

3.8 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding the potential adoption of the United Kingdom's approach to zero-hours contracts for those job seekers on universal credit:

Is the Minister aware that the U.K. (United Kingdom) benefit authorities have adopted a sanction regime similar to the Minister's by including certain zero-hours contracts as jobs suitable only for those job seekers on universal credit which can be rapidly adjusted to accommodate fluctuating hours and earnings, and if so, does the Minister intend to implement a version of this in Jersey with sufficient flexibility to protect job seekers from potential hardship?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley (The Minister for Social Security):

The universal credit is the new online benefit system administered centrally by the Department of Work and Pensions. It replaces 6 other benefits, including Job Seekers Allowance, with a single benefit paid monthly and in arrears. Under universal credit, changes to earnings are reflected in the following month's payment. So taking on some short-term work can result in a reduction in benefit for the entire month, rather than a specific number of days and weeks. Income support is currently paid in advance to claimants based on their expected earnings. Payments to those of working age are made weekly and can be quickly adjusted to accommodate any fluctuations in income which particularly help those on zero-hour contracts. Income support is designed so that job seekers will always be better off in work, irrespective of how many hours they work, the type of contract they are employed under or the duration of that contract. Job seekers are expected to actively seek work, to secure paid employment of up to ...

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Minister, I am not sure we are quorate. Greffier, can you just confirm my maths. Right, now we are. No need to repeat yourself. [Laughter]

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

This is such stimulating stuff that Members have left the Chamber. Job seekers are expected to actively seek work, to secure paid employment of up to 35 hours per week and there is significant support available from my department under the Back to Work programme to help them achieve this.

3.8.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister referred to adjusting the particular payments in the U.K., every 4 weeks. Is it not the case that his suggestion for adjusting zero-hours changes in earning in Jersey is once every 5 weeks, as what you suggested previously?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Deputy is partially correct in what he is saying. We do ask people who are working who are still in receipt of income support to provide us with evidence of 5 weeks of payslips in order to assess the average earnings to be used on their claim. However, we now have a process in the department whereby any change of circumstances can be dealt with on the same day in order to adjust somebody's claim. So if somebody has had a drop of income, which is lower than the average that we have allowed, they can come into the department and we can immediately adjust the claim based on evidence.

3.8.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

How many cases so far has the department managed to deal with on a same day basis for changes of circumstances? In particular, with regard to zero-hours contracts.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I am informed by the department that over 60 per cent of change of circumstances are now dealt with on a same day basis.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may, Sir, a final supplementary?

The Bailiff:

Is it supplementary?

3.8.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I believe it is. In how many cases over this period where this new regime is in place has a job seeker been sanctioned for leaving a zero-hours job saying: "I cannot cope with this variation in earnings"?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I cannot really be expected to know the minutiae of every claim going through the department but my understanding is that nobody has been sanctioned in relation to zero-hour contracts.