

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
BY DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER
ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 12TH SEPTEMBER 2017**

Question

Has the Minister read the results of the five-year study by Manchester University published on 10th August 2017 in the International Journal of Epidemiology entitled ‘Re-employment, job quality, health and allostatic load biomarkers: prospective evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study’, which finds that the transition to poor quality jobs may be worse for a person’s mental health than remaining unemployed? If not, will she undertake to read the study?

Will she engage with the Minister for Health and Social Services to discover what evidence GPs and other mental health professionals have on the validity of the study’s findings in the local context, with particular regard to the prevalence of zero-hour contracts?

What further engagement, if any, will the Minister undertake with employers to ensure that the inappropriate use of zero-hour contracts is eliminated?

Will the Minister ban the publication of zero-hour job adverts on the Social Security website and, if not, will she put procedures in place to vet such adverts to ensure that zero-hour contracts are not being used inappropriately?

Answer

Officers of the Social Security Department have read the study and I am aware of the results. The study does not present simple conclusions, and in particular does not make any reference to zero hour contract jobs.

The study examines the association of job transition with health and chronic stress related biomarkers, focussing on the extent to which people transitioning to jobs it defines as “poor quality” do or do not see improvements in these underlying biomarkers. The authors are careful to point out that it is an observational study, so it is not possible to make any causal claims. There is considerable evidence that work is good for a person’s physical and mental health, and the study acknowledges this, but seeks to explore whether a transition from unemployment to “poor quality” work may be shown to have a possible long term negative or mixed effect on health. The study does not focus on mental health, but primarily uses a series of established physical biomarkers such as weight and cholesterol as a proxy for possible longer term health outcomes.

To reach a broad definition of “low quality” work, the researchers looked at multiple criteria based on three dimensions of job quality: earnings quality, labour market security and quality of the working environment. In Jersey, these factors may be more or less present in different types of employment, and are neither restricted to nor excluded from zero-hours contract work.

There is no justification at this stage to engage with the Minister for Health and Social Services and divert officers away from their current work in order to seek to validate the results of a medically technical UK-based study within Jersey’s job market. What we will do is ensure that Jersey’s health system and benefit system continue to work together to support Islanders in finding and maintaining good quality employment, and supporting them in periods where they are unable to work.

Social Security’s Back to Work programme remains committed to supporting jobseekers into sustainable employment. This would always aspire towards work that offers good earnings to help a household move

towards financial independence, good job security and a good quality working environment. For many jobseekers, particularly the long-term unemployed, taking up the offer of a zero hours or temporary job is a positive first step into employment. Even a temporary job helps a person build up their skills and experience, gain confidence, and improve their overall employability. This increases their chances of securing permanent, good quality work in the future.

Back to Work Advisor support does not stop once someone secures paid work – in-work support is offered and plays a key part in helping people stay in work, but also gives the opportunity for any concerns to be raised and addressed. This support continues for the first six months after securing work, and if an individual is in a temporary role, it would include support for looking for a more permanent opportunity they can transition into, using the skills they have learnt in their current role to support applications. We also support individuals already in work who want help with applications to roles with better pay and conditions.

With specific reference to zero hours contracts, JACS continues to provide guidance and advice to businesses and individuals, seeking to ensure that both parties understand the nature of a zero hours relationship, including when they are and are not appropriate, the advantages and the disadvantages, as well as providing template zero hours contracts. Unlike in the UK, those working under zero hour contracts in Jersey are likely to be classed as employees and therefore will receive the same protection under the Employment (Jersey) Law 2003 as all other employees. The Minister has already committed to ask the Employment Forum to look at zero-hour contracts after the current family friendly review.

Jobs in Jersey is a part of the gov.je website that provides an easy way for employers to advertise roles to the public free of charge – in many cases the employer does not specify details about the role they are advertising such as salary or contract type. In some cases this may be because the employer has not yet made decisions about the specifics of a role, in other cases it may be that they do not want to share this on a public website. If Social Security were to require employers to give all information about every role in order to use the website for advertising, it could have a negative impact with fewer jobs being advertised through this useful mechanism. For this reason Social Security will not change the current way the system is used and recorded.