

23.11.28.

**13. Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding sanctions in the welfare system and helping claimants returning to work (OQ.236/2023)**

Will the Minister advise what evidence she has used to support the use of sanctions in the welfare system to help get claimants back to work; and will she detail the training that her department's support workers receive to help return claimants to work?

Deputy E. Millar of St. John, St. Lawrence and Trinity (The Minister for Social Security):

I thank Deputy Southern for his question. The question has 2 parts, so I will deal with the first one. The evidence I have is that the current system is working well. Jersey enjoys a very low level of unemployment with those job seekers who claim income support being actively supported by the Back to Work teams. It is a condition of claiming income support that people who are able to work are either in work already or that they will be expected to look for work. Work conditions do not apply to people with caring responsibilities or significant health conditions. The requirement to look for work is a feature of most tax-funded benefit systems and has strong public support. As well as providing incentives for those who do find work, there are a range of sanctions in the Jersey system for those who claim benefits but do not take reasonable steps to find work. As regards to training, on joining Back to Work, new advisers are allocated an experienced officer to partner with and they work through a comprehensive checklist of all the role entails. There is classroom training on the relevant legislation and decision making. Advisers also undertake safeguarding training, customer service training and mental health first aid training. After this training period, they continue to work alongside their appointed experienced officer on a mentoring basis before they undertake the role unaccompanied.

3.10.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister consider that there is scope in her system for increased sanctions to operate as has been taken in the U.K. by the U.K. Government?

Deputy E. Millar:

I have not followed closely the proposed changes in the U.K. The Jersey system is completely different and I have no plans to change our system in the same way.

3.10.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Does the Minister track sanctions that are made for people who are working and leave a job for reasons of health, which may not be evidenced at the time?

Deputy E. Millar:

I believe if someone leaves a job for health reasons, they will not be subject to sanctions. I think when someone just throws in the towel on a job, then they may be subject to a period of sanctions. I am afraid that is a very technical, detailed question. If someone becomes ill afterwards, I am not quite sure, but I am sure that will be dealt with by officers.

3.10.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Given that the increased awareness of mental health conditions, thankfully, in our society, could the Minister accept that people may leave a job and not really be in a position to explain why? Therefore, can I ask the Minister whether she would be happy to look back on such cases and review the reasons why sanctions were applied and perhaps then change those payments that have been made?

Deputy E. Millar:

I think that is quite difficult. I think to look at things retrospectively is also going to be challenging. I am not sure if the Deputy is suggesting we look at every single case where someone has been sanctioned for giving up work to check whether there is a mental health aspect. I would imagine if we did we would need some kind of medical evidence that there was a mental health issue to support that and that we would not just simply take someone's word for it, because anybody could say they were leaving work because it was impacting their mental health, whether that was true or not. I think that is a very difficult area.

3.10.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Sorry, that was not quite the question. I was saying in a situation where people are not in that situation at that time and then, retrospectively, if they can say that that was the reason, will they be looked back on? That was the question. I think it was a slightly ... dare I say, the answer was put to a question that was not set, again. It seems to be happening a lot.

The Bailiff:

Are you able to answer?

Deputy E. Millar:

Sorry, I am struggling to understand the question. If the question is that someone leaves a job, they are given sanctions and 6 months later they decide that they left the job because they were having a mental health crisis, that is a very difficult thing for us to assess. That person would have to come forward and explain that to us but I am not sure that I can do any kind of proactive review without people coming forward.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

The question was whether the Minister would be willing to look back on such cases or whether the department looks back on such cases given the nature of mental health issues.

The Bailiff:

Well, I think the Minister's answer was that - correct me if I am wrong, Minister - yes, it is something that can be looked if an individual comes back and raises this issue. Is that correct?

Deputy E. Millar:

Yes, Sir, exactly. That is what I said, if someone comes and ask us I am sure we will look at it.

3.10.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Could the Minister indicate for the Assembly how many income support payments are currently subjected to a sanction?

Deputy E. Millar:

I do not have a number as at today but I do know that in this year 75 financial penalties have been applied, 47 have seen some removal of the adult component only in 14 days and only 6 have resulted in the closure of an income support claim. There are over 600 people, income support claimants, currently registered as actively seeking work and there will be many more than 600 that will have engaged with Back to Work over the course of the year. There are small numbers of people who are subject to sanctions and those sanctions are only applied in appropriate circumstances.

[11:00]

3.10.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Can the Minister tell us of those who have been sanctioned, how many of those attributable to that sanction ended up finding work as a result of it?

Deputy E. Millar:

I do not know. The whole point of actively seeking work is that people are supported to return to work where they can. If someone has had a sanction, it is because they are not actively seeking work, they are not turning up to interviews or they are not attending work on a reasonable basis but the team have a very high success rate in finding people work and there are numerous methods they use to do that.

3.10.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

What attention will the Minister pay to recommendation 22 of the review of income support benefits overpayments: “The Minister for Social Security must look to introduce mandatory training on learning difficulties for all staff who are directly involved in income support processes” and expanding further: “The Minister for Social Security should ensure that unconscious bias training is introduced and delivered to all customer facing staff within Customer and Local Services”?

Deputy E. Millar:

I am not sure that is entirely supplemental because the review panel was looking at overpayments and not sanctions. Our response to that is all our staff are given extensive training and we constantly monitor the need for training. If the department feel that the type of training the Deputy mentioned is required for the actively seeking work team, then I am sure they will be included in all new training initiatives.