

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
BY DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER
ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 17th JANUARY 2017**

Question

Further to the response to written question 9747 on 12th December 2016 which indicated approximately 1 in 15 of Back to Work clients on Income Support had been sanctioned in 2015 for the first breach of a written warning, whilst approximately 1 in 6 had received a sanction for leaving work without good cause, will the Minister advise what assessment, if any, she has undertaken to determine whether these proportions of sanctions are too high and whether they are caused by administrative problems in the system?

Will the Minister agree to review the sanctions system in place for those on Income Support who are actively seeking work to ensure that it is fairly administered?

Answer

I have full confidence in the operation of the sanctions system, which is designed to create a deterrent for people who claim Income Support but do not do enough to look for work, or for those people who leave employment without a good reason and expect to rely on the benefit system. The majority of Back to Work clients are actively engaged with the services we provide to help them look for work, and are motivated to obtain the financial and social benefits of employment. They are unlikely to be sanctioned. Even amongst those who do not fully engage, receiving a written warning which outlines the potential consequences of not looking for work is usually sufficient to motivate them to engage with us.

The information provided as part of written question 9747 indicated that in 2015, a total of 195 sanctions were issued for the first breach of a written warning and 461 sanctions were issued for leaving work without good cause. It is not correct to describe the latter figure in terms of "1 in 6" Back to Work clients, as many of those sanctions will have been issued to people who were not clients of Back to Work because they were in employment prior to leaving work. Furthermore, sanctions for leaving work without good cause may also be issued to somebody who leaves work and claims Income Support for the first time. This is an important function of the sanctions process, as it is completely unreasonable for working adults to decide they will leave work and rely on a tax-funded benefit system.

Taken together, I do not think these figures indicate that the system is working inappropriately. We cannot expect the taxpayer to support a minority who are able to work but unwilling to do so, and I am strongly committed to doing everything I can to help people into financial independence away from the benefit system. A clear and effective system of financial penalties is a necessary element of the other incentives we provide, such as a generous disregard for earned income and tailored jobseeking support through Back to Work.

The process of financially penalising a person reliant on benefit is never taken lightly, and is constantly under internal review. Determining Officers are reviewed in terms of the way they issue sanctions, and overall the sanctioning process is subject to rigorous quality assurance carried out by a senior member of staff. We also have a robust safeguarding process in order to identify vulnerable clients and to refer them to other agencies where appropriate. Additional steps in the process were initiated by frontline Back to Work staff, in order to be confident of fairness and consistency in the system. In addition, any decision by a Determining Officer is subject to a process of appeal to an independent tribunal. These are strong checks and balances, and I am confident they ensure our system is applied fairly and consistently. I do not see the need for any additional review of the operation of the sanctions process.