

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND JOBSEEKER'S
ALLOWANCE (WORK SEARCH AND WORK
AVAILABILITY REQUIREMENTS - LIMITATIONS)
(AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS 2022

Wednesday 20 April 2022

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: JULIE ELLIOTT

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| † Carter, Andy (<i>Warrington South</i>) (Con) | † Mishra, Navendu (<i>Stockport</i>) (Lab) |
| † Coutinho, Claire (<i>East Surrey</i>) (Con) | Osamor, Kate (<i>Edmonton</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Davies, Mims (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions</i>) | † Simmonds, David (<i>Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner</i>) (Con) |
| Gardiner, Barry (<i>Brent North</i>) (Lab) | † Stephens, Chris (<i>Glasgow South West</i>) (SNP) |
| † Johnson, Dr Caroline (<i>Sleaford and North Hykeham</i>) (Con) | † Stuart, Graham (<i>Beverley and Holderness</i>) (Con) |
| † Johnson, Gareth (<i>Dartford</i>) (Con) | † Sunderland, James (<i>Bracknell</i>) (Con) |
| † Lopresti, Jack (<i>Filton and Bradley Stoke</i>) (Con) | † Tracey, Craig (<i>North Warwickshire</i>) (Con) |
| McDonagh, Siobhain (<i>Mitcham and Morden</i>) (Lab) | Anne-Marie Griffiths, Jonathan Edwards, <i>Committee Clerks</i> |
| † McDonnell, John (<i>Hayes and Harlington</i>) (Lab) | |
| † McGovern, Alison (<i>Wirral South</i>) (Lab) | † attended the Committee |

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Wednesday 20 April 2022

[JULIE ELLIOTT *in the Chair*]

Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance (Work Search and Work Availability Requirements – limitations) (Amendment) Regulations 2022

2.30 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance (Work Search and Work Availability Requirements – limitations) (Amendment) Regulations 2022, (S.I. 2022, No. 108).

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott.

The Opposition do not support the statutory instrument. I will say briefly why. This is a simple piece of legislation, but its effect could be widespread and damaging. To summarise, the explanatory memorandum puts it clearly:

“Existing regulations give discretion to allow jobseekers to look for work in their chosen field for up to 13 weeks. This is known as the ‘permitted period’... These Regulations will reduce the maximum permitted period to 4 weeks.”

Before I get to the substance of my argument, I want to make a procedural point, in that the regulations are being introduced under an urgency provision. The Government claim that they are urgent, but it is hard to understand why, when every other aspect of the Government argument about the pandemic is that we have moved beyond that period, yet here the Government are using urgency provisions to make substantial changes to social security arrangements.

The memorandum also explains that the Department is looking to undertake the Social Security Advisory Committee engagement retrospectively. What is the point of asking for advice on something that it has already done? Surely the Government's credibility turns on asking for advice and being seen to take it seriously, rather than retrospectively. That is why we will vote against the motion on whether we have discussed the regulations. It is evident that the process is being rushed, and does not follow the standard procedure for scrutiny of Government changes to social security.

I do not want to detain everyone for long. I will make three simple objections to what the Government are doing. As I understand it, the Government's argument is that the best way to help people's income is to get them into any job in the hope that that might get them a better job at some point down the line. If we were facing a massive unemployment crisis, as this country has faced before—due to an external or internal shock, a huge number of people are out of work—the evidence shows that it is better for people to be in a job, because long periods of unemployment cost workers in the long term. However, that is not the situation that we face.

The Government know that and anyone who takes a cursory look at the data knows that. What we have is a vacancy crisis.

The fundamental role of jobcentres in this country is to facilitate Jobmatch. I apologise if I am explaining basics to colleagues, but the idea is that people who need a job go to the jobcentre and are enabled to find a good job that will support them. Forcing people into their less preferred job, however, makes for a worse match between applicants and the occupations that they are seeking to fill. I do not think that employers or people looking for new or better jobs will want that change. In fact, a survey of businesses in the UK found that they do not like it either. Such rule changes mean that they get huge numbers of job applications that are completely inappropriate. People need to be supported to find a job that is going to be a fulfilling and well-paying career, not be told that they must just get any job.

That is what is true about today's labour market. One in five people in this country is currently working below their skill level. That figure is one in five, 20%, at a time when businesses are crying out for staff. Our problem is not people sitting around doing nothing; our problem is not enough help and support for people to move on and move up in work. We can add to that the 1 million people who have left the labour market since the pandemic. There are complex and different reasons for that. We do not yet understand some of them fully—for example, we do not understand properly the impact of long covid—but what we do know about this country is that it has a huge number of people with onerous caring responsibilities and a large number of people with mental health difficulties. Our attention, through the Department for Work and Pensions, jobcentres and the work of work coaches up and down the country, would be far better directed towards dealing with the actual economic problem that we face, rather than this policy.

That leads me to my second point, which is that this is a waste. We will end up wasting huge amounts of time for work coaches in the DWP. They will end up bringing people in to see them in jobcentres for what may well be relatively short periods of time and offering them no real support, but a huge amount of paperwork. Work coaches could be doing much more substantial and important work to help those people who face the biggest barriers, whether that is because they have suffered a period of long-term unemployment, because they have a disability or because they are a lone parent. That is the true value of the DWP and the work that could be done. There is a massive opportunity cost to this policy.

My final point is this. I have to be honest with the Minister and say that I hear what my constituents say about jobcentres and, although I know the dedicated staff who work in them, the reputation of jobcentres is not what it was. They are not seen always as places where people get help. I said that I would be honest with the Minister, and I am going to be. I think that we can do far more to build the reputation of jobcentres as a place where people can truly get help, where they can move on and move up in work, where they can enhance their skills, where we can support businesses to make the transition that we need towards a more highly skilled labour market and where we can really support people to get a better job, which will pay them more, which will deal with the cost of living crisis. I think that that is the change that people want to see. I think

that this approach is completely misjudged for the labour market that we face, and that we will see over time that it has been a waste of effort.

2.37 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is good to see in the Chair a friend of working people, Ms Elliott, because I think that is important when we are discussing this issue.

I have a number of concerns similar to those outlined by the shadow Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wirral South. They are particularly about the culture that we develop as a result of these changes, and particularly about the issue of sanctions. The Government seem to have rowed back on their commitments. The Minister is aware that I am a member of the Work and Pensions Committee. We have been advised as a Select Committee that what the Department was looking at was introducing a warning or yellow-card system of sanctions, rather than sanctioning people right away. The problem with these particular proposals is that they could force people into taking work that involves unsuitable hours for someone with, for example, children or caring responsibilities—or people might be forced into a zero-hours contract. I take the view that if someone is offered a zero-hours contract, they are offered it. That type of contract is not for everyone. It may suit some people, but a lot of people could not take a zero-hours-contract job and they could well find themselves, under these proposals, receiving a sanction because they have refused the offer of a zero-hours contract job. This is going back to a culture that I thought we had managed to persuade the Government to step away from, so let me ask the Minister whether this is the Department's intention. It undertook a pilot to look at introducing a yellow card or warning system before someone is sanctioned during the period in which they are trying to find work, because for some people, they do have to look at their caring responsibilities. We have a culture where some people are in work but have no hours until they receive a text message and are told that the first person to turn up gets a shift. There does not seem to be anything stopping such practices.

My other concern is that the provision does not address the problem of in-work poverty. The Minister was present in the Select Committee this morning when we discussed universal credit and childcare costs. It was revealed by officials that someone working 30 hours would get less money than someone working 25 hours, because of the way the universal credit system works. I have very real concerns about that.

The other issue relates to poverty pay. We are going to be forcing people into work on minimum wage only. That, of course, includes the jobs that are advertised at the national minimum wage, because we know that the DWP's website sometimes advertises jobs that do not meet the national minimum wage.

I hope that the Minister will answer questions around the sanctions regime. There is a very real fear that what we are trying to do is force people into work, and if they do not take the job, they are sanctioned. That should not apply to everybody. I hope that we are not going to go back to the sanctions culture that we saw in films such as "I, Daniel Blake". Going back to that culture would be damaging to many in this country.

2.41 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): To be frank, I may have taken my eye off the ball, but I did not think that the policy was a contentious issue from the past. I did not think it was an issue to be addressed at all. Over the years, there has been consensus about the nature of a policy that allows people a breathing space. That policy originally came from discussions between the TUC, the CBI and others, I think, and particularly related to skilled workers. They were given breathing space to ensure that they found employment that used their skills most effectively, which is beneficial to both them and the economy overall. The key issue was about ensuring that people kept within their profession or trade and maintained their skill level. As a result, they benefited from higher wages.

I honestly did not think that that was an issue to be challenged. I do not know where the proposal has come from. I certainly do not understand why there is urgency. I am really surprised that such regulations have been brought forward without full consideration of the rationale for the original policy, which was, as I said, largely to maintain people's level of skills and to provide them with a decent income. Exactly as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West has said, the intention was to avoid putting pressure on these workers to go into sectors or unskilled work from which it would be very difficult for them to retrieve their position. The three-month period was to ensure they had the time to find alternative suitable work away from the pressures of the daily grind.

I literally do not understand the measure and what worries me is that usually experts are consulted before new policies such as this are introduced. Years ago, as a youngster, I used to work for the TUC. I used to do the papers for trade union representations on the Social Security Advisory Committee, and its members are the experts. To say that the Government will consult the committee retrospectively is farcical. Once the Government have introduced a policy, it is very difficult to see them suddenly reversing it if it is rejected by the Social Security Advisory Committee. In addition, what I find bizarre is that the 21-day rule gets thrown out as well. We will introduce the policy immediately after it is legislatively agreed. I also do not understand why there has been no consultation with the legislatures in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales. Additionally, there has been no impact assessment.

That is not a good policy-making process. I am critical of the Government on a number of issues, but usually they have abided by a standard process of consulting the appropriate organisations and making sure there is time for proper consideration of any impact a policy might have. I honestly cannot understand the rationale for bouncing the measure through at such speed. I cannot understand the rationale behind the principle. It will be counterproductive and will particularly affect skilled workers. It will put them under undue pressure, and we will lose their skills over time.

I am also fearful that, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West says, the change will have an impact on the financial standing of some who will be unfortunately forced into work that is inappropriate to them, reduces their overall incomes and subjects them to the potential of sanction and the loss of all income. I think it is a misguided policy. The only objective I can see is that

[John McDonnell]

somebody, somewhere in Government—civil servant, Minister or whatever—has set the target of getting 500,000 people into work by the end of June, and the regulations are one of the blunt instruments they are going to use to do that. The problem is that they will put square pegs in round holes, in that they will be counterproductive for the individuals and the economy. That is why I wish to vote against them. I think they are misconstrued and misguided.

2.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott, and to have the opportunity to discuss the regulations in detail.

The regulations are part of an innovative intervention that we have at the Department for Work and Pensions: the Way to Work campaign. Let me explain why they were introduced. They are important to the Government's ambition to build back better and move more people into work. The hon. Member for Wirral South raises concern about the urgency of those interventions. As the UK Employment Minister for the last three years, I have met employers who are desperately keen to fill vacancies with the talent that they have down the road. I think it is right that we step up and deliver. As regards our engagement with the SSAC, we continue to work and engage with it.

This has been an incredibly challenging year for everyone, especially those whose career or sector has been specifically impacted by the pandemic. We at DWP have been conscious of the damaging effect of being out of the labour market for a prolonged period of time. That is exactly why we introduced the Way to Work campaign. It is a specific drive to help 500,000 people into new jobs by the summer. The Government know how to introduce labour market interventions that really work. I am incredibly proud of the plan for jobs and the other interventions. Kickstart has offered us the opportunity to build on the success of job matching, disrupting the way people are recruited and making sure that it is quicker and much easier for people to get into work.

Alison McGovern: Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I will make some progress. We at the DWP have monitored the labour market incredibly closely throughout the pandemic and put in that package of interventions through the plan for jobs to protect livelihoods and, above all, boost employment. The labour market context, which we cannot take for granted, absolutely illustrates the impact of the positive measures that we have put in place. It created a staggeringly positive effect.

In fact, unemployment levels are at 3.8%, and—despite the pandemic—they have not been lower since 1974, which was, it pleases me to say, before I was born, just about. The combination of the end of plan B covid measures and almost 1.3 million vacancies meant the scope that jobcentres had at the same time to return to full face-to-face activity presented us a unique opportunity to address the shortages and critical vacancies in particular

sectors and help the labour market to grow faster. People who may have been waiting for their chance before the pandemic would have faced another two years of being held back had we not acted. To address that, we developed the Way to Work campaign, including the key policy objective secured by the regulations, working across Government ahead of the Prime Minister's announcement on 26 January. The DWP has used the strength of the jobs market—I repeat, there are 1.3 million vacancies—to build on kickstart. It has meant we can work directly in our open jobcentres with employers to get claimants into those vacancies quicker, as well as strengthening our core support for jobseekers so that they can progress sooner.

Two things have happened in the labour market during the pandemic: people have wanted to transition and try new things, and in some sectors they have stepped up and helped in times of need. I make no apologies for any job, better job, career. The longer a person is out of the labour market, the harder it is for them to move forward, and it is absolutely right that we give people the chance to step back in, grow their confidence, and move on from there.

Alison McGovern: There are many surveys out there and a lot of information from businesses that say they do not support the Government's approach for the reasons I mentioned. If the Minister can provide the Committee with some evidence that businesses support it, I invite her to do so. When the Minister mentions 500,000 people, is she talking about the 1 million people who have left the labour market? Unless we have an offer for those people, we will not get anywhere near dealing with the vacancies crisis.

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the evidence and why employers want more people to apply for their jobs who normally would have ruled themselves out. On labour market figures day last Tuesday, I was at a job fair at one of our 190-plus new jobcentres, just outside Gatwick airport. They have 5,000 vacancies at the jobcentre there, and I spoke to representatives of Gatwick airport and local supply chains who were delighted to be meeting claimants who were looking to change and move into the sector, to help reinvigorate and bring back tourism and aviation. Those people had perhaps done different things before the pandemic, or were looking to progress and do something else. I can give the hon. Lady plenty of examples of employers, going beyond surveys. This is about real people—it is beyond statistics. It is about jobs, livelihoods, and real people progressing.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington was wondering why this is suddenly an issue. According to my records, he has not been to his local jobcentre since 2017, so perhaps if he popped down to that jobcentre and spoke to the work coaches, he would see it in action.

John McDonnell *rose*—

Mims Davies: Perhaps he has been recently; forgive me if I am incorrect.

John McDonnell: I do not think that is true—that is the first thing. The second is that I am in continuous conversations with the jobcentre, and occasionally will

visit, because it is next to my home. The issue is whether there is any evidence of reluctance among workers to take those jobs. Is that what the measure is about? Is there some evidence of reluctance, of people not wanting the jobs that she has explained exist?

Mims Davies: We will have a look at our records about whether there has been an official visit, but according to what I have, there has been no visit in the past four years.

John McDonnell: I do not do official visits, but I continue to work—

Mims Davies: I understand, but there have been comments about people being shoved into jobs, not tailored support. If the right hon. Gentleman chatted to work coaches, he would see that the reality is that people are getting tailored support and understanding what is right for them. We have reinstated those crucial face-to-face appointments, the first commitment meetings where work coaches can build that crucial rapport with claimants and then build on it, delivering regular, intensive support for claimants at the beginning of their claim and helping them to move back into work more quickly.

Crucially, Way to Work is bringing employers and claimants together quicker, helping to optimise the recruitment process through job fairs, employer hubs, social media channels, the DWP's Job Help website and our "Find a job" service. All those interventions have grown during the pandemic and post-pandemic to help people, and employers are offered a named, dedicated local employment adviser at their jobcentre to work with them to fill their local vacancies. If they are a national employer, they are also offered a dedicated national account manager.

I have met many of those people, who have been keenly helping people leaving prison, Afghan resettlers and others; they are very keen to extend all those opportunities more widely. We are also vastly extending our existing network of employer contacts, setting up work trials, for example, and using our existing sector-based work academies to give employers the opportunity to see what local recruits have to offer via the DWP. In fact, on my last visit to my local jobcentre in Haywards Heath, one gentleman was meeting an employer on the day and got offered a job, and he had not been in work for seven years. These measures are life changing, because people are having those conversations in our jobcentres.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Like many of my colleagues in this room and beyond, I visit my constituency constantly. I am proud to represent a constituency in east Berkshire called Bracknell, where we have near full employment. My experience of talking to employers everywhere I go—in Guildford, in Bracknell, all across Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire, in the south-east and beyond—is that people cannot get enough staff and that businesses are in danger of going under, not because there is no demand for their services and products but because they cannot get enough staff to do the work. The Minister mentioned earlier that there

are 1.3 million job vacancies, so does she agree that the Government must do everything possible to get people back into work? The vacancies are there and our economy depends on it, and the initiative does exactly that.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend, because that is exactly what the initiative is about; that is our total intent.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West mentioned the Select Committee session this morning. The regulations are absolutely about tailored support for the right opportunity down the road. They are meant to help people to become more self-reliant and to enjoy the improvements in their wellbeing from being in work and all that it has to offer. In doing that, claimants can take the next step of building a more secure future and being more prosperous and, of course, they are helping our economy to recover.

The effects of the regulations are that jobseekers with a strong work history and who are capable of work will be expected to search more widely for suitable jobs earlier in their claim.

Alison McGovern *rose*—

Mims Davies: I think this point is important for people to understand, so let me just reiterate it. The effects of the regulations will be that jobseekers with a strong work history and who are capable of work will be expected to search more widely for suitable available jobs earlier in their claim because of the shortening of the permitted period. The permitted period is the time in which claimants can narrow their work search within their usual sector. I must add that this is not applicable to all claimants who make a new claim. These regulations reduce the permitted period from 13 weeks to four weeks. We believe that reducing the permitted period could aid claimants' chances of finding work more quickly and seeing more options that are available to them sooner.

Alison McGovern: I thank the Minister for giving way; she is being very generous. There is clearly a disagreement about what the evidence may or may not show about the efficacy of the policy, so will the Minister be good enough to make public or put in the Library of the House of Commons the analysis that supports that?

Mims Davies: I will write to the hon. Lady with further details covering some of that, but I would like to reiterate something about the history of the permitted period. Perhaps this will help her. The permitted period was formulated as a policy as part of the Social Security Act 1989 and was originally set at 13 weeks, which was considered reasonable in the context of the labour market at that time. The end of the permitted period is not a deadline to move into work. It marks the point where a claimant needs to agree commitments that will help them to seize the record opportunities in the current labour market. Good work coaches tailor their ask of their claimants, listen to their needs and give them advice about how they can transition and take up more roles, by listening and engaging. This is not about putting people into jobs that are not right for them.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being exceptionally generous in giving way. Will she confirm that the DWP's position, as outlined in the answer to a recent written question, is that jobseekers are expected to commute up to three hours per shift or face being sanctioned?

Mims Davies: There is a fundamental misunderstanding on the Opposition Benches about what our work coaches do and how we are helping people to progress and move forward. The hon. Member for Wirral South made some comments earlier about jobcentres and our work coaches—

Alison McGovern: No.

Mims Davies: I can say that the feedback consistently is that they are a continually positive place to be. It is important that when people make comments—including about jobcentres wanting to sanction people more and being negative places to be—they do it from a position of understanding their strength.

At the heart of the debate is the perception that we are just trying to sanction people more. The reality is completely the opposite. We are trying to get people into work quicker.

Chris Stephens: The Minister has confirmed the answer to the written question and that a jobseeker is expected to commute up to three hours per shift. That shift could be on the national minimum wage. Will the Minister please confirm whether, as the DWP has told the Select Committee, it is considering having a warning system, sometimes referred to as a yellow card system, before progressing to a sanction?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman needs to understand me when I say that work coaches will also agree to restrictions of the hours, type of work and location of work based on the tailored needs of the claimant. Of course, there is a travel to work requirement, which I think is what he is referring to, but I can reassure the Committee that all work preparation activities and all that we do to improve the claimants' work prospects in undertaking training and work experience—everything that counts towards moving forward—is absolutely at the discretion of the work coach, understanding the claimant but making sure that discretionary easements are in place where needed for domestic emergencies, caring responsibilities and so on. Some of that is not fully defined in legislation; it is down to good quality, tailored work coaching.

I shall try to conclude, Ms Elliot. I would like quickly to cover the sanctions issue. I reassure all Members that the regulations are not a change in sanctions policy. That is not what we are trying to achieve with the amendments to the duration of the permitted period. We are not changing the reason why people might have a sanction applied, such as for refusing to take a job that has been offered, nor the sanction rates. Claimants will only ever be sanctioned if they fail to meet the requirements agreed in their claimant commitment by their work coach without providing good reason. If they have good cause, they will not be sanctioned. I reiterate that sanctions are at a record low.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Minister is making some very good points. We have talked about the number of vacancies available, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell talked about the pressure on businesses to find extra people. It makes sense that the Government wish to maximise the number of people in work and do not wish to support people on benefits when they are capable of work—that does not make sense for society. I understand the Opposition's point, made by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington, about highly skilled people and square pegs in round holes. Will the Minister confirm that if somebody takes a job temporarily on a lower salary, that does not mean they are not available to look for other work or that people cannot find a better job over time? In fact, having had a job in the meantime might make it easier to find work, because it is easier to find work from work than otherwise. The resilience and work ethic demonstrated by doing such a thing might help their job prospects in the future rather than hinder them.

Mims Davies: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Many people have stepped into work in sectors that they would never have considered, because of the pandemic. They have done it because it is the right thing to help their community and their family or because of the impact on their sector. Through our plan for jobs, including the restart programme that supports people after nine months' unemployment—previously it was after a year—we are helping people with their wellbeing, confidence and skills. The longer someone is out of work, the harder it is to progress. Once someone is in a job, it is much easier to get a better job and reach the next stage of their career.

In essence, I think that people are saying that the regulations are trying to get people to go into the wrong roles. It is all down to good-quality work coaching with our local jobcentres and teams opening up people's mindsets and abilities, in the way that the pandemic has for some people, so that they try new sectors. That does not mean that they will leave the sector that they have not been able to get back into forever, but they can transition and use their skills in a way that perhaps had not occurred to them, and we are making sure that people understand that.

John McDonnell *rose*—

Chris Stephens *rose*—

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Keep going.

Mims Davies: I would like to conclude—

John McDonnell: Don't follow that advice; the Minister wants constructive engagement.

Mims Davies: I think I have been very generous to the right hon. Gentleman, but I will hear him out just this once.

John McDonnell: I am grateful for that. This is about getting the policy right at some stage. If the Government are to retrospectively engage with the Social Security

Advisory Committee, it might well be that some of these issues can be taken up and the policy honed as it goes to implementation.

The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham is right that often it is best to be in work to find another job, but I am worried that this policy seems to be based on an idea that people are reluctant to take alternative work in different sectors. That is why I asked for evidence of that. When the Minister writes to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South, I would be grateful if she included any evidence of such reluctance in the correspondence.

The issue is that once people are forced into work, which could be long hours on low pay, that makes it more difficult to get into other work, so when the consultation takes place with the SSAC, it is important to ensure opportunities for the individual to challenge some of the decisions, based on the reasonableness of getting back into a level of work or professional grade that they had before. *[Interruption.]* I apologise for the length of my intervention.

Mims Davies: I do not think I have ever spoken about the reluctance of our claimants to be tenacious and open-minded and to move forward. In fact, that is what the relationship that we build among work coaches, local employers and sector-based work academies, and our approach that we have developed through the plan for jobs, has really brought out. Given the transitions and opportunities and our 50-plus choices and 50-plus champions, I often remind people that the latter part of their careers, when they have great choices, can be the most fulfilling of their working lives. In fact, that is 25% of a working life. The hon. Member for Wirral South mentioned those who fall into economic inactivity, which is something we are focused on.

Alison McGovern *indicated dissent.*

Mims Davies: I think the hon. Lady spoke about people leaving the labour market—that is the point I was making.

With regard to the regulations, it is important to mention the evaluation, which will help the Committee, and then I will conclude. We will reflect on the evidence and what the Way to Work campaign has brought forward. The evidence shows that, as we have discussed, how hard it is to secure a job is often based on how long it takes to return to the labour market. With Way to Work, we are giving new claimants more time with their work coach and making sure that we bring local employers into the jobcentres with sectors and opportunities that perhaps people would never have found otherwise. That will help more claimants move into work quicker, and we will be routinely reassessing the impact of the changes on universal credit claimants more generally.

It is important to reiterate that we know that the longer people are out of employment, the harder it is, so intensive support sooner from DWP is what this is about. It will mean that claimants who are expected to broaden their job search will take advantage of the additional vacancies out there. To be clear, we do not expect claimants to move into work that is not right for them. The Committee should be clear on that. Our

work coaches are specifically trained to direct claimants to suitable opportunities, where they are appropriate and tailored to their personal needs and circumstances.

Given my comments, I trust the Committee understands both the need for the change in the regulations and why we felt it important to deliver at pace, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell. The change is designed to build on the success of our plan for jobs. I hope I have reassured the Committee about the measures. We are committed to seeing the jobs filled quickly for progression in every community. People can succeed by working with us at DWP to find their next career at any age or any stage.

3.9 pm

Alison McGovern: I will keep it exceedingly snappy and make just two points in closing.

First, anecdote is one thing; evidence and analysis about the economy, and about the labour market and how it works, is a completely different thing. I look forward to seeing the full analysis of why the DWP thinks this is going to work.

Secondly, the Minister said that I said that work coaches were no good. The opposite is the truth. I have sat alongside work coaches and spoken to them about the things they are doing, and I think that work coaches up and down this country are, by and large, fantastic people who do a great job. The problem with the DWP is not work coaches; it is what is going on on Whitehall and policies like this.

3.10 pm

Chris Stephens: You certainly won't hear me criticising jobcentre staff. I should probably refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group.

The Minister said that there was not a change in policy here. My view is that there is. I think that the sanctions regime has got tougher, because it has changed so that someone can face sanctions four weeks after their initial universal credit claim. We have heard it confirmed today that people can be sanctioned if they refuse to travel three hours to a shift or if they say no to a zero-hours contract. We have not yet been given any assurances about what will happen. The Department has given commitments on sanctions to the Work and Pensions Committee, but it now seems to have abandoned those commitments. I think that the Minister should be invited to confirm whether those commitments have been abandoned.

This is about the parameters that jobcentre staff are being asked to work within. For example, if they are advised that they should sanction someone on a zero-hours contract, that is what they will do, because those are the parameters they have been given. I invite the Minister to say a bit more about sanctions and to give the Committee some assurances about what is, I am afraid, a return to the sanctions regime.

The Chair: Does the Minister wish to respond?

Mims Davies: I think it has all been said.

John McDonnell: On a point of order, Ms Elliott. The Minister made reference to my visits to a local jobcentre. My office—we are in almost daily dialogue with the local jobcentre on individual cases—does say that my visits are fairly frequent, but they have largely been on the picket lines with PCS in the disputes that have taken place.

May I just make this point? Are MPs' visits to Government offices now being monitored by the Government? If that is the case, could we be informed of that? If that is to be raised in debates such as this one, we will need to make sure that all our visits are properly logged. I think that monitoring the activities of individual MPs is a dangerous process and we should be aware of it.

The Chair: Thank you. That is not a matter for the Chair, but the point has been noted and is recorded.

Question put.

The Committee divided: Ayes 10, Noes 4.

Division No. 1]

Carter, Andy
Coutinho, Claire
Davies, Mims
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth

AYES

Lopresti, Jack
Simmonds, David
Stuart, Graham
Sunderland, James
Tracey, Craig

NOES

McDonnell, rh John
McGovern, Alison

Mishra, Navendu
Stephens, Chris

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Committee has considered the Universal Credit and Jobseeker's Allowance (Work Search and Work Availability Requirements – limitations) (Amendment) Regulations 2022 (S.I. 2022, No. 108).

3.15 pm

Committee rose.