

Universal Credit

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

Totnes has a vibrant arts sector. My hon. Friend will know that many self-employed artists take longer to establish themselves as a business, and there may be great variation, month to month, in what they are paid. In the light of her detailed work, does my hon. Friend have any suggestions about how we can improve the situation for self-employed artists?

Heidi Allen Conservative, South Cambridgeshire

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is a fact that universal credit was not built for self-employed people, and it shows. The monthly assessments do not work and the minimum income floor needs to be looked at again because it typically takes more than a year for people's businesses to settle down.

To make the existing system really fly, I suspect that we need a boost to IT and admin man and womanpower behind the scenes, because let us make no mistake: universal credit is not yet fully automated. Claiming for childcare costs is a prime example of the manual work that is still being done. That brings me on to how we move legacy claimants across and the regulations that we have still to vote for—in November, I suspect. I am pleased that migration will start a lot later than originally planned, but I and many others still have concerns about the regulations. As a Government, we are choosing, for all the right reasons, to move people—that is people—across to a new system. I fail to see why that should be the complete and utter responsibility of those claimants. I have led on IT transformation projects in business and it would be unheard of for there not to be some kind of automated population of data from the old system to the new. We need to look really seriously into doing that, because it would save us hardship in the long run. Let us not forget that a third of migrated claimants are on ESA—the most vulnerable in society who have some kind of illness or disability—and we should look after them and not let them drop off the system. The population of data should be automatic and there should be no break in those people's payments at all.

Finally, when people arrive safe and sound on universal credit, the work allowances need to be what they should have been prior to 2015. How in this fair Great Britain that we call home can we have two families in identical circumstances living next to each other, but one has been protected across through migration and their next-door neighbours are £2,500 worse off a year? That is not Great Britain.

They Work For You