

5. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Social Security

The Bailiff:

Very well. That concludes Question Time on Notice so we now come to Questions to Ministers without notice and the first period is to the Minister for Social Security.

5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister inform Members what measures he has taken to ensure that income support recipients can afford their G.P. bills following the reduction in the award of Household Medical Accounts?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley (The Minister for Social Security):

The Deputy is aware that I have previously informed him that the Household Medical Account provision is part of the review of primary health care being carried out in conjunction with the Health and Social Services Department. There are no plans to make any changes to the current provision. However, if there is a household that has a high need to visit the G.P. regularly we could, in those circumstances, offer the Household Medical Account, which is basically just a savings account and no more than that.

5.1.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister accept that he appears to be unaware of what officer practice is and that many people have been refused the establishment of an H.M.A. (Household Medical Account) being told that it is not necessary and that they can look after their G.P.s' accounts without that special buffer provision?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I refute that I am not aware of what is happening. I am aware but the point is that the Household Medical Account is a savings account. It is no more than that and components are set aside from the weekly benefit to save towards G.P. bills. It is purely a savings scheme and no more than that. Therefore, if households feel that they would like to have that provision that is something they can talk to their officer about.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

May I have a supplementary there because I believe the Minister may be inadvertently misleading the House and I would not want him to do that?

The Bailiff:

All right.

5.1.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

It is also about clinical components which are extra money that needs to be applied for. He was suggesting that the H.M.A. is only made up of other components. It should not be made up of other components like the living component or the rental component. It should only be made up of clinical components and that is not always happening.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Here Deputy Southern, as usual, is expressing a view that only clinical components should be used for the Household Medical Account. That is purely his opinion. My opinion, for what it is worth, is that other components, particularly if the household has a high component for impairment, that some of that component can be used to top up the Household Medical Account with the agreement of the household.

5.2 Deputy S. Power of St. Brelade:

My question for the Minister for Social Security is an aspiration to become self-employed as a result of unemployment. A constituent has advised me that as a result of unemployment he may wish to become self-employed starting with 5, 10 maybe 20 hours a week. He advises me that the Social Security Department are inflexible and onerous in the level of contributions that he may have to pay. Can the Minister consider or has he discussed with his officers a sliding scale of variable contributions so that a person who is unemployed can become self-employed starting with contributions based on 5 hours, 10 hours and so on per week?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The issue of the self-employed and people wishing to become self-employed was addressed by the previous Minister when he was in office in the view that we would be looking to the income of the applicants 2 years prior to becoming self-employed rather than relying on a forecast of current income for their new business. We have tried to assist new entrepreneurs as far as their social security contributions are concerned. The fact is that people on income support who wish to become self-employed are receiving advice and assistance from Jersey Business as to whether their idea is one that has merit. Insofar as the whole contribution system is concerned, one of the projects for my department is to look at the fact that we only have 2 types of contributions, class 1 or class 2, class 2 being for the self-employed, and whether we should have other classes which might assist in paying a lower level of contribution.

5.2.1 Deputy S. Power:

If I might be allowed a supplementary to that. I am very grateful that the previous Minister has looked at this but I would like the current Minister to look at it again.

[12:30]

If somebody wishes and aspires to become self-employed the system that his department has at the moment is very inflexible and I would suggest to the Minister he needs, as a matter of some urgency, to look at a flexible system of self-employed class 1 social security contributions to encourage people on this Island to become self-employed on a scale fee. Would the Minister not agree that it is now appropriate, and with a degree of urgency, to look at this matter?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Anybody who pays class 2 not class 1 contributions as self-employed can have their contribution reduced based on historical tax data. At the moment it would be your accounts or your income tax return 2 years prior to the year of the contribution. There is a system in place. I accept what the Deputy is saying that it is not as flexible as we would like and, as I said before, it is a matter that we are looking into.

5.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Has the Minister been able to make any progress in dealing with another group of people who do not seem to fit easily into his bureaucratic categories, namely students who wish to pursue further and higher education but somehow find themselves being dragged into back to work programmes while their official aim or their real aim is to improve their education and thus enhance the intellectual capital of the Island?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I realise that Deputy Le Hérissier has been away on holiday so he may not have followed the developments in the media with regard to a number of students who were challenging the fact that they might be asked to leave their course. I have come to an agreement that they will be able to finish the current academic year but they will remain job seekers as far as income support is concerned. They would only be expected to seek work outside of their course, the hours that they attend the course, so that would be part-time work, evenings, weekend and also during any holiday breaks from the course.

5.3.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

A supplementary. I was able to follow all the developments and the Minister's partially welcome news but would he not accept that this is a very strange situation because firstly, he has only come up with a temporary solution, admittedly other ministries like Education have to be involved, and secondly, if he insists on being quite frankly rigid he is going to do the very opposite. He is going to push people back to income support.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I need to make it absolutely clear, income support for people who are expected to be seeking work, that is people not looking after a child under the age of 5, over the age of 65 or who have a high impairment component, are expected to seek work and as long as those are the rules for income support that is what we expect of people. Obviously some people will be able to attend courses and work at their job-seeking activities around those courses and we would encourage people to increase their educational attainments. That also can be done by distance learning, O.U. (Open University) and there are other means of improving your educational standards without doing a full time course which would affect your job seeking activities.

5.4 The Connétable of St. John:

Can I firstly say I agree with the comments passed by Deputy Power in relation to self-employed and I sincerely hope the Minister looks at that sooner rather than later. Will the Minister please explain why... and I am referring to 2 of my residents of St. John who have got part-time jobs because they cannot get full-time jobs and yet one is expected to apply for a minimum of 2 jobs a week and have interviews or whatever goes with the application and the other one at one stage had to apply for a minimum of 5 jobs per week. What is going on? People are trying to help themselves, finding part-time jobs... Will the Minister please explain because it is very difficult when you are doing a part-time job to get the time off you need to go to interviews because your employer who has given you basically 20 hours a week, shall we say or 15 hours a week, cannot give the time that maybe the interviews require.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The only people expected to seek part-time work, which is work less than 25 hours a week, are people who would be looking after a child who is not yet in secondary school and over the age of 5. Each person in that category would normally be working with a personal adviser from the Work Zone and in some cases more time is required for job seeking than for others. Those who have already secured some part-time work close to the 25 hours would obviously not be pressed to increase those hours. But nevertheless the requirement is to be looking for part-time work up to 25 hours a week.

5.4.1 The Connétable of St. John:

Could I challenge the Minister, Sir? These people are doing less than 25 hours a week. One yes, I will accept that he has got some youngsters. Fine, I can accept that one within reason. But the other person I mentioned in fact is over 50 and therefore he has not got any people he is looking after, i.e. children, whatever and yet this person is still expected to apply for 2 jobs per week.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

In the current economic climate we encourage all job seekers to take part-time work if they cannot find full-time work. In fact, of the 1,820 people currently registered as unemployed approximately 300 of them are in work insofar as they have part-time work. But, as I stressed before, unless they are looking after a child between the age of 5 and 11 they would be expected to seek full-time work which is 35 plus hours a week. I cannot talk about the individual concerned because I do not know all the details.

5.5 The Deputy of St. Martin:

In his answer to written question 1, the Minister has given us today considerable amounts of information about the amount of money paid to each G.P. out of the States Health Insurance Fund for visits to the doctor. Given that we all have the same amount of hours in a day and that doctors are very hardworking was the Minister surprised by the variation in these figures and does he realise he has one doctor who seems to work or who has been paid over twice the average of all the others?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The variation in figures can be attributed to a number of reasons. Some G.P.s have a larger proportion of elderly patients and that would account for increased visits from that particular group or they may be treating people with an ongoing disease or illness that requires frequent visits. I was not surprised with the figures. In reference to the very high perhaps figures that perhaps relate to assigned medical benefit this is something that the Medical Director for Primary Care will be looking into.

5.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

It follows on from the question of Deputy Le Hérissier about mature students who are on income support or who wish to be on income support. The Minister did send me an email towards the end of November which outlined the policy and it does say in the policy that you can be eligible to not work and receive income support if a person undergoing educational training on any course is approved by the Minister for the purposes of this article. Does the Minister agree that there already is something written into the policy guidelines which would enable him to simply approve certain courses if he judges them to be in the best interest of the student, either in the short or long term, in getting them back into employment and that it is perhaps not necessarily as complicated as we have been making it?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Yes, I agree with the Deputy but the fact is that some courses we would consider inappropriate and therefore we advise people not to enrol on such courses but clearly we have flexibility and we are using that flexibility to assist people.

5.6.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

A supplementary, I do appreciate the attention that the Minister has been giving this recently and we have come to some kind of temporary solution for the students affected which is appreciated. Will the Minister give an undertaking to continue to work with interested parties because ultimately the policy does say it is courses approved by the Minister and I think it is probably time that we just had a rethink about which courses are admissible and also if we can change courses within the Education Department so that they are more conducive to people both studying and working potentially part or full-time at the same time?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

My department are working on a report on this very matter in conjunction with officers at Education, Sport and Culture and now that the Deputy has joined the Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel I am sure he will keep a close eye on developments.

The Bailiff:

Very well. That brings questions to the Minister for Social Security to an end.