

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

The Bailiff:

Very well, that brings Questions on notice to a close so we will come next to questions to Ministers without notice and the first period is to the Minister for Social Security.

3.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister confirm that 26 out of 44 staff in Income Support are on temporary contracts - I presume they are zero hours contracts - and that in the work zone only 8 are permanent staff and all the rest are temporary staff?

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

I can confirm from memory that the figures that Deputy Southern has just used are correct. In explanation I would say that we are waiting for the Medium-Term Financial Plan to be debated by this Assembly. Further to that we will be able to offer a lot of the people on temporary contracts permanent employment.

3.1.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister not consider that his practice of being reliant to such an extent on temporary staff is a bad example to all employers on the Island?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Not at all. I think most employers on the Island would be grateful for the services being provided by these temporary staff, particularly in helping people get back into work.

3.2 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Given recent news, is the Minister able to inform the Assembly whether he is of the opinion that the compliance and investigation side - particularly to do with the fraud cases in the Social Security - has enough staff in order to carry out their function?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I thank the Deputy for his question. We are very active, as he and other Members are aware, in pursuing cases where fraud has been carried out in the department. I can tell the Deputy and the Assembly that between January and June of this year we had 132 hotline calls, 72 webpage hits, making a total of 204 out of a total number of cases for investigation of 394.

3.2.1 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Yes, but the Minister did not answer my question. I asked whether he felt that he was satisfied that his team were able to carry out their inquiries.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I apologise to the Deputy, I was trying to give him the breadth of the work that is going on and, yes, at the moment I am satisfied that we have sufficient staff pursuant to fraud.

3.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister accept that the practice of stopping income support basic components and stopping the contribution to rent for anyone on income support who is outside of the Island for whatever reason for more than 4 weeks is grossly unfair and will lead to hardship in some recipients?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The income support benefit system is not designed to allow people to have extended holidays at any time during the period that they are claiming the benefit, therefore, I think that the 28-day rule is very fair.

3.4 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Is the Minister aware that certain Parishes - in particular St. Helier - do have problems in getting some income support claimants to pay their rates and that under the old system this was addressed by a direct payment to the Parishes and this is no longer the case; and would he be willing to look at the possibility of

having those payments made direct to the Parishes to make it easier, not only for the Parishes but also for income support claimants to do their budgeting?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I note approbation amongst the Constables so I assume that this is an issue that they would like resolved. There is a provision for income support recipients to receive a special payment to pay their rates. Having looked at the figures for the last 12 months there does not appear to have been any payments for Parish rates. It is something that I would look into further but the Constables need to be aware that if we do make a special payment it would have to be by way of a loan and we would have to recover the money from the income support household at the rate £21 a week which could put some households into severe financial difficulties.

3.5 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Just a clarification of what the Minister for Social Security just said about the special payment for rates. When I asked this question before regarding rent and the household component I was told that the families are given the rates, therefore, I understood the special payments not to cover anything that has already been given. That is probably why - I understand - there have been no claims under special payments because they are not allowed. Could the Minister clarify the situation?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The household component, which is designed to assist with household bills in particular, including Parish rates, is paid on a weekly basis to households where they have the responsibility for paying rent or are property owners. There will be occasions - as explained by the previous questioner - where a household has failed to save the appropriate money during the year to pay their Parish rates. What I am saying to the Assembly is that there is a provision to make a special payment to pay rates but it would be by way of a loan and we would have to recover the money from the household by deductions from their benefit.

[11:45]

3.6 Deputy J.H. Young:

Will the Minister advise the Assembly whether he is yet in a position to bring forward a scheme for interim employment opportunities on our coastal footpaths, as he previously said to the House he would do?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Officers are still working with the T.T.S. and the Department of Environment to bring forward such a scheme, but I cannot give any firm details today.

3.6.1 Deputy J.H. Young:

Can I ask the Minister, does that mean that the opportunity for this winter will be missed?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The likelihood of any scheme being put into place before Christmas is remote but I am hopeful that something will happen in the new year.

3.7 Connétable M.P.S. Le Troquer of St. Martin:

Is the Minister satisfied that the arrangements for the payback of false claims are acceptable and what deterrent are they, if the payment period is over 15 or 20 years?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I am sorry, I did not catch the last part of that sentence. Could I ask the Constable to repeat?

The Connétable of St. Martin:

For the repayment of false claims that have been made, are the arrangements acceptable when the repayment periods made by the department are normally in the region of 15 to 20 years depending on the sum that has been taken?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

There will be occasions where the household in question or the claimant may have assets that we could realise to repay a false claim. We would have to take action through the Petty Debts Court to realise assets in that way. The fact is that unfortunately people who have sometimes made a false claim are not people in the position to pay back the money at any sort of shorter period and hence we take a view that as long as they are making attempts to repay we will take what offer is available.

3.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Minister inform Members how long staff are employed before they are placed on the front desk at Social Security, and how and who monitors the quality and accuracy of the advice they give customers, because it is certainly my experience and many peoples' experience that the advice given one day is contradicted the next.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I think the question about the day-to-day administration of the department is not really one for the Minister. The running of the department day-to-day is the responsibility of the Chief Officer. Obviously we have been in the position where there has been great demand on 2 areas - income support and the work zone - and there will have been occasions where people have been put on the front desk but supported by another experienced officer to deliver services to the public. I only hope that the public will accept that when somebody is training they may take longer to respond to inquiries.

3.8.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can I follow that up with a supplementary which relates to the question about fraud? Is the Minister aware that in the U.K. for every pound attributed to fraud in the benefit system between £1 and £2 is attributed to customer error and departmental error? What measures is he taking to reduce departmental error in the assessment of income support?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I do not accept any of the figures just proffered by the Deputy. I would point out to Members that the number of appeals that have been dealt with from the department was 11 last year of which 10 were upheld in favour of the department, so I think the Deputy's premise is quite wrong.

3.9 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Does the Minister not realise that it might well provide a better service for customers if he put more experienced staff on the front desk instead of putting the trainees?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Senator misunderstands the original answer to Deputy Southern's question. He was asking me about trainee staff being put in the front line. The system that is worked in the department is that people work on a rota basis so experienced staff are mixed with people who are less experienced, so that we have good cover at all times.

3.10 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Just a follow on to that subject. For the staff that administer income support and benefit system, does the Minister or his department take exit interviews because it would appear since the introduction of income support there has been a very, very large turnover of staff, which I probably would say the Minister is limited in the amount of staff with the experience needed. So are you doing exit interviews and also are the right staff administering this scheme on the right pay level?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

We used to have a system of exit interviews, last year we changed it to what we call mystery shopper. As far as the payment of staff, I am sure that all the staff listening to this broadcasting of the States Assembly would be delighted if I was to say that their pay should be doubled but that is most unlikely in the current climate.

3.10.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Would the Minister say 12 to 15 weeks or a year's training to only last in a job 2 months is a waste of actual money for staff training?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Deputy obviously has a particular case in mind. I am not aware of that particular case so I cannot comment further.

3.11 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister consider that his policy of only offering bedsit accommodation to single adults is not a fair policy and prevents people entering the market at extremely difficult times?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Deputy is quite correct, that is the current policy for anybody over the age of 25 who wishes to set up home. We are bound to control the cost of income support and obviously large cost is related to the housing component within income support. We do have discretion where there are exceptional circumstances, perhaps where somebody has a disability or somebody coming out of care, where we will allow them to occupy a one-bedroom property. But it is by discretion and not a general rule.

3.11.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister not accept that this runs directly contrary to the housing policy of getting rid of bedsits because they are inadequate accommodation in today's modern age?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Deputy Southern needs to get out and about. If he looks at the new developments that are currently being built he will find that many do not have a separate kitchen, the kitchen is part of your lounge, part of your dining room. So the fact that somebody has their bed combined with their lounge does not mean that they are living in inadequate accommodation.

3.12 Deputy J.A. Martin:

The Minister wants to get in and out a bit more because a bedsit has the bed in the lounge, not just the kitchen. The Minister said in his answer that somebody setting up home over 25 will only be offered the bedsit rate. Is the Minister not aware that families that have broken down and I represent - like Deputy Southern - men and women in their 40s and 50s who are literally shoved into a bedsit just because their marriage has broken down and they have to be the one to leave the family home. Does the Minister think this is suitable and correct in this day and age?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

There is nothing to prevent somebody on income support renting a one-bedroom flat if that is what they wish. The position is that we will only pay the housing component up to the level of the bedsit, which is the fair rent in the States housing. There is nothing to prevent them doing that if that is what they wish to do.