

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
BY DEPUTY S.Y. MÉZEC OF ST. HELIER
ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 3rd FEBRUARY 2015**

Question

What information, if any, does the Minister have as a result of her investigations into the increased use of food banks on the Island and, if none, will she investigate this issue and report progress to members and, in particular, will she agree to investigate the impact of the Income Support sanctions regime on the need for food banks and other charitable support to alleviate hardship?

Answer

In common with my ministerial colleagues, I was interested to read the recent newspaper articles about the increased use of food banks in the Island. As the Minister responsible for financial support to low-income families, I immediately tasked officers with meeting with representatives of each of the groups that offer this service. These meetings have been taking place over the last couple of weeks, and have been an opportunity for us to strengthen existing working contacts with third-sector groups and discuss any recent pressures experienced by each group. Officers have also attended meetings with the Citizens' Advice Bureau and the Shelter Trust, as these are also organisations who offer advice and assistance to people who might be struggling in the Island.

I can report that the meetings so far have been helpful and that the Social Security Department will continue working with these partner organisations to investigate the wider reasons that people are approaching them. We plan to work with the organisations to give the option of a uniform means of recording anonymous data that captures the reasons that people approach each group for help. We have also set up direct contact so that organisations can, with the clients' permission, contact us to ensure that people are receiving all of the financial help to which they are entitled.

It is clear that each group has different criteria for assisting people. One of the fundamental principles of our tax-funded benefit system is a set of consistent rules including the requirement that people may only access financial support once they have been in the Island and contributing to the economy for a minimum of five years. It is therefore likely, for example, that some recipients of food are people who do not meet this residency condition.

Income Support also has robust financial sanctions for people who claim benefit but who do not do enough to look for work. It is entirely the choice of a charitable organisation whether or not to help somebody who has ignored repeated warnings and put themselves in this situation, but it is the case that the principles underlying these financial sanctions were firmly endorsed by this Assembly. I do not agree that these rules create hardship, but consider that they are an essential element to ensure that the benefits system is able to perform its function in supporting people to move out of dependency by helping them find employment.