

22.09.20

4 Deputy C.S. Alves of the Minister for Social Security regarding the Health Access Scheme (OQ.91/2022)

Will the Minister commit to extending the Health Access Scheme to include people with long-term illnesses?

Deputy E. Millar (The Minister for Social Security):

The Health Access Scheme was introduced at the end of 2020 to help people with low incomes access general practice medical services. Under the scheme, people in receipt of income support or Pension Plus can attend a surgery consultation with a G.P. (general practitioner) for a fee of £12, with a nurse for £9, and there is no surgery consultation fee for children in these households.

[10:15]

This group of 11,000 low-income people will include many who also have long-term illnesses not carved out of the scheme. I will commit to reviewing this scheme, among other benefits. in my Ministerial plan but it is too soon to make a commitment as to the outcome of that review.

9.4.1 Deputy C.S. Alves:

Does the Minister recognise that those with long-term illnesses will often affect their income or their dispensable income quite significantly when they are regularly visiting the G.P.? If the Minister will not necessarily commit to looking at them having access to the Health Access Scheme, will she commit to looking into having some kind of support for these individuals in the long term?

Deputy E. Millar:

The Health Access Scheme was specifically designed to help people with low-income access general practice services by reducing the cost. There may be people with long-term illnesses who are not low income and their needs may very well be different. The support needed for people with long-term conditions needs to be understood and may need a different approach. I think it would be a mistake to narrow our consideration of the support for people with long-term illness purely to the Health Access Scheme and it needs a more thorough review.

9.4.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Would the Minister accept that it would be a relatively easy change to make to the Health Access Scheme to simply add a new criterion into it that those who are receiving a disability benefit such as long-term incapacity allowance could simply be added to the scheme and benefit from it as well?

Deputy E. Millar:

I do not think those people are necessarily included from the scheme. I have to confess, I do not understand how the Health Access Scheme works with all our other long-term benefits. We have long-term incapacity allowance, long-term care, there are numerous benefits that may be available to people with long-term conditions. I think the Health Access Scheme will be subject to review and it is, as I say, too early. I do not think we can necessarily have a one-size-fits-all expansion of the Health Access Scheme. We need to look more widely as to how we support people who have long-term illness, whether or not they are on low incomes.

9.4.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

We have heard in answers to multiple questions this morning so far a lack of an ability to give any sort of commitment because of ongoing reviews. Will the Minister accept that that is an extremely frustrating thing to hear for Members of this Assembly who want to get things done on behalf of our constituents? Will she not, at this point at least, commit to looking to extending the Health Access Scheme to those who are in receipt of some form of disability benefit on the basis that it will not cost very much at all to the Government, but will make a huge difference to those who are struggling to get access to the healthcare that they need on the basis of cost?

Deputy E. Millar:

I think the Deputy will understand that it is impossible to say yes to increasing a scheme without knowing what the implications in terms of numbers of claimants and the cost of that may be. It is very easy to say it will not cost very much, it may in fact cost a great deal. People with disabilities and long-term conditions are supported in a number of ways through the income support scheme and through other benefits. I think without reviewing the operation of all those schemes together, it is impossible to make a commitment at this stage, but a review will be undertaken next year.