

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

3.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Will the Minister inform Members if he still intends to end the transition in October and, if so, what sum of money will he be withdrawing from the benefits of households currently in receipt of £22.5 million of protected payments and, if he is going to do this, will he inform those in receipt of these benefits?

Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Clement (The Minister for Social Security):

The Deputy is quite right. The transitional payments are due to be started with a staged withdrawal in October of this year. If that stage withdrawal is to take place, then my department would need to issue letters, I think, in April and May of this year. As I have recently said at the Scrutiny hearing, however, a number of proposals have been gathered together as part of the economic stimulus package. Those proposals are duly being considered by the Fiscal Policy Panel and I would like to inform the Deputy that one of those proposals is that the transition payments are extended for a year.

3.1.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

A supplementary. Is the Minister not concerned? I fully understand protecting the people who are on transition but, since January 2007, hundreds and hundreds of people have now entered on the benefit payments now, so they are either wrong and they are losing out or the transitions are right and they are not. Which one is right?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure exactly what the Deputy is trying to ask me. If transition is to be extended, then, yes, there will be a piece of work that needs to be undertaken to understand those people who are currently on transition if their circumstances have changed and what effect that will have upon them and whether they should be moved from transition directly just on to income support. That is a piece of work that would need to be undertaken and it will be a decision for this House, as I understand it. The Fiscal Policy Panel will make their recommendations, that will turn into a proposition and the House will decide, so it will be ultimately for Members of this House to decide whether that is the right course of action, I should say, in an economic slowdown and that is critical for Members to remember.

3.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In his answer to written question 4150 tabled today, the Minister suggests that the Supplementation Bill paid by the taxpayer to top up Social Security contributions may be as high as £73 million. Can he explain what research has been done to state why this is so high?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As Members know, analysing and understanding at the start of the year the figure that supplementation is going to be at the end of the year is an inexact science, shall we say, because it is quarterly in arrears. It is driven obviously by the level of wages in the economy and it is difficult for the department to know in advance exactly what that amount is going to be. I will shortly, during the course of this year, be considering some proposals to try and see if we can budget more accurately for supplementation. While the amount will vary, we could perhaps put in the States accounts a budgeted amount and then make an adjustment for either a higher or lower number in the following year, so it is not a satisfactory answer for the Deputy, I appreciate, but that is because of the nature of what supplementation is.

3.2.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary on supplementation, if I may. Yes, it is not a very satisfactory answer. Research was commenced some time ago on the reasons why the Supplementation Bill seemed to be going

up. Will he specifically inform Members today to what extent the one-third one-third one-third principle has been breached? How much, in terms of proportion, is the taxpayer now paying towards the Social Security Contributions Bill? Is it still one-third or has it risen above that?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I do not have that information with me today, so I am not able to give a full answer to that. I understand that it might be slightly lower. Supplementation is a difficult issue. What we say is that those who currently are on lower incomes, we, as taxpayers, are prepared to top up their contribution into the Social Security fund to provide ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

I think, Minister, that you were asked about one-third, one-third, one-third and I think you said that you do not know the answer to that.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

This is important to provide benefit in the future for those employees.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

He has not agreed to dig out those figures and say what the figure is yet. Will he do so?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I have no problem with providing that figure.

3.3 Deputy S. Pitman:

Could the Minister inform Members whether or not he feels it acceptable that the Medical Board have deemed a person who has degenerative disc disease and arthritis 45 per cent unfit to work after 2 years of him being assessed by the Board and the illness quickly progressing? Indeed, this person has sought employment but has been refused it because employers have said he would be a financial liability. How is the Minister going to address this reality?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I thank the Deputy for that question. S.T.I.A. (short term incapacity allowance) and L.T.I.A. (long term incapacity allowance) are quite difficult benefits. The previous Minister for Social Security had a professor to review that whole area of benefit. I am going to struggle with his name. I cannot remember his name. I think it is Stratford but it begins with an "S" anyway. I propose that the review will be rolled up into the total review of the Social Security Law and the Social Security Fund. I must say it must be driven by medics but, currently, it uses a faculty analysis - and this is where we are going to get a little bit technical - but perhaps what we should be using is a function analysis as we do for medical components of income support.

3.3.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

The Minister was made aware of this by one of his constituents who he met with myself 11 weeks ago and nothing has been done about it. In the meantime, while this review is being done, what is the Minister going to do about this person who is receiving income support on 45 per cent of long term incapacity allowance. That is surely a very low percentage of the full amount, considering that this person's disease is progressing very fast.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As the Deputy knows, these cases are not always straightforward and nor is this one. It becomes very difficult. In order for me to defend myself in this case, I would have to talk about personal individual details and I am not prepared to do that, nor do I think it is acceptable to do so, suffice to say that I have asked for this to be reviewed.

3.4 Deputy D.J. De Sousa of St. Helier:

Is the Minister satisfied that the department can respond promptly to urgent requests for special payments such as dental work and rental deposits and that the clients are informed of what can be claimed?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am satisfied that the department can respond speedily to these requests. It can be, in a case of extreme need, that the department could turn a claim around within one day. However, the department generally works to turning a claim around within one week but we have a tolerance time of 2 weeks. I should say in the majority of cases, as I see the Deputy in front shaking his head. With regard to whether all potential recipients are aware of the benefits that are available to them, then the department has a piece of work to undertake there because I am not, at this stage, satisfied that everyone that could be entitled to a benefit is aware of all the benefits that they could be entitled to and that is a piece of work that we are undertaking and will continue to undertake to make sure that people are aware.

3.4.1 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Can the Minister inform the House that he will push for this urgently, as a lot of people are missing out on benefits they are entitled to because of lack of information?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Perhaps this is an opportune moment for me to pay tribute to my predecessor. Before I took up this role, I was under the impression that Social Security was, shall we say, a relatively quiet department. I have become all too aware that that is not the case. The Deputy is quite right. It is a priority that the department, alongside a myriad of other departments that I continually daily talk to my officers about and they juggle trying to meet the needs of the more vulnerable members of society but I can assure her it is a priority but these things do take time.

3.5 Senator P.F. Routier:

Thank you for that compliment. Will the Minister please inform Members what progress has been made in providing improved work and training opportunities for people with learning disabilities and on the autistic spectrum since his department has been allocated new funds to provide additional opportunities?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Perhaps I could turn that question around and ask the Senator where he left it but, seriously, that ranks, as the Deputy has just said, as a priority for my department. That piece of work currently sits with the Education Department because one of the priorities within that strategy was understanding and providing funding for the transition, as we call it, between services. The remaining areas of concern that I have, and those in those particular areas have, is transitioning between education. Education can be congratulated on the service that they provide at Mont à l'Abbé School to these individuals. It then becomes very difficult to find meaningful occupation or meaningful training or meaningful work opportunities when those individuals reach school leaving age, so that is where this piece of work currently sits. It is with Education and we are waiting back for a report to understand and a strategy to deal with that but it does remain a top priority. I should tell Members that I was involved in a transition meeting with a member of my Parish and I was absolutely shocked to experience what that process was like and it remains an absolute priority for me and it ought to remain a priority for the other departments and for this Assembly.

3.5.1 Senator P.F. Routier:

A supplementary. Can the Minister give an assurance that the allocated funds will be used solely for people with learning disabilities and people on the autistic spectrum because that is what the money was intended for and for no other purpose?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As I was one of the authors of that strategy, I am well aware that that is what it was intended for and that is what I intend to ensure that it is allocated to. I should add one slight caution to that and that is that some of the monies will be apportioned to Jersey Employment Trust, of which I am a Trustee, and I should make that clear. Their remit is across the disablement spectrum and, therefore they might struggle to apportion it directly to those with learning difficulties on the autistic spectrum, for example. If they are introducing new training courses, it might be that some with physical disablements are joined alongside those courses as well, so it might be quite difficult in that instance to hypothecate it but I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the vast majority of the money, apart from those difficult areas, do remain hypothecated for those 2 groups of individuals.

3.6 Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

The Health and Social Services Department is shortly to launch a new Carer's Strategy and I understand that the Employment Forum at the moment is looking at flexible and family-friendly working arrangements. As part of the strategy, we hope to deliver some form of flexible working for carers and I ask the Minister whether he can tell us at what stage the Employment Forum is regarding this flexible working and what consideration is being given to flexible working for carers?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I thank the Connétable for that question. As far as I am aware, the Employment Forum carried out their consultation of what had become known as family-friendly proposals or policies last year and perhaps the year before. I understand that my officers will shortly be presenting to me their recommendations. I am unable to say whether they have included proposals for carers. I cannot say one way or the other because I have not seen their proposals. If the Connétable and the Health and Social Services Department is saying that this is an issue which they did not address at the time with the Employment Forum, then perhaps the way forward is for them to write to me and/or the Employment Forum and perhaps we can include it as an addendum to their recommendations.

3.6.1 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

I thank the Minister for his response and I think, as the report is being prepared by the Employment Forum, it would be better if the Minister advises the Health and Social Services Department whether the carers have been taken into account in these flexible arrangements.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure that that is how the process works. As I understand it, the Minister instructs or requests the Employment Forum to look at a certain area of employment legislation which, as I say, the previous Minister did. They then consult interested parties and a more wider consultation and my question was - and I know I am supposed to be giving answers and not raising questions - I am not sure whether Social Services were part of that consultation process or not. It sounds at this stage as though they ought to have been and that is why I am suggesting that Social Services might wish to contact the Employment Forum and/or myself.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Very well. I am afraid that brings questions of the Minister to an end.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

May I just bring a point of, I think, order? May I remind, before we start on questions for the Chief Minister, to congratulate the Minister for Social Services on fitting so many words into so few breaths in the length of his answers. Can we have succinct answers in the next please, Sir, and will you ensure that that happens?