

24.01.16.

3.7 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of the Chief Minister regarding the recent report from Jersey charities on foodbank usage (OQ.11/2024)

Has the Council of Ministers accepted the conclusions of recent reports from Jersey charities that foodbank usage has reached record levels; and what plans, if any, does the Government have to resolve this situation?

Deputy K.L. Moore (The Chief Minister):

Ministers acknowledge that local foodbanks have reported high levels of demand in recent months. It is not possible to confirm if foodbank usage has reached record levels, as there is no agreed method for recording usage and each foodbank runs independently. The 2022 and 2023 Jersey Opinion and Lifestyle Surveys included questions for Islanders receiving charity support of all kinds. In 2023 this section specifically asked about foodbank usage for the first time, with 2 per cent of respondents replying that they had used a foodbank at some point. Local charities play a valuable role in providing practical support to Islanders in many ways. The Deputy Chief Minister and I visited the Salvation Army just before Christmas to see first hand the services offered and to discuss areas where Government can support charities. We will continue to work closely with foodbanks and other local charities to understand and support the needs of their clients.

[10:30]

3.7.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec

Is that really the Government's strategy that it will help foodbanks to continue to provide support for these people rather than eliminate the need for them to need that support in the first place?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

The Government's strategy since the beginning of our term of office has been to meet the needs of Islanders and to focus on the cost of living. That is why we brought a mini-Budget. That is why we brought forward measures in our Government Plans to support Islanders. I can list a number of them, if Members need reminding. We have a temporary reduction in social security contributions of 2 per cent, we brought that in in September 2022. The Community Costs Bonus was doubled to £516.50 and we have continued that through into this year. We guaranteed a £70 a month cold weather payment for 2023 and 2022, and minimum wage, of course, increased in September in our mini-Budget to £10.50. That support continued in 2023. Income tax thresholds and allowances increased by 12 per cent. Alcohol and fuel duty was frozen for 2023. A 10.4 per cent annual rise in income support components from January 2023 gave extra help for private sector tenants. A £20 reduction in G.P. (general practitioner) surgery visits. I go on. Changes to G.P. prescribing rules to reduce the number of visits needed to receive regular medication. Free G.P. surgery visits for all under-18s. Health Access Scheme £12 for G.P. surgery visits for low-income groups. The expansion of the Pension Plus scheme, which helps pensioners with dental, optical and chiropody costs. Additional support for winter 2023 and 2024 with £70 a month guaranteed cold weather payment to low income pensioners and some income support claimants. We have increased the Christmas bonus to £114 in 2023 and the Community Costs Bonus, as I mentioned earlier, was maintained at £516 per household. For this year, income tax thresholds have increased ...

The Bailiff:

Chief Minister, we have reached 30 seconds longer than the normal 1 minute, 30 seconds allowed for an answer so I might just ask you to bring your answer to a close.

Deputy K.L. Moore:

Yes, Sir, I have 3 more points to make. Our measures for 2024. We increased income tax thresholds to £20,000 for single people and to £32,050 for married and civil partners. Income support rates increased by 8.6 per cent, which is just under a 20 per cent increase in 2 years. Minimum wage rate went up to £11.64 on 1st January, that is a 26 per cent increase since June 2022. Finally, the Health Access Scheme, £12 fee for G.P. visits maintained for the whole of this year. I thank Members for their patience.

3.7.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is good to see so many Reform policies being quoted there. Can I ask the Minister, if there is a situation where because of a repayment of an overpayment caused by a delay in social security or an element of social security, those people have then been driven to foodbanks, is not a simple solution to simply not recover those payments because it is counterproductive?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I believe that that particular matter is the subject of a Scrutiny review and one that we need to ... we are grateful for the recommendations, we are and we will work to improve on that response.

3.7.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Indeed, it was a recommendation that was rejected by the Government. I would ask the Chief Minister to look again at that recommendation and to act upon that, because that is one of the reasons that foodbanks are becoming an integral part of this Government's policy for those who are least able to pay and survive on the Island. Will the Minister look again at that and perhaps act on that particular issue?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I will, yes.

3.7.4 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Could the Chief Minister confirm whether or not staff at Customer and Local Services are referring people to foodbanks when the States benefits do not meet their needs?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

That is not a question that I can answer from my role, I am afraid.

3.7.5 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Given the high numbers of people that are using foodbanks, would the Chief Minister concede that that is proof that the current benefits system is not fit for purpose and needs immediate attention?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I referred earlier in my rather lengthy answer to the increases in income support payments that have been met over our terms of office. Those are increases of 20 per cent over the period. We have been doing our best to respond to the needs of Islanders. We continue to do that. We are fully focused on it. The cost of living is an issue for all Islanders. It was one of our areas of relentless focus and it remains a priority for this year and beyond.

3.7.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Can the Government provide an explanation as to why, with all of the things that the Chief Minister listed in response to an earlier question, charities are reporting a rise in the usage of foodbanks? Is that not a sign that the cumulative effect of those policies is not working?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

In any situation, and particularly when under strain and difficulty as we can see many Islanders are in, of course we do our best. We implement proposals, policies and changes. That is what we have done and we continue to review those, to consider those and if they are not meeting the needs of Islanders in any way, then of course we revert to that, we respond, we continue to improve. One of our values as a public service is always improving and we are committed to doing just that