

4.10 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding the review of the Social Security system: [1(576)]

Will the Minister inform Members what quality assurance measures are in place to ensure that the review of the Social Security system currently underway properly assesses the full range of options open to the Minister?

Deputy G.J. Truscott (Assistant Minister for Social Security - rapporteur):

I thank the Deputy for his question. The way in which contributions are levied and paid into the Social Security Fund and the range and value of benefits paid out of the scheme are all included in the ongoing review of the Social Security system. The review will feed into the next Strategic Plan of the new Council of Ministers and the Medium Term Financial Plan that will be agreed in 2019. Surveys have developed with the support of the Statistics Unit. The current consultation includes a number of public workshops which will be externally facilitated, all open comments received or recorded and analysed independently, and the result of each stage of the review is written up and published as it was completed. An independent actuary will review the fund next year. The Minister is confident that the approach we are taking will identify and evaluate the full range of viable options to maintain a sustainable Social Security Fund. The Minister is equally confident that this work is being undertaken to a high standard and will be of great help to the next Assembly when they are asked to make decisions on the changes of the Social Security system. Thank you.

4.10.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Assistant Minister is expert in not answering the question. The question was what quality assurance measures are in place, not what is the survey about. May I ask him then whether he has read the conclusions or the responses that have come from the survey so far and whether he can justify the fact that in terms of paying for the Social Security system the second-most popular answer to: "How do we do that in the future?" was: "To increase employers' contributions" received 71 per cent approval rating. Yet by question 20 in part 2 of the survey it says: "How do you think we should pay for an increase this time in parental leave?" "I would be willing to pay more contributions" is one option: "I would be willing to accept reductions in other working age contributory benefits" is the other. No mention of employers' increase at all. How can that be justified on the evidence that he has got?

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

I will start first of all by saying there is no I.S.O. (International Organisation for Standardisation) quality assurance that you can apply to a survey. We have engaged professional businesses from the U.K. to conduct this survey. We have engaged - and it is something which I know you appreciate - the Statistics Unit locally to construct our questions and answers. I was wondering where this question was going because you are ...

The Bailiff:

Through the Chair, please.

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

Sorry, Sir. I was wondering where this was going because you are a valid member of our Scrutiny Panel and if you had concerns with regard to the quality of the questions, it would have been, I think, quite appropriate for you perhaps to contact the department to raise your concerns.

The Bailiff:

Deputy, through the Chair: the Deputy can raise his concerns.

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

Sorry, I keep doing it. It has just been let loose. In 3 years, it is quite nice for me just to ... but anyway. [Laughter]

The Bailiff:

All the more reason to keep yourself in place.

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

So if you have concerns, I really would appreciate that you come to the department and talk to us. It is going very well and it is so important to consult. I think as a department, they are looking towards the future. We have got the ageing demographic, and I do celebrate the fact that people are growing old, but it is throwing up such challenges and it was so important to maintain the health of the Social Security Fund. So I was wondering where the question was going, and I was wondering what concerns Deputy Southern ... and you have outlined that now. I have not got an answer for you, but I would you like you to come into the department, or I do note that we have a Scrutiny meeting on the 20th and maybe that would be the best place to table this question. But just in my defence, this question was tabled on Thursday and Deputy Southern did stipulate that the question should be answered by the Minister under Standing Orders 13(3A). I was happy to stand up and have a stab at answering his questions and try to address his concerns, but I really do feel, I just need to say, you are on Scrutiny, you really should ...

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Minister, I think it is perhaps time to sit down.

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

Yes. Thank you.

4.10.2 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I noticed the States of Jersey Facebook page promoting this consultation and I wanted to ask the Assistant Minister for some clarification. The post reads: "Have you or anyone you know ever claimed a maternity grant or maternity allowance? The Social Security Review Consultation is asking questions", *et cetera*. Can the Assistant Minister clarify that it is not just mothers who should be contributing to this consultation and that the department also needs responses from fathers and that it is not just those who have claimed benefits in the past with regards to parental grants but those who may do so in the future? Does he encourage people who are in the situation, are thinking of having a family in the future - fathers as well as mothers - to complete the consultation?

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

I would absolutely encourage everyone to participate in the survey. As you say, we are trying to plan for the future which is so important. I have not got the answers for the Deputy, but I will consult with the department and go back to her with an answer on this matter. Thank you.

The Bailiff:

Senator Ozouf, would you please turn your machine ...

4.10.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Can I clarify my question? So if fathers are able to contribute as well as mothers to the consultation?

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

As I say, I will clarify that for you, Deputy.

4.10.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

My question follows on from that of Deputy Southern. I engaged with this consultation through AppTivism and I have to say the questions were unbelievably biased and I think inadequate. This was pointed out to me also by other members of the public who were shocked that at no point was there an option to say that they wanted some of these contributed benefits to be paid for by raising the cap on social security contributions from the highest earners. Given that that would clearly be an overwhelmingly popular option, yet members of the public did not have the opportunity to select that, does the Assistant Minister believe that the consultation is therefore unsafe and perhaps its conclusions on the basis of the process were unsafe may well be good to just disregard?

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

We provided our Scrutiny Panel at the beginning of the year with a road map of the work that we are going to be conducting through to the beginning of 2019. We have already concluded the *Living Longer: Thinking Ahead*. We have 1,300 responses. We held a number of workshops and all the results have been written up and published. We have gone on to part 2: *Living Today: Thinking Ahead* looking at the changes in society, maternity and bereavement benefits, using Chatbot, as you say, an online survey. We are also using an external company helping with workshop facilitation analysis of results. Now, you would have seen that we will be reviewing Class 2 contributions; there will be a technical review. That will be the next piece of work, but I would be delighted if, at the next Scrutiny meeting, if you would bring this up ...

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

So we are back to the Scrutiny Panel.

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

Yes, I was just going to say. You did not ...

The Bailiff:

Through the Chair, Minister.

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

Sorry, Sir. Literally, this question, it was posted to us on the Thursday. It came in under the right time, yes, and we were seeking clarification if you wanted the Chief Minister to answer this or myself. I only heard yesterday that you wanted me to answer it, so there we are and as it is. But, as I say, I will happily help, and I hope in the Scrutiny process that we get to the bottom of what you are trying to seek because it does need looking at. Thank you.

The Bailiff:

I have Senator Ozouf and then a final supplementary.

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Do I not get a supplementary to ...

The Bailiff:

No, you do not. Senator Ozouf and then a final supplementary.

4.10.5 Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

While recognising that due to the ageing society, all communities around the world are having to meet the challenges that this consultation is trying to answer, and they are massive changes for everybody, is the Minister aware that the F.P.P. (Fiscal Policy Panel) in their recent report to States Members and others said that Jersey should be regarded as a leader for having made decisions early in relation to the ageing society and that while we have got issues to deal with, that we are starting from a much, much stronger base, notwithstanding the massive increases in income that has been got from investment from last year's Social Security Fund? So while there are challenges, it is not the end of the world, and we are in a much better place than anywhere else.

[11:15]

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

I totally concur with the Senator. This Government has been very forward-thinking. I think it is so important to be forward-thinking and look towards the future. We have introduced the long-term care, we have tax in place to collect and fund it ongoing, which I think is, as you say, Senator, the way forward. I am so pleased that, as you say, we are not in a panic situation in any shape or form and social security funds are in a very good condition. I sat on the Treasury Advisory Board for 2½ years with the Minister and we saw millions, literally hundreds of millions of pounds, come in through investments into the fund. So, yes, we are forward-thinking, we need to continue looking to the future, looking at ways to make people save, contribute to their retirement, either through workplace pensions or savings. So, as I say, this is a very positive scheme and anybody listening I would encourage them to take part if they could. Thank you.

4.10.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

May I congratulate the Assistant Minister on doing a perfect impression of somebody digging a hole. May I ask further if he has read the consultation and the responses that were given because his answers would suggest that he has not? Does he not accept that germane to doing this survey, no matter how many times you do it and how many contributors you get, is the quality of the questions? I return to my basic question: what checks were run on the quality, appropriateness of these questions? Because without quality questions, the right questions, then the survey itself, no matter how widespread, is called into question. Does he not accept that some of the questions are misleading?

Deputy G.J. Truscott:

Something I think I will go away and look at and study, I have read ... there are 1,300 from the first survey. I have seen again the summary of the conclusions. Interestingly, it was the 35 to 55 age group that was responding mainly. It seems that the youngsters from 20 to 30, regarding their pension, were not probably too interested at this stage. As I say, I will be delighted to look into this matter though.