

3.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of the Minister for Social Security regarding the information provided to benefits recipients by the Social Security Department:

What efforts, if any, has the Social Security Department made to inform benefits recipients of the full implications of the cuts to their benefits beginning on 1st January next year?

Deputy S.J. Pinel of St. Clement (The Minister for Social Security):

I can confirm that individual letters have already been sent to virtually every income support household that will have a benefit adjustment from January next year following the decision of the States to approve both the M.T.F.P. and the associated benefit legislation changes. To accommodate the wide variety of households that claim income support, 17 different letters were used to ensure that each household received the correct information for their circumstances. In total, just under 3,000 letters were sent during the week beginning 19th October, giving households 10 weeks' notice of the change from January 2016. The only outstanding issue relates to a very small number of claims that require individual attention and these will receive letters this week. Although the majority of letters identified a small reduction in benefit from January, some aspects of income support are being made more generous and claimants have also been advised of increases in benefit from the same time.

3.4.1 Deputy S.W. Mézec:

The Minister referred to there being 17 different types of letters, I believe. I cannot claim to have seen all of them. I have, however, seen some and on these letters, particularly when it is people who have benefits implications, not just of income support, but also invalidity benefit, single parent component, et cetera. These letters do not say how much money the recipient will get in their pocket every week and I have had to go down to the Social Security personally with them to wrangle and find out exactly what is going on. Does the Minister consider it acceptable that when sending out letters to these people, many of them who are very vulnerable, that the letters should have the courtesy of being straight with these people and telling them exactly what the implications are, not leaving them to go on a wild goose chase to find out the information that they need?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

As I have already explained, these letters were tailored to each individual's personal circumstances: detailing the money they would receive from January; breaking it down into the rental component and whichever other component that they were receiving. The majority of letters were issued over a period of a week and throughout this time a team were in place, checking responses and the levels on a daily basis to ensure that we could handle inquiries and, if necessary, adapt.

3.4.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

Has the Minister considered adding a personal touch to all of these letters that are going out? Perhaps quoting from her own election manifesto stating: "We must do more to support the estimated 18,000 Islanders with some form of disability and improve their quality of life"? "I have noticed that you are disabled; therefore, I wish to cut your income support."

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I think that would be slightly impractical with 3,000 letters going out and, yes, I was in my manifesto very concerned, and still am, about disability. As soon as we have achieved age discrimination law which will hopefully be next year, we will be looking at disability discrimination.

3.4.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

I think therein lies the rub because the Minister says we are going to bring in age discrimination law and that is a time to tackle this holistically, yet we have not waited to implement the cuts that are going to affect the elderly until we have a discrimination law. We know that currently, for example, elderly people - who might need to work to supplement their income - cannot necessarily do that on an even playing field, because they are not given priority. There is no legislation in place. So the question is: why have we not waited to have a proper discrimination law, whether it be for gender, for disability or for age, before we implement these cuts, which particularly target either deliberately or, as a consequence, those 3 categories?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

As the Deputy is very well aware, the whole reason for the adjustments to benefits and across the board is to make investments into health and education and it is a 4-year programme that Social Security have put forward and there is no reason to wait to implement these for legislation to come in.

[10:15]

3.4.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

It is hard to know where to go with this area, since the Minister is being in denial. One of the problems with the letters that come out, that emanate from Social Security, is they are not very clear. Will the Minister release the 18, or whatever it is, pro-formas anonymised, so that we can study them and see if they are clear? Secondly, nowhere on the letter, I understand it, does it say: "This is what you were receiving, and this is what you will receive from 1st January." That is what people need to know. "How much less am I going to have to survive on under the new regime?" It does not say on the letters or does it? It never says: "That is what you had, this is what you are going to have." Will the Minister act to ensure that a comparison point is made on the letter so it is clear from one letter what has happened to the benefit?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I will discuss with the department whether the letters can be released and, of course, I have seen all 17 versions. As regards putting down what people receive, people are very well aware of what they receive. The letters indicate what they will receive from January 2016 in a breakdown of each component that they receive.

3.4.5 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Given the offer by the Chairman of the Constables this morning that when they get people coming to their Parish Halls, that they will sit down - and welfare is more than money - but often direct them to other departments, probably the Social Security Department, what steps has the Minister done to do this in reverse? Is the Minister teaching her frontline staff that if there is no help at Social that your staff will be directing them back to the Parishes for the practical offers that have been made this morning by the Chairman of the Comité?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I am not sure I quite understand the question. There is help from income support. That is what it is there for. The Parish community support schemes, several Parishes have now got them, will help

top up that if people need it. But it is not necessarily financial help, as the Constable of St. Clement said. The community support schemes are there to give personal guidance and help in situations where people are perhaps alone and cannot help themselves. It is not necessarily financial help.

3.4.6 Deputy J.A. Martin:

May I help the Minister? There may be different practical helps in one Parish to another. What my question is: does the Minister for Social Security know this, do her staff know this, and when you say to somebody: "We cannot help you any further, but in your Parish there is X, Y and Z, go there", are her staff being trained in this and does she know what the Parishes are backing her up on?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

Yes, I know which Parishes have community support schemes. That is the name of the one in St. Clement. I am not quite sure what the names of the others are. I would not suggest necessarily that the staff prefer them to the Parish because we are, as a department, there to provide the statutory income support that the person is qualified to receive.

3.4.7 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

In response to my second question and Deputy Southern's question, the Minister said that she believed the letters were clear about what the implications to the cuts are for the recipients. This is only true if the only benefit the recipient is getting is income support. I am specifically talking now about people, who receive income support and another benefit, whether it is invalidity benefit, or what have you. If those people - particularly if they are living in social housing and income support pays for their rent - with income support now being reduced, because of the change in disregard, that means that the rest of their rent will have to come out of their other benefits, for example, invalidity benefit, which means at the end of the week these people end up with less in their pocket. One person I am speaking to at the moment, £625 a year worse off he will be; the letter does not say that on it. It only talks about income support. It does not say the implications for other benefits. How does the Minister justify this and how can she attempt to explain to the House that this is not going to leave some of our most vulnerable residents confused as to what the financial implications will be from 1st January; and will she endeavour to put out a new letter - set some officers to task to go through each individual person and work out what their circumstances will be - instead of leaving these people in the dark as she is doing at the moment?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

There is no change to invalidity benefit and that is no longer ... yes, there was no change to the benefit. There is no longer, anyway, an invalidity benefit; it was phased out in order to introduce long-term incapacity allowance. I understand where the Deputy is coming from and I will speak to the department to see if a further letter can go out to stipulate what the recipient receives at the moment and the change in what it will be in January.