

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
BY DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER
ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 18th JUNE 2013**

Question

What consideration has the Minister, in conjunction with the Minister for Health and Social Services, given to measures to address the problem of the high cost of accessing primary health care through GPs and if none, why not?

What plans, if any, does the Minister have to address the issue of prescription charges, and if none, will he commit himself to assess this issue and to bring proposals to the States in the next 18 months?

Answer

Both the Minister for Social Security and the Minister for Health and Social Services are fully committed to working together to deliver a sustainable health and social care system, properly funded and delivering services to Islanders in the most appropriate, cost-effective manner to meet their needs. Affordable access to high-quality primary care will be an integral part of this system, and Ministers will be co-operating over the coming years to develop a more sustainable future model for primary care, including access to GP services and the availability of prescription medicines.

As outlined in P.82/2012 (as amended) Health and Social Services: A New Way Forward, a Primary Care Governance Team has been established and the Team is currently co-ordinating an independent review of primary care, leading to the production of a Primary Care Strategy by September 2014. Both the current co-payment system for GP consultations and the possible reintroduction of community prescription charges will be considered as part of this review.

The bulk of the current costs faced by people in Jersey for primary health care is in respect of the GP co-payment, given that medicines and charges for dispensing community prescriptions are free to Islanders, met by the Health Insurance Fund (HIF) pharmaceutical benefit. GPs operate as private businesses and the States do not control the fees they levy. The States does however subsidise the cost of each GP consultation in the form of a medical benefit, currently set at £20.28 per visit, paid directly to GPs to contribute towards the cost of a consultation with a patient.

The number of visits to GPs has remained relatively steady over recent years, although there has been a steady annual increase in the number of prescriptions issued and paid for by the Health Insurance Fund. In total, the HIF provided £8.6M towards supporting the cost of GP fees in 2011 and a further £17M in respect of drug costs and the dispensing thereof.

In addition, substantial investment has been provided to establish and maintain the local Primary Care Governance Team and separately the HIF has provided funding of approximately £1 million to improve the IT systems that support GP surgeries.

In addition to the funding provided through the HIF, households with low incomes are able to access additional financial support via the Income Support benefit. Income Support contains dedicated components which are designed to address the extra costs associated with long term medical conditions and additional GP visits.

I must emphasise that community prescriptions are currently free to all Islanders covered by the Health Insurance Fund and that I have no plans to reintroduce prescription charges. Community prescriptions will continue to be available free of charge until the review of primary care is complete; if that review recommends a reintroduction of prescription charges then proposals will be put to the States for debate as part of the overall model of primary care.