

3.10 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of the Minister for Social Security regarding the abolition of the single parent component of Income Support:

Given the conclusion of *Living on Low Income* (S.R.4/2016) that the decision to abolish the single parent component of income support was “unsound”, what measures, if any, has the Minister taken to improve the decision-making processes with which she is involved?

[15:30]

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

The Scrutiny Panel has provided its opinion. Members will not be surprised if I state that in my opinion the decision was perfectly sound. As is usual practice, I will be making a full written response to the Scrutiny review within 6 weeks of its publication. In this case the response will be provided by 19th October. The lone parent component is included in legislation which was debated and approved in the States Assembly. Last year I put forward an amendment to the legislation to change this aspect of income support. As is the right of any elected member, Deputy Mézec lodged an amendment to my proposals and these were debated in October 2015. Following the debate, States Members supported my proposition and the law was amended. The decision-making process is clear and democratic and I have no plans to seek to change it.

3.10.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

A supplementary question. Of course the debate which took place in October last year occurred before the publication of the Income Distribution Survey, which showed that 54 per cent of single parent households live in relative low income. How can she possibly describe a decision-making process which ignores the fact that over half of these people were already living in relative low income and therefore could not be included in the decision to take away what is, for some of them, over £2,000 a year; how could she possibly describe that process as sound when she made that decision without the most important piece of information she would need before making it?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

The timing of the M.T.F.P. debate last year and the timing of the release of the new evidence referred to by the Deputy of living on low income and the Scrutiny Report of that and the Income Distribution Survey, the timings of these were completely out of my control. However, both present different types of evidence, some of which will undoubtedly shape future policy development. However I can unequivocally say that neither of these would have affected my decision to propose a phased reduction in the extra amount paid to lone parents. I would have made the same case to this Assembly and I am confident it would have been accepted.

3.10.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister accept that the decision she made to reduce or eliminate the lone parent component was made on the basis of no evidence but merely on the prejudice of some officers in her department? Will she in the future pay due attention to the results of the independently produced report on income distribution and reconsider her decision in the light of this fresh evidence?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

This measure does not unfairly target single parents. By 2018 all single parents receiving income support at that time will be in a comparable position to couples with children. All single parents will still receive an adult component to cover their personal living costs, a rental component to cover rent, a household component to cover household bills and a child

component to cover the costs of a child's living. They would also be able to claim help with childcare costs when they return to work and receive specialist support from the Back to Work team to get them back into the workforce.

3.10.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister again did not answer my question. The question was: will she pay careful attention to the new evidence produced in the Income Distribution Survey and reconsider her decision?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I think I said in my previous answer that both the Income Distribution Survey and the *Living on Low Income* will support future policy development but there is no question of a change in the way that we dealt with the lone parents.

3.10.4 Deputy R.J. Renouf of St. Ouen:

When making her decision to withdraw the single parent supplement did the Minister go back to consider the principles of income support, which were adopted by this Assembly in the early days of the income support scheme, and for what reason did the Minister reject the findings set out in those principles that single parents do have additional costs which should be covered by the income support scheme?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I think the Deputy is referring to the law of 2007 prior to the Income Support Law of 2008 coming in. That may have been considered necessary at that time. The evidence and the investigation and research that we have done at this time, considerably further down the route, does not produce any evidence to say that it is more expensive for a lone parent than it is for a couple with children.

3.10.5 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The Minister refers to her evidence and research and I should be grateful if she would provide the Scrutiny Panel and Members with it, and I would ask that she does so; she has not previously done so on this subject.

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

The Deputy, also Chairman of the Scrutiny Panel, has asked for evidence. This was all done in the department which is without doubt the best place versed to do this because we are dealing with these situations every day. As a result of our change in the lone parent component there have been 2 questions to the department from the public ... this was introduced in November. One was merely a query, one was a complaint, and I personally, in the last 3 weeks, have had one email. So there is no evidence subsequent to the introduction of this change to say that it is proving a problem.

3.10.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister accept that it is completely inappropriate and misleading to make comparisons with parents who are in a joint relationship because in fact their potential for increasing their earning power is much greater than that of a single parent who is very limited when it comes to the use of their time to seek alternative employment and to increase their funds and that is why, in particular, this Scrutiny Panel found that they have been targeted disproportionately. Remember, a group who already is in a bad position to start off with being made even worse off by this Minister's cuts. Does the Minister accept that point?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

No, I do not accept the point because there is a huge amount of support given to lone parents. Our research shows that lone parents very rarely stay in that position; 20 months is the average in that position, with one in 3 staying in that position for less than a year. The emphasis on trying to find them suitable jobs is huge, with the Back to Work team, and also childcare costs are covered to allow them to get back into the workplace.

3.10.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister accept that it is completely irrelevant for how long a single parent remains a single parent? If one is on one's bones for 20 months or so that is a significant period of time during which they absolutely need the correct level of income support claims to help them and their family in that situation. Will the Minister agree that that is a completely spurious argument she is putting forward, irrespective of how long one remains a single parent. That could be for a matter of months or a matter of years. During that time they should be adequately supported, is that not correct?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I have already outlined in a previous answer that the adult component, the rental component, the child component, the household bill component, are all paid to a lone parent on full receipt of income support so it is not as if they are on their bones, as the Deputy said. The whole reason for the savings in the benefits in last year's M.T.F.P. was to support health and education, and already Education are rolling out the pupil premium in schools which will support a lot of these children.

3.10.8 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Income Distribution Survey of course also pointed out the appalling rates we have of pensioners who live in relative low income in the Island as well, another group which her department sought to cut support for. My question is: does her department bother to do any investigation whatsoever to find out what she is doing to the poorest people in our society and what will she say inevitably when the next Income Distribution Survey comes out that will show that the measures she has taken in office have made life even more difficult for the people in this Island who are already the poorest and most vulnerable. What does she say to that?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I seem to keep answering the same question time and time again with a similar answer. There were not cuts to pensioners, as the Deputy refers to, and the lone parents on income support are very, very well supported with all the components I have referred to earlier, plus the childcare costs, plus support to get them back into work and give them financial independence.

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Can I raise a point of order on that last question? I believe that the Minister has just misled the Assembly when she has said there were no cuts to support for pensioners. Her department did in fact reduce the disregard for income support for people who are pensioners, meaning there was a cut. To say otherwise is simply to deceive the Assembly.

The Deputy Bailiff:

What is the point of order?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

That she has misled the Assembly.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That is not a point of order, Deputy. A point of order is something on which the Chair has to make a ruling and the Chair obviously cannot make a ruling on what she said. I am working on the assumption that you are suggesting that the Minister may have unintentionally misled the Assembly. But I do not think that is a point of order. I cannot make a ruling upon on it.