

4. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Social Security

4.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In transferring what was the Invalid Carer's Allowance to the Home Carer's Allowance from funding by the taxpayer to funding by social security contributions, was it the intention of the Minister to reduce those who can offer home carer's care for, say, parents by requiring them to have a full contribution record for at least one month during the previous quarter but one; thereby reducing the number of people who can volunteer to do this caring effort in our society when the demand is going up?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley (The Minister for Social Security):

No, there was no such intention. However, it is a condition of a social security contributory benefit that there has to be a contribution record of some sort. We chose the very minimum which, as the Deputy explains, is one month and we also made due note of the credits received for home responsibility which would apply to women.

4.1.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister not consider that this is reducing the number who can apply for this particular benefit and is he considering reducing what he calls this minimal level still further?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I am not aware that the changes have created any difficulties with people making applications. If the Deputy is aware of any particular cases, if he would bring them to my attention I will give it further consideration.

4.2 Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

What provision, if any, is made by the Social Security Department to enable those who cannot drive for medical reasons to have access to reduced travel costs such as subsidising the bus service?

[11:45]

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I have to say, in response to the Connétable, that I do not think any of this comes within the responsibility of my department. If she believes it does I would happily look further into it, but I do not see that these issues relate to Social Security.

4.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Just to follow on from that, is it not the case that in the past cards were available for disabled bus passengers, for example, to use that and there was a transfer so that a component came under income support? If that is the case, is there sufficient provision in income support arrangements already for those with mobility issues to use public transport?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I am at a bit of a loss with these questions and the direction they are taking. The issue of people on income support who have mobility difficulties, there is a component within income support - 2 levels - which is assessed and included in an income support claim. It may be that those monies can be used to buy tickets on a bus or a taxi maybe once a week or whatever, but I cannot think how these questions are targeting my department because I am not sure they are our responsibility.

4.3.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

If I can reiterate perhaps with a supplementary, is it the case that the department still issues cards or, rather, are there people on income support who, as a legacy, still have bus passes that would have been issued by his department and will those individuals also still be in receipt of a component, whereas new claimants are not able to receive a card for travel purposes?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Now we are getting to the nub of the problem. I think we are talking about health insurance exception cards, which were done away with when we introduced income support. A holder of a health insurance exception card was entitled to free travel on the buses. I think there was a slight legacy of arrangements made, but certainly the only people I am aware of now who have entitlement to free bus passes are people in receipt of an old age pension.

4.4 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville:

Would the Minister consider introducing a flexible social security contribution arrangement as they have with National Insurance in the U.K. for our fishermen who, in the case of this winter, were unable to go to sea for 2.5 months in some cases?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

There has been concern raised with the department about the plight of our fishermen and it is something that the department officers are looking into in conjunction with the Economic Development Department. Quite rightly, we are looking at situations where we can reduce, as far as possible, the contribution requirements in the relevant quarter for fishermen who are having financial difficulties. As to whether we will be making changes, there is a programme of work scheduled for probably next year now to look at introducing new classes of contributions other than the 2 that we have, but that work has not really started yet.

4.4.1 The Deputy of Grouville:

As the demands will be going out in the next few days and as some fishermen are going out of business as we speak, would he consider an expedient timescale to address this at this time, even if it is a temporary measure?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The difficulty with social security contributions is it is a legal requirement. We would have to change the Social Security Law that would require primary law changes, so that could not be done in a hurry, and it would probably be wrong to do it in respect of one particular group of people on a one-off basis. I would reiterate, if any fishermen or organisation involved with the fishing industry is having difficulty or the receipt of their latest bill is presenting them a difficulty, they should come in and talk to officers in the department.

4.5 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Is the department monitoring the number of people who, given the radical changes in pension provision and indeed the expansion, for example, of zero contracts, are really going to be without proper pension provision? If so, has the Minister got an estimate, say, for the next several years and will he be considering auto-enrolment as a way of dealing with what could be a growing issue?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Government Actuary has completed the latest review of the Social Security Fund which, of course, provides provision for pensions. I will be presenting the findings of that report to States Members in the next few weeks. There are clearly issues around people who are not

making adequate contributions in relation to receiving a full pension and the findings in the report will help guide us as to whether we need to make changes going forward.

4.5.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

On a supplementary, though, is the Minister committed to a solution like auto-enrolment were he to discover large gaps in provision?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I believe that we need to take some steps to make sure that, going forward, people have adequate pensions. Maybe that answers the Deputy's question.

4.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is it not the case that Disability Transport Allowance for many on income support is being subsumed by the requirements of the household medical needs - so their medical needs - and, in general, what progress has the Minister made, in conjunction with the Minister for Health and Social Services, to develop access to G.P. services for those on low incomes in future?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Deputy has confused me as to why the Disability Transport Allowance fits in with access to G.P.s. The Disability Transport Allowance no longer exists, although there are a few people who are having it phased-out. Maybe that was not the correct terminology. In regard to work with G.P.s, which is presently underway with both my department and the Health and Social Services Department, the process has been slow but we have put more resources into dealing with the issues. We had intended to use an off-Island consultancy but we decided to do the work locally. The Ministerial Oversight Group is now meeting monthly to monitor progress and we hope that we can stick to the timetable set by the States.

4.6.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Which is to deliver something by what date?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The amended proposition of the Minister for Health and Social Services was by the end of September. At this stage I would very much doubt that we will have full proposals, but we will certainly be at a stage where we can present to Members our findings to date.

4.7 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

The Minister just half-answered my question. I was going to ask a question about sustainable funding for primary care and the Minister has basically confirmed that it is not going to be delivered by September 2014. Can he tell Members when he thinks it will be in its entirety?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I was referring to the model of primary care, not the sustainable funding, which is a separate element of the proposition. The issues around sustainable funding are really a matter for the Minister for Treasury and Resources in conjunction with the Minister for Health and Social Services and myself.

4.8 Deputy J.G. Reed of St. Ouen:

Just following on from Deputy Hilton's question, what progress have the 3 Ministers made in developing a sustainable funding mechanism for primary care?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The issue is complex, as I am sure the Deputy would understand being on our Scrutiny Panel. The question is really tied-in with the development of the next Medium-Term Financial Plan and bids are presently being put forward, particularly by the Health and Social Services Department, as to the growth required to meet the requirements of the delivery of a new model of primary care and also the cost of a new hospital, *et cetera*. The work really relates to the bids and the funding for the next Medium-Term Financial Plan, which is work well underway at the Treasury.

4.8.1 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Does the Minister propose that the sustainable funding mechanism for primary care will not only be brought to the States but decided prior to the next Medium-Term Financial Plan?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I firmly believe that the 2 Ministers have a responsibility to bring out proposals to the States, but the funding mechanism will certainly be part and parcel of the next Medium-Term Financial Plan.

4.9 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

I am aware of the excellent work the Minister is doing here but he must be aware that the public believe that the current payment system is not working, hence the big shift, for example, to Accident and Emergency. Can the Minister inform the House whether the group's work is based on the fact that we are going to have to abandon the current system and develop other alternatives? If so, which are they considering?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

It is too early in the development of proposals to give any direction to the Assembly and to the Deputy. I would challenge whether the co-payment system that we have for G.P.s and the refund through the Medical Benefit System is not sustainable. I suggest that it is a system that is done in some other countries and it just needs refinement. It is a question of how that refinement is obtained.

4.9.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

The U.K. is talking about £10 a visit. Is that the kind of refinement that the Minister is seeking?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I think the Deputy is perhaps not taking into consideration that G.P. practices are private businesses and they are quite at liberty to charge whatever the patient is prepared to pay. We pay a set amount out. The control of the costs of going to the G.P. very much rests in the hands of the practitioners and their representative body, which is the P.C.B. (Primary Care Body).