

3.9 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding the choice of the words “tighten benefit rules” as an option under question 90 of the survey undertaken for the report ‘Living Longer: Thinking Ahead’: [1(301)]

Will the Minister explain the choice of the words “tighten benefit rules” as an option presented to members of the public under question 9 of the survey undertaken for the report *Living Longer, Thinking Ahead*?

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

Last October I launched the first part of a major review into income in retirement and the Social Security scheme. *Living Longer, Thinking Ahead* asked for the public feedback on these subjects, given that many more people are expected to live longer in the future. This review is looking 30 years ahead so that we can plan how the Social Security scheme should change to meet the needs of this and future generations of Islanders. The outcome of this review will help people in Jersey achieve and maintain financial independence in the future while safeguarding the most vulnerable in our community, a strategic goal of the Council of Ministers. It is only right that we, the public, have an opportunity to give their views about all the choices which include tightening the rules for benefits and who can claim Social Security scheme benefits. The questionnaire provided a balanced approach looking at 6 options for possible changes to the Social Security system. It included increases to how much individuals or businesses pay into the fund, as well as changes to the rules around benefits paid out of the fund. It is important to note that there are also free text questions to give people the opportunity to tell us in their own words their views and ideas on the areas we could look at over the next few years. I am very grateful to the 1,300 people who took part. Thank you.

3.9.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister explain to Members what checks were performed on this survey, particularly by the Statistics Department if they were available, in order to ensure that all the questions asked were balanced, even-handed and not weighted in any way whatsoever? Were they value neutral?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

Yes, they were. This is the first of 2 consultations that we are doing over the next 2, 2½ years. As the Deputy will very well understand, the Social Security system is extremely complicated. The questionnaires, or consultations, were aimed to be very clear and simple so that people would be able to answer them and the questionnaires included tick boxes ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the next question gave people the opportunity to write in their own words what they thought about each of the options.

3.9.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

Could the Minister state how much she thinks would be saved in terms of fraud or error if the benefit rules were tightened?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

No, I could not say that because any detection of fraud or error is a very flexible day-to-day system, so it is not possible to estimate what any cost would be saved.

3.9.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

So would the Minister look into that and return to the Assembly with an answer?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

It is not possible to give an answer on a projection. We do not know what the benefit changes are going to be. This was only a consultation and all that is reported in the review are the results of the consultation. It is not a political document at all. It is merely the results of the consultation and until we receive the results of both consultations, the next one has not gone out yet, then it is impossible to say which areas of the benefits will be changed.

3.9.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister's answer indicates the importance of asking value-neutral questions. I will just take Members through the 6 options that were provided by the department to illustrate where they went wrong, I believe. In terms of areas that people felt the Government should look into in terms of the Social Security scheme, there were the options: businesses to pay more versus people to pay more. Seems fairly obvious: one or the other. Secondly, pension goes up less quickly or higher pension age, which might be phrased: people work longer but higher pension age, in any case, or pension goes up less quickly. Again, balanced, it seems to me, that there are 2 logical options. It then goes on to say: less benefits, when they mean fewer benefits but let us leave that for the moment, fewer benefits paid out other than pension or tighten benefit rules. Now "tighten benefit rules" does not say "change", it does not say "increase", it says "tighten". There are a whole set of values that suggest that people are cunning, people are getting away with not paying their contributions. The fact is that these benefits are contributory, does the Minister not accept that using the words "tighten benefit rules" implies a whole set of scammers and skivers and we can save significant money through this mechanism when in fact that is not true? Does the Minister agree?

The Bailiff:

A question, not a speech, Deputy.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Got there.

The Bailiff:

Indeed, just.

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I am really not quite sure what the question was but ...

The Bailiff:

You were asked to agree with the long preamble.

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

All I can say is by tightening the benefit rules, it really means keeping the range of existing benefits but limiting the cost by changing the criteria for claiming them. So it does not necessarily mean removing them, as I think the Deputy mentioned. As I say, there are many leaves involved in this and this is only the first consultation paper.

[10:45]