

4. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Social Security

The Bailiff:

We come next then to questions without notice, and the first period is to the Minister for Social Security.

4.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Is the Minister able to tell the Assembly what measures the Social Security Department are taking against those persons who are currently receiving low-income support but should be out at work, through laziness that they are not bothering?

Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Clement (The Minister for Social Security):

As part of the income support benefit, there is a requirement for those who are able to work to sign an agreement with the department which in effect means they are registered as actively seeking work and they have to come into the department and look for work and show that they are seeking work. There are some exemptions, not least of which is if one is a main carer for children under 5; then they can be exempt from that requirement, but on the whole if people are medically fit and able, as part of their agreement, they are expected to look for work.

4.1.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

So the Minister is saying that he believes that the system is robust and those people who are physically able to work are actively seeking work?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

What I am saying is that it should be. Of course, in these difficult economic conditions, it is not as easy as it once was, perhaps 2 years ago, to be certain that all the jobs available are being filled because there are not the same jobs available that there once were, so it is difficult for people to prove that they are seeking work perhaps in the same way that we would like them to.

4.2 Deputy S. Pitman:

Could the Minister inform us as to what components of the income support, the equivalent to the educational grant is under, please?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not certain. I think what the Deputy is asking is the money that Education used to provide in a very small way - I think it was £200,000 - was subsumed into income support. Could she confirm that is what she is referring to?

Deputy S. Pitman:

Yes.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Yes, it is my understanding that it is in the general adult component.

4.2.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

Supplementary, please, Sir? This is my understanding. But as all the components of income support, including the adult component, are all bunched together and paid towards rent, a recipient of income support may have some left over; they may not. To encourage young people to take up courses locally, how can he then say or how can this be conducive to encouraging students to go to further education when they might not be seeing any of this money?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy is right to a certain extent. Income support is component in its nature. There are adult components, there are household components, there are children components, and there are

components for medical requirements as well. If a household who is in receipt of income support is living in States accommodation and has to meet that rent, then the Deputy is right; yes, the department can and does pay that rental payment to the Housing Department. In the case that she refers to where that takes up the whole amount of what is, in effect, left to pay from income support, I would suggest that there must be other income in that household that means that the whole amount that income support is able to pay goes to meeting that rent and therefore I would suggest that perhaps it is that other income that could be used for these purposes.

4.2.2 Deputy S. Pitman:

He has not really answered the question. This amount of money is equivalent to the former educational grant which goes to help young people or whoever to study locally and I am not talking about necessarily people with other income. This is a certain amount of money, it is supposed to go to these people, studying; is it conducive to encouraging recipients of income support to go to further education?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not certain quite what I am being asked here because as I have just said in my previous answer, income support is component in its nature. I would not want to get into a technical answer discussion how we add up those components that a family might be entitled to and then, in effect, net off any other income that the household might be receiving. The remainder of that income in the first instance may go to pay the rent. If they do not have to do that then that individual family will see it in their pocket. Where households are able to access income support and are low income there would be money available for young adults in that household to be able to access, for example, the Advance to Work schemes. Those individuals who are on that scheme are able - or the households are able - to access income support at the same time.

4.3 The Connétable of St. Peter:

Thank you. Just wonder what measures does the Minister have to withhold income support payments to those who may continually fail to take up employment?

The Bailiff:

That sounds quite similar to a question that has just been asked.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Indeed it does. That is particularly difficult, as I have tried to say, in the current economic circumstances because there is within the law the ability to reduce down someone's income support if they do not meet those requirements. Members might remember that there was a debate at the time of the approval of the law about the length of time that one should be given as a grace period before they do show that they are seeking work. But obviously that is quite difficult in the current climate because there are not the jobs for people to be moving into necessarily, but those procedures are still in place.

4.4 Senator A. Breckon:

I wonder if the Minister could tell the House if he is aware of the current practice of collection of contributions whereby employers submit returns by say 15th January, the department then evaluate that and a bill is sent out whereas previously employers used to submit their returns with the money attached. I wonder if the Minister could comment on why this has changed and if he thinks it should change back?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

The Senator raises a very good point. It is my understanding that in actual fact one of the reasons that potentially has changed is that there is no penalty now as there used to be for the late submission. I believe that the law was amended. I can only imagine that it was amended by this

Assembly prior to my entry it and it is something that we will be considering in the Social Security Law review this year.

4.4.1 Senator A. Breckon:

With another hat on, with the Minister's profession as an accountant, does he believe it is good practice if millions of pounds are outstanding to allow people to do that for 2 or 3 months or should we not be proactively seeking the money in as soon as possible for the benefit of the fund?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

We do send out reminders to people so that they are aware of their liability and the law does place the liability upon those who are required to contribute to make those contributions. Having said that, as a department some - and I have to be careful how I phrase this - companies are encountering difficulties and I will just go so far as to say that we are understanding in those cases.

4.5 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Indeed building on the original question of Deputy Hilton, could the Minister tell us at what point in a claimant's job search does the department say: "Enough is enough, we will now take action"?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As I said in answer to, I am not sure if it was Deputy Hilton or some other Member, there is a 4-week window where an individual has to prove that they have continued to actively seek work during those 4 weeks. If they are not able to prove that to the satisfaction of the department then, as I said, the income support claim can be stopped and they are then expected to prove for another 4 weeks that they have sought work before it is reinstated.

4.5.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Supplementary. Is this work in a chosen area of choice? For example if someone says they are a circus performer and cannot get work, is that an acceptable excuse to the department?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I expect it would not be an excuse if the Deputy or I went in saying that was our chosen profession. Again, we have to approach this in an even-handed and careful manner. If someone is made redundant and they have long experience in a particular professional then it is only appropriate that they are given a reasonable amount of time - I think that currently stands somewhere between 3 and 6 months - to find work in that particular field. If they are not able to but there are other jobs for which they would have ability, but not necessarily a history, then we would in time expect them to broaden their search and look for any work.

4.6 The Deputy of St. John:

Can the Minister give details of when the Health Department will be reintroducing prescription charges and how much is currently being lost annually by his department?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am sorry that I cannot give the numbers that the Deputy requests, however if he wishes to submit a written question then I would be more than happy to do that. I have checked this morning, because I suspected that the Deputy might challenge me on this once again and he is absolutely right to do just that. I expect to have the full details which will accompany any decision that I make in April of this year. The reason it is taking some time is because, as I have tried to say in the past, I do require information regarding not only age groups but conditions,

and those in receipt of benefit to be able to make a full and informed decision about what the appropriate level of a reintroduction charge would be and to which group.

[14:30]

4.6.1 The Deputy of St. John:

Does the Minister believe it was right to have withdrawn the prescription charges?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I think the Deputy is asking the wrong Minister, perhaps if he would ask the previous Minister.

4.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Minister will no doubt acknowledge that cross-departmental communication and co-operation can always be improved in any department and that the key to the success of his department does depend very much on the communication. Does the Minister acknowledge that currently clients are being let down in certain cases, they are not always being given the help because communications is not there across the departments? How is communication and co-operation between the departments currently being improved?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy is aware of a particular case where that has been the case and I have openly admitted that departments in the past have not worked in the way that we would expect them or want them to work for the benefit of not only individuals but for the community at large. I endeavour, as far as possible, to ensure that we do - particularly with the Health and Social Services Department - and will be working much closer in the future. We, in 2010 as part of our Business Plan, will be rolling-out a communications strategy and part of that will be ensuring that communication between our 2 departments is robust in the way that it should be.

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

We debated recently the release of information on individuals over the age of 75 with regards to the digital switchover, and I had some concerns about that information being made known to third parties in effect. Will the Minister advise please whether he has now put in procedures whereby that information will only be released with the prior written consent of the individual?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I thank the Connétable for that particular question because, as she will be aware, it was initially considered that bringing legislation to this Assembly would fulfil the requirements of the Data Protection Law. There has now been a suggestion that that is not the case and in actual fact anybody whose name is going to be forwarded on to Digi UK - I believe the company is - needs to be contacted individually as well. I am discussing that with my officers about how we might go about doing that because it is a large piece of work, as I said during that debate. With regard to whether we would ask for written confirmation that they are happy for their details to be released, I suspect that it would be couched in the negative. In effect if you do not want us to release your information then please contact us and let us know rather than in the positive. Thank you.

4.9 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire of St. Helier:

I wonder if the Minister could tell us what he is doing in his department to bolster the skills and the support mechanisms that people that are out of work are in need of. I went to see the Minister 6 to 8 months ago to suggest some issues, some skill centres that he could perhaps look at: what is he doing in his department to help those people who are unemployed in these times and does he, in particular, have any courses that are ongoing in relation to such things as retail sales training?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Yes, I thank the Deputy for his question. A large amount of money has been put forward from the economic stimulus package towards skills, not least of which is apprenticeships, the Advance to Work scheme, something that is called Career Strengthening which is in the careers and work zone areas. So there is extra money in there for advisers and to help with courses, *et cetera*. I personally would like to see the Advance to Work scheme extended. It is currently for 16 and 17 year-olds, I would like to see it raised up the age chain, as it were, so that we are capturing other people into a very similar scheme because so far it has been very successful. People from that scheme have been given full-time work opportunities, and they are not only having the training but they are having on-the-job training as well so it is a mixture; it is not just theoretical, it is practical as well. So I would like to see that extended. There is some money currently sitting with the Skills Executive, whether that is going to be enough or whether I am going to have to go cap in hand to the Minister for Treasury and Resources again. But the Deputy raises excellent points. We need to do that we can do because it is imperative that we try and get as many people back to work as we possibly can, and that is one of the main aims of my department in 2010. I should also say that my Assistant Minister is working on more proactive job-matching and that we will be looking at in 2010 as well, together with Economic Development and skills to make sure that we are recording data in a manner that will allow us to be much more joined-up in that area.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

A supplementary, please.

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Deputy, I am afraid time has come to an end on that.