

2020.03.24

3 The Greffier of the States on behalf of Deputy K.F. Morel of St. Lawrence of the Minister for Social Security regarding measures to ensure that Islanders were not left without a home during the Coronavirus crisis: (OQ.85/2020)

Given the likelihood that many families and individuals will find themselves struggling to pay their rent over the coming months, what measures is the Minister taking to ensure that no Islanders are left without a home during the coronavirus crisis?

Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier (The Minister for Social Security):

I have 3 very similar questions and I know that Deputy Higgins is not here either. Government high level, we have 4 main issues. That is to keep people healthy on the Island, a roof over their heads, make sure they get food and supplies and then that will save lives. We are working with the Landlords' Association, the Minister for Children and Housing, the courts. There will be no evictions over the next 3 months. **[Approbation]** The courts are not sitting. A letter from your landlord is not an eviction and if the press want to put a media statement out there, do that now. Rent will be covered as usual if you are on income support. I just want to extend this slightly. People are telling me that I am not answering enough questions. I have got teams; teams were moved to get a one page income support form to be filled in, so that people do get money. Are we acting quick enough? Can all of you remember what you were doing New Year's Eve? That was the first report from the World Health Organisation of coronavirus. Then everyone packed up and took this disease home with them. People kept telling me we are at war. You cannot see this enemy. People brought it home, they popped it in their suitcase, in the planes and they took it right into their front doors and into their families. Now testing will not stop it. I do not get it. We want to keep our families safe and I am doing this; it is high level. Health is the main importance, roof over the head, food, medicine and, as the doctor said, we need to tell the community that we can get these things to them. They have to know. I am surprised Deputy Ward had to ask. I treat everyone I meet as possibly they have got it and members of my family, because that is absolutely the right message. Do not think you are safe.

The Bailiff:

Minister, if I could just ask you to bring that particular answer to a close. I am sure there will be other questions.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I say to States Members, yes, we are ... I have got staff under pressure and I am trying to be pulled across, I am trying to get other States Members, when the people ring you try to reassure them. Tell them the only way to keep this at bay. I do it. I have a picture of my family, small family and I think of them every day, because if I do not do the right things, I might lose one of them. I can only process it like that and ask the rest of the Island to do it. But big stuff, keep you healthy, keep you in your home, make sure you are fed and make sure you get medicines.

The Bailiff:

Minister, I have to stop you. The question is about the payment of rent and the steps that are being taken and we have gone a wide way beyond that. I know Members want to ask questions.

3.3.1 Deputy J.H. Perchard of St. Saviour:

Could the Minister clarify something that she said in her response just now regarding evictions? She stated that no evictions would occur over the next 3 months. Was she referring specifically to evictions from States-owned housing companies and, if not, was she suggesting that if individuals do not pay rent to private landlords that they will not be evicted?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Myself and the Minister for Children and Housing are working closely with landlords and the courts are not sitting. The only way to process an eviction is through the Petty Debts Court. People may still receive a letter saying: "This is a letter of eviction." The message we are getting out there, there is also I think some urgent legislation coming through the ... the Minister for Children and Housing is not here. We are all doing so much, I cannot keep up with everything that everyone else is doing, but these measures are powers ... no. I am asking people not even to send the letter. People are worried out there, so we have got that. Banks are writing to people with mortgages to give them a holiday, so, yes, that is what I am saying. There will be no evictions.

3.3.2 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Again, just for the purposes of really making it clear: if an individual cannot pay their rent due to a knock-on effect of the coronavirus, for example they may have been laid off because the restaurant they worked at is shut down, what measures are in place from Social Security to support them, so that they are able to either pay their rent, or be excused from paying their rent?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

It depends on which different schemes. But what I am saying is we have made a plea to everybody, if your tenant cannot pay the rent, legally you cannot evict them, but morally would you put someone out on the streets of Jersey when the coronavirus is around? Would you do it? Would any landlord here do it? Because you have got to keep them healthy. So we are appealing to landlords. When that person, hopefully they may even work for you, they might be living in your accommodation, when, or if, we get back to work the rent will be paid. We are trying a massive package ... there is money. We are into the Rainy Day Fund. We are trying to support with money as much as we can.

3.3.3 Deputy I. Gardiner:

Would the Minister advise if we are going to implement legislation on a dual state as a guidance? For example, what consideration will be given to bring in a temporary rent cap via legislation to ensure at least minimum income for some owners, landlords, that need to pay mortgages and a smaller number paid out to ensure a roof kept over somebody's head? Legislation via guidance.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

There is some legislation, extra power is coming, but again if you are renting a house out that you have got a mortgage on, I am told the banks are contacting everybody to give the mortgage owner a 3-month holiday. Not saying that is the answer. These are things, what I am saying. I am having constant public ... States Members want answers yesterday and it is 12 weeks since the first case of coronavirus on New Year's Eve came out from the World Health Organization. It is worldwide. Everybody wants an answer yesterday. We are not moving quick enough. Two weeks ago the most important thing in this Assembly, I think, was a day on buses and that is what it was then. We are getting the answers. Big policy things, I cannot pull the officers off who are working 24/7 and they are going to fall over. I have got staff, I have moved a load of staff, the income support form will look like this. It is one side of A4. You can do it online. No bank statements. It has got to be quick

and we have got to get the money to people. That could be your rent. If we are giving you money to pay rent, you will be paying rent. The majority of people come through our offices anyway. Landlords will get the direct rent.

3.3.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Minister clarify what measures she has in place, or under consideration, to ensure that anyone who is laid off tomorrow, without a wage coming into the household, will have their rent covered?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

As I just said, we are working on a form. It is a side of A4. That will give the people, once it is filled in, very few checks, bank account, we will pay in advance probably. Sometimes again, it might be too much. I would rather people get too much and too quickly. Again, if it is somewhere where we can pay the rent to the landlord we will. I do not know how much more I can say. I have got people working on this now. They have been working on it for the last 2 weeks since coronavirus hit Jersey.

3.3.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister at least outline whether the measures she envisages putting in place will cover those who have not been on the Island for 5 years, for example?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

We want to make sure that the people, who have not been on the Island for 5 years, have a roof over their head and they have money. We have not decided yet what support system they will be on. That is as honest as I can be.

[11:15]

3.3.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

The Minister mentioned the recommendation that landlords not be chasing rent at this time. Is the intention that any rent that is not paid during the crisis, would that be due at a later date? Or is the Minister recommending that landlords write off rent for this period?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I did not say they should not chase the rent. I am saying that if the rent is not paid we have powers, or there will not be evictions. If they have got some money to pay rent they will pay the rent. What we cannot see at this time is tents popping up in the parks, people living homeless, that is pretty normal in some of the cities in the U.K.

3.3.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

So rents that cannot be paid now, because of the crisis, will those rents be due at a later date, or will they be written off?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I have no idea what the economy ... what anything will look like in 6 weeks, 3 months' time. I really do not have that answer. But obviously people will want paying. We are trying to keep people in work. There are so many schemes being brought together and people will be needed and they should pay their rent if they have got the money. I am saying: do not evict them.