

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

The Bailiff:

Very well. That concludes all questions on notice. We then come to questions to Ministers without notice and the first period is to ask questions of the Minister for Social Security. The Deputy of St. John.

4.1 The Deputy of St. John:

At the last sitting I handed a memory stick to the Minister for Social Security which I had found in the Members' Room. Is the Minister happy that no serious consequences have arisen from finding that stick and the information within it? Also, can he tell us what security is in place within his department in relation to ...

The Bailiff:

One moment, Deputy. I am afraid we are not quorate. Usher, could you summon Members back please? We are now quorate. Can I just say this, questions without notice were introduced in order to hold Ministers to account so it really does seem to me important that Members should be here in order to fulfil that role. **[Approbation]** Deputy, please continue.

The Deputy of St. John:

Yes. I will repeat the question for those Members who were not present. At the last meeting I handed the Minister a memory stick which I had found in the Members' Room. On it there was some sensitive information, I presume. Could the Minister tell us what he did with the stick, whether he has taken disciplinary action, whether the police have been called in and is his security within his department as strong as it should be in relation to computer theft?

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

Yes, indeed, the Deputy did hand me a memory stick at the last sitting and it did have a Social Security tag on it, as assets across the States are tagged by department. I can confirm to the Deputy and put his fears to rest; there was absolutely no personal data whatsoever on that stick. In actual fact it was a stick that belongs to the Information Systems Department. As Members will be aware members of the I.S.D. (Information Systems Department) helped build States Members' computers and they have sticks with generic applications on. They use those sticks to build the computers for States Members. There was no absolutely no personal data on it. As I understand it an employee was down in the States Chamber on that day carrying out that particular work. The work had not been completed. Why does it come to have a Social Security tag on it? That is quite simply because some of the I.S.D. members operate from my department and therefore it is tagged, as one would expect it to be tagged, because it is an asset of the States. Thank you.

4.1.1 The Deputy of St. John:

I thank the Minister for his response. I am somewhat happier now that we have found out where it has come from. That said, the Minister has not answered the second part of my question; what is there in the way of security within his department in relation to computer theft of information?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure if the Deputy is still referring to the stick. The only thing I really can say is that it would be rather similar to a plumber leaving a toolbox on a job at the end of the day. We do have robust procedures around data security, as one would expect. Even I, as Minister, do not have access to the Social Security database.

[11:30]

I have to have a specific reason for requesting information about an individual, and we take that data security very seriously indeed, as I believe do other departments, and the Information Systems Department as well.

4.2 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Bearing in mind the recent release of current unemployment levels and the fact that the bulk of the unemployed are in the younger age bracket, and these members have a lot of years ahead of them in the working environment, is the Minister considering in his role looking at other courses to enable retraining for appropriate jobs for the Island?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Yes, indeed, it is a constant concern, not only of myself, but my Assistant Minister in our department regarding the increase that we have seen in the levels of unemployment in the Island. Of course we know that some of that has been driven by calling people as part of a requirement to register for income support to be actively seeking work. We are considering many options. The Deputy will be aware of our work with the Skills Executive. Only this week, we have rolled-out a new programme for, as it were, office training. There are 12 people piloting that at the moment. We have got the Advance to Work too, and we are also considering whether we cannot do some sort of very short-term training in the trades, because we are working together with a major employer now, looking at job matching in the trade section. My Assistant Minister has been meeting with employers to push forward that message. It might be that we have to send Jersey individuals abroad for a short period of 4 to 6 weeks with the understanding that they will come back and then they will have a job to take up here. So in effect, we are looking at right across the board, and we are looking at as many options as we possibly can. We are looking at the way that the work zone is working in the department, and I shortly expect to receive a report on that to consider what changes and how we can use those resources even more effectively, and of course a lot of this work I should say has been funded from the fiscal stimulus fund.

4.3 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:

As part of the C.S.R. 2 process, is the department looking to generate a genuine efficiency saving by working with the Treasury Department to amend the Data Protection Law, as much time is wasted by individuals having to get information from either department which the other needs in order to progress its work?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

This is quite a difficult area. I, as an individual Minister of a department, of course would love my officers to have access to the information in the Tax Department, I am not certain that the tax department would see it in quite those terms. I should say, however, in answer to the Deputy, that work is being undertaken even now to consider the way that our 2 departments can work more actively together where there are efficiencies and economies that can be reached, but perhaps that is more likely going to be in the collection of contributions and tax, rather than a straightforward sharing of information. But the Deputy is quite right, were we to go down the route of sharing information, then this Assembly obviously would have to change some of the data protection legislation, and that is where we get into what can sometimes be quite difficult political areas, but he raises a very good point. A piece of work is already taking place. I am not sure what the timescale is for the release of that information.

4.3 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Reference the recently released *Jersey Income Distribution Survey 2009-10*, does the Minister agree that 8 years after the last survey, it is disappointing to find that one in 5 households are still in the category of relative low income after housing costs, and what does he intend to do to try to remedy this before the next survey is due?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I have to say what I am slightly disappointed about is the headlines that we have seen across the media about what is in actual fact a broadly positive report. We can see from this report that median equivalised incomes in Jersey are 52 per cent higher than they are in the United Kingdom. In actual fact, the U.K. median equivalised income is £343; Jersey it is £522. When we look at our low income measure, which is 60 per cent of the median equivalised income, we are still at £313. So, in actual fact, our local income measure is only around £30 less than the actual median equivalised income in the U.K. However, improvements have been made. We can see that those percentages are reducing, inequality is reducing in Jersey, perhaps in a slightly greater way than the U.K., but we must of course never rest on our laurels. It will be a concern, and it is something that the Council of Ministers are cognisant of, but of course we want to see improvement year on year. But we are improving, the numbers and percentages are going in the right direction, so this is a positive report, but of course it is something that we are now going to build upon and we are going to use to inform government policy going forward.

4.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

There is anecdotal talk of people becoming benefit-dependent, and that it becomes a lifestyle. What is the Minister doing to ensure that people are encouraged back to work, rather than relying on benefit?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

There are a number of things that we are doing. We do not want - and I, as a Minister, do not want - anyone to become benefit-dependent in the negative sense. However, of course there will be always members of our community, particularly those who are ill or suffer with disabilities, and it is right that they are dependent on benefit, and it is right that we provide benefit for them. It is those that could work that I would like to see working. As the Senator will know, I increased the working disregard, or it will increase from 1st October. The States approved that policy in July. I am also looking at currently if one gets into work, one has the first month's salary and benefit, so in effect salary free. I think perhaps we need to do more there, we might need to extend that to 2 months. At the same time, of course... that is carrot. We must make sure that the stick is working, and I hope shortly to be bringing forward some small amendments to ensure that stick is working as well as the carrot. It cannot be either/or, it has got to be both, and we are mindful of that and we are continuing to work on it and Members will see the fruits of that moving forward this year.

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

I believe Deputy Martin gave an instance this morning of a case whereby a householder was not able to afford their mortgage repayments, but was refused help by the Social Security Department to pay those payments on their behalf, and has been forced to sell their property and move into States accommodation, whereby the housing component being paid by the department is greater than would have been the mortgage repayments. Will the Minister comment on that, please?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not aware of that individual case. However, Members will be only too fully aware that income support does not cover mortgage payments. That was a decision of this Assembly when income support was introduced. There is an element under the discretionary payment element of income support where, in exceptional circumstances, up to 3 months, I think it is, of mortgage interest could be paid. But if income support is to change and cover mortgage payments, that is a topic for political debate and it should be debated by this Assembly. I should just say that I did put forward as part of the fiscal stimulus funding - what seems now months ago - a proposal to perhaps have a similar component within income support, which would help people to meet their

mortgage payments. That was not accepted by the independent panel which oversees fiscal stimulus finding. I am perhaps minded to revisit that in light of what the Minister for Housing has said today in the increase of the number of people looking for social rented accommodation. As I said, I am not adverse to it, but I think probably it is something that both the Minister for Housing, the Minister for Treasury and Resources and myself should sit down and just reconsider if we are seeing more activity in this area, which we were not seeing a year to 18 months ago.

4.6 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Relating again to the same report, the *Jersey Income Distribution Survey 2009-10*, is the Minister concerned that the equivalised incomes are 64 per cent higher in Jersey than in the U.K. before housing costs, and I think it is 52 per cent after, whereas our minimum wage is only 5 per cent higher than in the U.K. and this is despite a recent increase from 1st October in the U.K.? Does he not feel that it is time to seriously review our minimum wage?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure whether the Senator wishes me to be concerned because it is a positive number and we have seen increases in median equivalised income over the last 8 years, or concerned because he thinks it is too low. I think what it shows is that the combination of the tax and benefit package that we have introduced over the last 8 years is working and resulting in positive incomes for relatively low income families. I have just forgotten what the second part of his question was, if he could perhaps remind me.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

It was reference to the fact that Jersey's minimum wage is only 5 per cent higher than the U.K.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

The Senator might be aware that the Employment Forum will today be releasing its latest recommendation for the minimum wage. There has been in this Assembly a number of comments made about the relationship between minimum wage and income support. I am by no means certain what that relationship is and I have asked my officers in this income distribution survey, and the underlying data should be able to help us to understand what that relationship is. We have got to remember that one is not entitled to income support unless one is locally qualified, i.e. the 5 years' residence, and perhaps I think anecdotally that the minimum wage is mostly received by those individuals who are newly arrived in the Island, but of course there will be elements of retail, individuals working in that sector who are receiving minimum wage. So we need to understand what that relationship is before we can draw these conclusions and say: "No, we must radically increase the minimum wage" because my concern is - and I know that it is a concern of the Employment Forum - that we raise radically the minimum wage, we put more people out of work, and that is absolutely the last thing that I want to see happen to anyone in this Island.

4.7 Senator T.J. Le Main:

The recently published unemployment figures show an increase, quite an increase. What is the Minister doing about this? Is he really concerned and could he give us comfort that he will work with other Ministers on this unemployment problem at the moment, and I think we are getting really concerned that figures are increasing on a monthly basis now, and some dramatic, serious chatting and discussing the issues with the other Ministers needs to take place?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I would not necessarily use the vocabulary of Senator Le Main. However, I am concerned and it has been a concern of mine since coming into the office that we must make sure that there are jobs available for local residents and that we do everything that we can to get people into work.

This is a particular passion of my Assistant Minister, and I am sure that the Senator will realise that she does not give up on issues easily. We are constantly a thorn in the flesh of the Economic Development Department who grant licences. We work very closely together. Our officers work closely together and my Assistant Minister is constantly challenging any request for new licences and whether they need to be locally qualified or non-locally qualified. She constantly reviews the job situations available in the department and she constantly contacts employers to make sure: "Why are you not offering that job to a local individual?" That is absolutely right and proper, and she has my 100 per cent support in that. We are working more closely with Economic Development than we ever were. We are working more closely with employers than we ever were. We are rolling-out a job matching scheme. As I said, we are looking at possible new training opportunities for this in the trades with the idea of coming back and filling those local jobs. I am no longer prepared to accept that some people are not able to work. I believe that a lot of people are able to work and we should be encouraging them every which way, shape and form that we can to get into work.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Could I have a follow up on that?

The Bailiff:

Sorry, Senator, time has run out.