

4. Questions Without Notice – The Minister for Social Security:

4.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Given the Minister is experiencing some lack of clarity with respect to employment figures - that would be the polite way of phrasing it - could he inform the House how he staffs this particular section of his department and what measurements are applied to the workings of that particular department, the department that manages the search for work?

Senator P.F. Routier (The Minister for Social Security):

The Work Zone team has the obligation to assist people who come into the department. Firstly, they have a detailed interview with anybody who comes into register to look for work. There is a small team of 5 who do help people and that is directly in the Work Zone. Then there is another team that are the job coaches, who work with Workwise, which also helps people who need additional support. We recognise that helping people back into work is a major issue for us and we do our very best to achieve that.

4.2 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

Can the Minister confirm that adults with learning difficulties living and being supported in the community who are not able to access paid employment for whatever reason will not be penalised financially under the new income support system?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Yes. Certainly it would be our intention to support adults. I should declare an interest, obviously, as President of Mencap and Chairman of Les Amis, who supports people with learning disabilities. The services my department supply to people with learning disabilities need to be at a level which is appropriate for their needs and the income support system will support them the best we can.

The Bailiff:

Surely Members are not going to let the Minister escape so lightly?

4.3 Deputy J.B. Fox:

Carrying on from that subject, the concern about employment at this time ... obviously people with special needs have obviously special circumstances for the nature of their employment. Can the Minister advise whether it is more difficult at this particular time to find what I call “proper employment” as opposed to sheltered employment, and if so, what steps his department is taking to alleviate some of those difficulties that are experienced, if any?

Senator P.F. Routier:

It is extremely difficult to help people with disabilities to get into employment but it is not impossible. My department through the Job Coach support scheme does, as I said earlier, help people on a one-to-one basis and also the Jersey Employment Trust has as its function to give additional training. But to get to the end product of finding work in the workplace, unfortunately with the job market changing at the present time opportunities are few and far between. But we do work ... in fact I was at a meeting last week with the Jersey Employers Network on Disability. The membership of that organisation was very keen to support people and to accept people into their workforce. It is a major issue and I know the Chief Minister has instructed his Assistant Minister, Deputy Gorst, to take a lead on this on the Chief Minister’s behalf. I have met with Deputy Gorst a couple of weeks ago to outline all the areas that are of concern to people with disabilities in getting into work. I know that there is a wish from the Chief Minister and from Deputy Gorst and myself to try and improve things dramatically for people with

disabilities. We will have to find out what resources are required for that to happen and we will do our utmost to ensure we are able to provide that.

4.4 Deputy J.B. Fox:

Can I just ask a quick supplementary? Does the Minister have a timescale that he could indicate to the House?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Certainly the timescale I would want would not be quick enough. There is some work to be done, which I believe ... I am trying to recall the discussion I had with Deputy Gorst. But I think we set ourselves a timescale for the end of this year to have a report to go to the Chief Minister to bring forward the issues to him.

4.5 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I would like to ask the Minister about the further consultation on the income support proposals. At the back there are 10 questions. Would the Minister not agree that basically all 10 questions are a department issue, down to ... I will just quote one question, Sir: "special payments for furniture"? We are asking the public and politicians whether they should be second-hand or new in all or some circumstances. Surely, Sir, this is just a sham of consultation and there is not one sensible question in this document for further consultation. These decisions have been made and this is just going out to the public with a rubber stamp on it and they know the answers they are going to get back.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I could not disagree with the Deputy more. These questions are really very, very important. I am delighted that she has highlighted the consultation process that is happening because I want to encourage as many people as possible to take part in that consultation. What it is going to do is it is going to help us form the Regulations and the rates which will be coming back to this House in February of next year. At the next sitting we are going to be debating the overarching law which sets the basic principles of all these components and all the rest of it. With the tremendous amount of consultation we have already done, originally last year this takes it a stage further to get down to the very detailed issues which need to be asked. The reason we are asking some of those questions - the one that was highlighted by the Deputy about whether it should be second-hand or new or whatever - these are the sorts of issues which are currently happening within the Parish welfare system. We want to know whether it is appropriate to carry on with that or whether we move to something a little bit different. We want to have the public's views. Of course, all of these questions, if you think about them, have a knock-on effect to the amount of money that can be distributed to the claimants. Every one of them has a knock-on financial effect. If someone responds in a more generous way to one question it will mean there will be less money available for people in another area. If someone was to go through and answer those questions and give the most generous answers all the way through we would have to make cutbacks in other areas because we have only one amount of money to play with. I am sorry that was not brief, Sir, but I had to say all that. I would encourage people to respond to the consultation document.

4.6 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, Sir. Is the Minister really suggesting then ... and I will just quote this. On question 2: "What sanction should be applied to someone who fails, without good reason, to take part in job seeking activities? None, small loss of benefit, compulsory training or complete loss of income support." Is the Minister suggesting, if everyone comes back and says: "Complete loss of income support", he is not going to pay income support to single parents, old age pensioners and people

in need? This is a sham, Sir, and I absolutely do not agree with the Minister on this consultation process.

Senator P.F. Routier:

Again, I cannot disagree with the Deputy more than I possibly could. These questions are really valid questions for the community to think about. They really are. I am not going to make a comment about them now because I have a view but I would not want to influence the consultation process. I want the public to think about those questions and to give us their views and their understanding of the issues. It will help us to form our Regulations for the income support system.

4.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

May I congratulate the Minister on his ability to keep a straight face, but can he turn now to questions 9 and 10 on his survey? Since the aim of the income support scheme was to replace welfare with a more efficient scheme, how can he justify question 9 which says: "How important should the role of the Parishes be in the administration of the new income support scheme", and question 10: "If you needed income support in the future, where would you most like to go to, the local Parish hall?" Is he suggesting that again, if 90 per cent of the respondents come back and say: "Very important" to question 9 and: "Local Parish hall" for question 10, he is going to replace the welfare system with a system that is in all 12 Parish halls, or is that already ruled out?

Senator P.F. Routier:

The Deputy is very aware I attended upon the Income Support Scrutiny Panel hearing to discuss this particular issue. The theory we were working to is the income support system is one system. It will be administered by the Social Security Department. The reason we are asking those particular questions is because we want to know from the community, if someone is living in an outlying Parish, whether it would be easier for them to go to their Parish hall to receive a benefit rather than coming into town. If people are on low incomes getting into town is an additional expense. So we just want to have an indication from the community, not to have made up our minds about the particular issue which ... I think the Deputy has already made his mind up that he does not want the parishes to have any involvement at all. But that is not the feeling I have had from the consultation processes I have been through in the Parishes during the last year. There are some people who do value popping into their Parish hall to get information and, if need be, they might be able to get a cash payment from the Parish. But it will all be administered by the social security system. The days of non-communication between the Parishes and the States have gone. We have electronic communication systems which the Parishes are already plugged into. They just go into our social security system and find out the details, if they want to do that. It is down to each Parish to make a decision about what involvement they want to have. The Parish of St. Helier has already made the decision they are not going to be involved because it is sensible that there is just one place in town. The other Parishes are responding to us with regard to how much involvement they want to have in delivery.

4.8 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

What liaison, if any, is there between officers from the Minister's department and annual school leavers to explain to them such things as the system of social security contributions, which will apply to those who are fortunate enough to find work; and to those who have no work, how to register as unemployed?

Senator P.F. Routier:

There is an information passing process which the Careers Service and the schools do provide to people who are leaving school. Our officers do occasionally go into schools to give talks on social security matters and we hope that process is sufficient. But certainly if it needs to be

beefed-up, we would certainly be prepared to do that. I am aware that the Education Minister is looking at a document with regard to awareness of local political issues and the areas of provision around the Island, which is going to be rolled out within the schools in the near future, so I am looking forward to that being rolled-out to the schools to get that information out to students.

4.9 Deputy J.J. Huet:

As the Minister is aware, I am involved with the St. Helier community centre and it does worry me greatly that we have a lot of what I call young people between 16 and 26 who have never had employment. I would like to be reassured that in some way they will be able to build something into this to take care of these youngsters because it is getting to the point that these youngsters do not get out of bed in the morning because they are not used to going to work. They desperately need to be found work. We have to find something and I would like to know that you will take this on board because we try and encourage them to come into our department on a regular basis to get them used to being around looking for jobs. It is very disheartening when all of them cannot get work all the time.

Senator P.F. Routier:

Yes, we do recognise that there are some young people who do need motivation in trying to help themselves. The process that income support will require is for them to attend the department and the job advisors on a regular basis to ensure that they are attempting to help themselves.

4.10 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

Is the Minister happy with the situation regarding post-death residential charges being put on a person's property, rather than a possible social insurance scheme throughout a person's adult life?

Senator P.F. Routier:

That is a particularly hot issue for not only us but also in the U.K. The current system, which the Parishes administer, does allow for people to have charges put on their properties. Obviously the new income support system is having to reflect that current situation. The law which we will be debating next sitting does have that provision in to be able to do that, but I think at a later stage, with the development of decisions which are made by the Health Committee with regard to long-term care and how that is going to be funded, that will have a reflection on how people are supported in the future. Obviously, with the income support system we have, people will be able to claim income support if they are living in their own house and it will not affect the title of their home because we recognise that some people are asset rich but cash poor. We believe that the income support system should support them.

The Bailiff:

That concludes the second question period to Ministers.