

2.3 Deputy J.A. Martin of the Minister for Housing regarding what he meant by 'zero tolerance' on rent arrears:

Will the Minister explain what he means when he talks of zero tolerance on rent arrears?

Senator T.J. Le Main (The Minister for Housing):

This zero tolerance policy applies only to those tenants who ignore the fact that the department has corresponded with them by letter or by telephone and that they have failed to respond to making repayment plans or arrangements suitable to the department.

2.3.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Would the Minister accept that it is totally unfair that there is only 40 per cent of tenants that he can affect in this way; 60 per cent do not have their gas, their oil or their T.V. aerial included in their rent. They have a terrestrial aerial and so if a tenant owes the same money, the Housing Department are carrying out a lot harder sanctions on one tenant than they are the other.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

You have to remember, Sir, that the arrangements were made by the 40 per cent of the tenants who have utilities included in their rent that when they fail to pay their rent, they fail to pay their utility and their gas or electricity. Might I add, Sir, that no one has been cut-off from the mains electricity or gas if it is needed. Nothing has happened on that point. The point is that people have got to recognise that if they go into arrears through their fault - or not on their fault sometimes - they are at liberty to come and talk to the department to make arrangements to repay. It is ignoring the fact that they will encounter problems.

2.3.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, Sir, he did not really answer the question. This is not equitable across the board. When he said the Housing Department cannot cut-off mains electricity or gas, that is correct. Would he ensure to look at the utility policies of cutting-off elderly people and people with young children and at least see if their policies are the same because, Sir, I would suggest Housings are much harder and I would say not fair.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, the issue is we would not cut-off elderly people or families with children. That would have to be the absolute last resort and that would come to the Assistant Minister and myself to make a decision. No one will be cut-off until we have a look at it and we would make sure that it is in the best interests.

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

Does the Minister know if his department will have guidelines for people who are in this position to go for a meeting with income support officers if they find that they are perhaps in a difficult position? Many people find even the attempt to pick up a phone a daunting task. Will the department be, in the future, helping these people who might be facing a difficulty in addressing their problems by introducing them to the income support mechanism?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The department has been totally rearranged and, in fact, officers now deal with a very small number of clients and the officers are well known to the clients they deal with. I would rather hope that the message goes out again. Although we correspond on a regular basis, at least 4 times a year with newsletters and notes and meetings on a regular basis with all our clients... that they are able to pick up the phone and speak to their housing officer, who is a highly professional, well trained individual with customer care number one in their vocabulary.