

2.9 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Housing regarding how the threat to withdraw heating or hot water from tenants, contained in Housing Department “zero tolerance” letters, constitutes a “firm but fair policy” under Audit Commission good practice guidance:

Will the Assistant Minister advise how she considers that the threat to withdraw heating or hot water from tenants, contained in Housing Department “zero tolerance” letters, and sanctioned by the Minister, constitutes a “firm but fair policy” under Audit Commission Good Practice Guidance, as suggested by the Minister in his response to my question of 23rd October 2007?

Deputy J.A. Hilton (Assistant Minister for Housing):

The Audit Commission briefing Housing Association Rent Income recognises the absolute importance of prevention, of early intervention and of firm but fair policies for further action in dealing with rent arrears. It is therefore reasonable to describe the initial letter sent to those tenants who fall into arrears of a week or more as early intervention. This early intervention and the offer of a suitable rent arrears management scheme extend that fair policy. There is a clear need, however, to balance this approach as recognised by the Audit Commission and where necessary a firm approach is required. That firm approach is reflected in the letter in question which is despatched to those tenants who fail to acknowledge the first letter of early intervention and who allow their rent accounts to accrue unmanageable arrears. It must be stressed that every assistance is offered to those tenants who fall into rent arrears and evidence of this is that no such disconnections have been necessary.

2.9.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Assistant Minister aware that no other housing authority or utility company in the U.K. ever makes such a threat to vulnerable clients?

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

No, Sir, I am not aware.

2.9.2 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Does the existence of outstanding arrears at the beginning of the year of about £1 million not suggest that the Housing Department has only just been paying attention to this and that it is really trying to catch up very fast and really sort of catching up with its mistakes in the past?

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

The Housing Department are taking a much firmer line on arrears. I cannot really answer for what happened before because I have only been there this year and last year. But certainly the policy now is early intervention and the success of this policy is reflected in the fact that we have reduced arrears in the space of 10 months by £320,000-odd.

2.9.3 Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier:

Would the Assistant Minister not accept, while I fully agree that they need to collect rents, rent arrears is also a moving target depending on what day they do the computer run as rents are due on a Monday and some people do pay their rents on time but they are monthly in arrears instead of in advance as the department likes? Secondly, Sir, the letters: can she say they are fair when there is only 40 per cent of their tenants they can cut their heating supply off? The other 60 per cent pay directly to the utility. This is why I do not think the letters can be fair and just.

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

It is a fact that as the Deputy points out, some of our tenants pay for their heating, television aerials and suchlike within their rent, but we can only deal with each case as it comes up. I would like to reiterate, nobody has been disconnected; we do not disconnect vulnerable people.

2.9.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Assistant Minister intervene with her Minister to ensure that the phrase “We will cut your heating or hot water off” is removed from these letters because it is an idle and unnecessary threat to her tenants?

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

As I explained in my previous answer, that phrase appears in the second letter that goes out to clients who have ignored the first letter. So, no, I would say no, we have no intentions of removing that sentence at the present time.

2.9.5 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Is the Assistant Minister aware that people who fall into rent arrears are refused essential maintenance by the Housing Department? I have no sympathy whatsoever with the “will not pay” but the “cannot pay” are becoming an increasing worry. Only last week I visited a lady cooking a meal by candlelight. This has since been repaired. Can the Minister comment, please?

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

I am not aware of the particular case that the Deputy is referring to and obviously I am concerned to hear that he knows of a client of the Housing Department who is cooking by candlelight and I would appreciate very much if after the Assembly today that he gives me the details so I can look into the case again. But, can I say, as I have stated before, the second letters that are generated are individually gone through by our very experienced Housing officers who then make a decision based on the knowledge that they have of those clients whether those letters are sent out?

2.9.6 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains of St. Clement:

Could the Assistant Minister confirm that being the landlord of last resort somewhat ties the department’s hands in so much as if one has a tenant who is reluctant to pay rent the only sanction open to the department is to evict that person or family meaning that immediately the department has to rehouse them? So sometimes it is better to leave them where they are and try to manage the rent problem.

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Yes, Sir, the Deputy is quite right. The Housing Department is considered the housing of last choice and we do run into difficulties at times. But as I have tried to say before, we will engage with clients to try and address the problems of rent arrears and it is only when we have exhausted all possibilities - usually over a very long period of time - that the Minister and myself will then sit down and consider whether eviction proceedings are the last remaining choice.

The Bailiff:

Final supplementary, Deputy Southern.

2.9.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Assistant Minister aware of the practice under her zero tolerance policy of repeatedly phoning tenants at their place of work and will she insist that this practice ceases in her offices?

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

I am not aware that any Housing officer has repeatedly been phoning our clients at work. I will take this matter up with the department when I visit it later in the week.