

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

3.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister believe that the following statement is consistent with his department's remit to both train and encourage the placement of local people in positions? The advertisement is for the job of personal assistant to the chief officer of Social Security: "The following position does not require the post-holder to have residential qualifications or have been ordinarily resident in the Island for the last 5 years, although preference will be given to locally qualified applicants." Is that consistent with his department's role in training up people for work?

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

When I saw the advertisement it was news to me that that was certainly the position. I was taken aback myself when I saw that. Certainly, from my investigations, I have found out that we have... we went through the same process of trying to recruit somebody very recently to that same position and we did not have one applicant locally at all. Eventually we had to advertise - we got permission to advertise for somebody who did not have the necessary 5 years - and we had one applicant again, and we were able to appoint that person fortunately who was a very able person. The department - probably the H.R. (Human Resources) Department - took the view to save the advertising yet again, going through that same process yet again. I notice not even a year has gone by since we last advertised. It is a position which I found myself, I agree, is inconsistent with our general policy of trying to employ local people. But the practicalities of the matter is that there are very few people who were able to apply for that job in the past and the decision was taken to circumvent the situation because we had to make that replacement quite soon.

3.1.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister therefore accept, Sir, that all his programmes and all the emphasis of the States upon the training up of local people is taking place against a rather strange background?

Senator P.F. Routier:

The market is what it is at the present time within the employment market. I should make it clear that the advertisement did say they would give preference to local people. It did say that, and I have heard that it is quite possible that a local person will be applying for the job, but that is beside the point. I take the point - I do take the point - and it is the practicalities of the labour market at the present time. If there is a choice of candidates and there is a local person we would take that person, as long as they had the same skills.

3.2 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire St. Helier:

I find that remarkable. First I have heard of this. If I understood correctly, the post was for secretary to the Minister or the head of Social Security. Was there any effort made in trying to give succession appointments within the States of Jersey? We have numerous departments, numerous secretaries, numerous skills, numerous courses, numerous people, I find it unbelievable that it was advertised and not one person applied for the post. I mean, surely Social Security has an idea of how many unemployed people there are and how many people there are employed within the States, if not within the Island as a whole. I find that having advertised and having had not one application something must be seriously wrong with the job description or with the processing in hiring that we have to go outside and then only have one applicant who is from the unqualified sector. The Minister has looked into it; what were the reasons behind all of this? Was the job specification too heavy, was there any investigation done within the actual state sector itself?

Senator P.F. Routier:

It must be recognised that the employment of staff at that level is an administrative matter and is not a political matter. But the principle I certainly accept, is something that we should be trying

to employ people with local qualifications. But the experience, I am told, is that there was - as I explained - nobody who applied for the job. There is within the central H.R. Department I believe a system of trying to encourage local people to be trained-up to take on these positions but the practical reality of it is no one applied for the job. I cannot say any more than that. I mean, that is what happened.

3.2.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Could I ask the Minister maybe to get back to us all so that we can have some fathom of an understanding as to what happened to the training that is meant to be going on in the States of Jersey? What went wrong here because surely there should have been an application that was able to be filled within the amount of people that we employ for a post such as this? It is absolutely ridiculous to say there is nobody available. Will the Minister please... I know it is not normally politically done but if it is failing at this level it is failing at other levels too.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I accept there is an issue to be dealt with but the labour market is the labour market. I would suggest that perhaps it may be a question that is probably better suited - and I am not trying to pass the buck - to the States Employment Board, who have a general overview of all employment matters within the States. I would like to see a person with local qualifications in the job. I cannot say any more than that really.

3.3 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Perhaps if he had looked closely at his 20,000 people on income support who should be job seekers he may have found one with sufficient qualifications. But my question, Sir, is does the Minister for Social Security direct G.P.s (General Practitioners) who sign people off with back injuries or someone who has a back injury at work, is it a directive from Social Security to allow that G.P. to only sign-off the person for 2 weeks. It has been brought to my attention, Sir, that people have said the G.P. is informing them that: "It is no good to come back to me after 2 weeks or more than 2 weeks because Social Security will not allow it." Can the Minister confirm if this is the case, and if so under what authority he is doing this?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I cannot confirm that, Sir. I am not aware of that situation being in place.

3.4 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

Would the Minister inform Members how he will be informing recipients of income support of special payments?

Senator P.F. Routier:

An applicant would need to make an application for a special payment and if they made an application they would be informed by letter.

3.4.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

I have a constituent who has a huge electricity bill because of his illness, and it was only through me that he became aware of special payments. The Minister has not answered my question; will he be making this information directly available to income support recipients?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I am sorry, I do not follow the question. Has the person made an application for an additional payment for support?

Deputy S. Pitman:

How many income support recipients are aware that they can apply for special payments?

Senator P.F. Routier:

There are obviously leaflets available for people to know what they are able to apply for, for income support. I imagine that people would just, as they used to do with Parish welfare... if they have an extraordinary bill they would apply to the department to see if they can get any support. But obviously an application does not mean that it is going to be paid, it would have to be assessed to see if it was an appropriate payment. It is not just a matter of going along and asking for money and it being paid. But it would be dealt with fairly and if it was appropriate to support that person then a payment would be made.

3.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In his response to my written question earlier in the day he stated that in terms of recipients of income support who require home visits from the G.P. because they cannot access the surgery, that clinical need of the individual family members may include home visits and it further says: "Further funding may be available through a special payment." How widely has he spread the information to income support recipients that such special payments are available for those requiring home visits from their G.P. and that these will be covered if necessary by special payments, because there are a number of people out there extremely worried that while they supposedly have a payment to be able to go and visit the G.P. they cannot do so and require a more expensive home visit?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I believe that the department has communicated with people to ensure that they are aware. Certainly G.P.s are aware of it. My understanding is a patient would be aware of that as well. I have not been told that people are not aware of the ability to have home visits. It is a natural progression if somebody is ill they would call the doctor.

3.5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister accept that there is extreme worry among recipients of H.I.E. (Health Insurance Exemption) in this particular position that their payments will not be covered, will he therefore undertake to increase the broadcasting of the information that such payments are available to reassure recipients, if necessary through their G.P.s through having the application forms with their G.P.s, that such a reserve is there and available and open to them?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Firstly there is no need for an application form for additional payments through the G.P.s because, if they have an H.M.A. (Household Medical Account) certainly, that happens automatically. There is no need for special application to be made. If someone does not have an H.M.A. and they have additional G.P. requirements, if their circumstances are such that they do need additional financial support they could make an application to the department for an application. If it is felt that certainly more publicity needs to be made with regard to ensuring that people are aware of their full entitlement, well, that certainly can happen. But I have not had anybody come to me to say that they are not aware of what they cannot claim. Certainly if the Deputy has, I hope he has taken the opportunity to reassure them that there is support there for them, rather than to go around negatively saying that the system is not working and it is failing. I hope he would be able to go out and tell the public that it is a good system.

3.6 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

My question has just been partially answered, Sir. In answer to a question of several weeks ago, Sir, the Minister assured Members that if someone was housebound on H.I.E. and needed regular doctor's visits that provided the doctor concerned wrote to the department that this cost would be met by Social Security. As there still seems to be some confusion among patients and a few doctors, will the Minister undertake to write to all doctors illustrating the procedure, if he has not already done so?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Yes, we have already done that. In fact, I think at the last sitting I gave that information. Certainly, G.P.s have all had communications, whether it be electronically or hard copies, we have... in fact, it is in my answer today, I think, to Deputy Southern which talks about the... we have a daily update with doctors of who is on H.M.A. They get an electronic version of who their current people are who have H.M.A. accounts, and what the status of that account is. I am convinced now that all G.P.s are up to speed of how to operate the system.

3.7 Connétable S.A. Yates of St. Martin:

I am recognising certain difficulties that the Minister is experiencing in his comparatively new role as provider of benefits and income support, and I would like to ask him that as we on the Income Support Sub-Panel recognise issues, important issues that are arising, will the Minister listen very carefully to our submissions in the future, quite possibly quite soon, will he listen and take very careful note of what we say, Sir, because there are issues arising? I do recognise difficulties that he will be having because he is taking on the role that perhaps the Constables did in the past, and people do not fit into boxes and every case has a merit or lack of merit, but they have to be dealt with. I would like to say that the Income Support Sub-Panel will be bringing issues to the Minister's attention and I hope he will listen very carefully to what we say.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I would be delighted, Sir. In fact, as I said in answer to an earlier question, I would be happy to sit down with the Income Support Panel to ensure that we have a joint understanding of the whole system, and to ensure that we do end up with a system which is of benefit to the Island community. I was reading the Sub-Panel's most recent minutes last night and I see that they are calling for evidence and it is something which I understand they want to go with providing myself with information. I will react to the best of my ability and would welcome the opportunity to sit down with them to discuss these matters.