

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

3.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I am just beginning to look into a particular case ... I will not mention the case but one of the aspects of that case is that a refund was sought from a partner of a deceased person who had been given a full month's support and because the deceased had died prior to the end of that month, the person was not only having to deal with the fact that their loved one had died, they received notice that they would have to refund the department what had been overpaid due to the fact that they had not lived throughout the whole month. Is that not an insensitive policy, if that is in place, and will the Minister not look to extend that situation so at least when people are faced with that crisis in their lives they do not have to start thinking about refunding a couple of days here and there either side of the month that their loved one had died?

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

Yes, I do not believe that is the policy of the department and if that has occurred I do not believe it is something that should have occurred, and if the Deputy wants to let me know what has happened I will look into it.

3.2 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

As this is going to be the last question time before the summer recess, a bit of an old chestnut... I and many of my colleagues on this side of the House and, indeed, the Minister himself, I am sure, are very keen to know if there is any progress regarding insurance for long-term medical care should people in their later life where one partner has to go into long-term medical care and have to sell their house as a result? The Minister was looking at insurance for this. Does he have any news, yet?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Members will be aware that we have been fully concentrating on income support. Our officer who would do the main work is gradually becoming freed-up from income support work, hopefully, but there are more requests about, obviously, income support and that does tend to delay being able to move on to new items. But certainly as soon as that officer becomes free, we will then move on to looking at insurance for long-term care. Just as an aside, I spent some time at the recent cricket match with the Assistant Minister for Social Security in Guernsey discussing their scheme and the more up-to-date thinking with regard to that, and it is useful and I will be meeting again with the Minister and their full committee in the very near future.

3.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister comply with the request of the Income Support Scrutiny Panel to hand over the raw data on which the panel can calculate 2 factors: the like-for-like change that occurred in January 2008 over income support and the after-housing cost disposal income figures which they believe are important to analyse what the effect of income support was?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I refer the Deputy to my answer 22 today.

3.4 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

When will the Minister bring forward amendments to the supplementation policy?

Senator P.F. Routier:

A similar sort of response to the question regarding long-term care; the initiatives that are required to that... But we are committed to bring forward some options to the States to enable us to remain within our cash limit for 2009. That is being worked on and, hopefully, I will be able to have it for Members as soon as I possibly can. The department, as I think I mentioned last

meeting, is very stretched at the present time and trying to find officer availability with our current resources is very difficult. We are moving to a situation whereby we may have to consider employing more staff in the policy section but that is an area that we are looking at.

3.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister confirm or deny that there is currently a 4 to 5 week delay on the assessment of income support and changes of circumstances attached to them as is reported by several applicants for income support recently?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I cannot confirm or deny a 4 week delay. What I can say is that each week we have 32 to 40 new applications. We are making about 50 to 60 special payments each week and there are some re-determinations which are ongoing, which is a matter of 6 which are being looked at. As I say, the workload of the department is fairly heavy. I would hope that there is no one having to wait an inordinate amount of time and we are doing our best to respond to people's needs as soon as we possibly can.

3.5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister not accept that "hope ... inordinate length of time" is not adequate? This is the bottom layer; this is the final layer and safety net and often after 4 or 5 weeks, lots of families are on their uppers and need emergency payments?

Senator P.F. Routier:

If anybody has any real emergency, they can have an emergency cash payment any day at any time.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I shall be doing 2 of those this afternoon.

3.6 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

I am starting to come across a number of instances where there has been a reduction in one of the various illness allowances and this has led to considerable hardship. I have also found people with considerable disabilities experiencing a significant fall in the allowances following the withdrawal of the Disability Transport Allowance to the extent where they cannot get to work because the cost of the taxis is more than the marginal amount of their salaries. Will the Minister review the workings of the various allowances allied to illness?

Senator P.F. Routier:

There seems to be a mixed question there. I think the Deputy was firstly talking about the long-term incapacity benefits?

Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

The illness allowances. I have once instance where somebody has a severe back problem, can only work 2 days a week, and his allowance is £56.

Senator P.F. Routier:

It is very difficult to comment on an individual's benefit. That sounds like a long-term incapacity benefit which, obviously, is a matter for the medical profession to decide on what a person's incapacity is and they are awarded a percentage payment. For a back condition, obviously, that person is able to do certain amounts of things and they would be paid a proportion of the benefit. But as I say, it is a medical issue. It is not a matter for political interference by myself or anybody else. But there is a mechanism for appeal if that person is not satisfied with that award and they can do that through the system which exists. There was a

comment, also, about somebody being worse off because of disabled transport not being there any more. Certainly, disabled transport has not been taken away at the present time. Those amounts are protected until 2010. So, I cannot see that people could claim they are receiving a lesser benefit at the present time.

3.7 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

The Minister will remember that a few weeks ago I asked about the number of people visiting their doctor compared with before the onset of income support, and I did not say during that but it was due to the fact that I have been told that some families and other individuals are delaying going to their doctor. I would ask the Minister; will he give a commitment to keep under review ongoing figures for doctors visits compared with before the onset of income support and look at this over the next 2 years?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Yes, I can give that commitment. It is obviously a piece of work which the department ordinarily does. It has an ongoing relationship with general practitioners to ensure that the services they provide are appropriate. There is, obviously, a big piece of work to be done in conjunction with the Health Department with its *New Directions* to find a way forward with compliance and to be sure that G.P. (General Practitioner) services are appropriate for patient needs, generally. I hopefully will be able to bring forward any new initiatives within that policy.

3.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister some time ago promised that he would reboot, as it were, his communications policies to make sure people were fully informed about what was going on. Is he satisfied that he has done sufficient in the last few weeks to communicate to people who might be recipients of personal care at various levels to ensure that they have the right forms and can fill those in to ensure they receive the right level of support? Secondly, is he content that the one-stop shop approach is successfully working and there are not artificial barriers inside his department between the health zone and the income support zone where people do not know what is happening one with the other?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I think there were about 3 questions there. The first one, with regards communication of personal care allowance, I believe the department are working through each of the individual cases where they possibly can to ensure people are given the correct information. I am sorry, I have forgotten the other question.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

The second one was about internal barriers between health zone, in particular, and income support.

Senator P.F. Routier:

There is, obviously, the co-ordination of all the benefit systems has made it a lot better for communication between the various sections within social security. There is still some work to be done with regards between the health zone and income support but now that we have everybody's records on one system, it is a simpler thing to achieve and we are working to have a better service for the public.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may, a supplementary?

The Bailiff:

I think not, Deputy.

3.9 Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Clement:

Last week this Assembly approved an employment strategy for those with learning disabilities and on the autistic spectrum. One of the proposals in that strategy was the setting-up of a joint working party across departments, the Minister's department being one of those departments. I wonder if the Minister could give a brief outline of how his department proposes to give effect to that strategy?

The Bailiff:

No more than 60 seconds, please.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I have already met with my Chief Officer to ensure that he does take forward the proposals that were approved by the States. Obviously, the proposals will be worked-up and we will be looking forward to the States themselves coming forward and backing the additional money that will be required for that strategy which is needed most urgently.