

4.3 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains of the Minister for Social Security regarding the provision of satellite welfare offices at Parish Halls:

Would the Minister advise when, by whom, and for what reason the intention to provide satellite welfare officers at Parish Halls was abandoned? Would he also advise who was consulted regarding this change of plan?

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

I have to say I am a little surprised by the Deputy's question as the Parishes have in no way been abandoned. The Comité des Connétables has been closely involved in the development of income support for several years. With the exception of St. Helier, all Parishes have the facility to offer cash payments to income support claimants and to provide additional help with budgeting if required. Parish staff have received income support briefings and have income support literature available for parishioners. Each Parish Hall has a nominated Social Security contact and timetable has been agreed whereby income support advisers will attend Parish Halls to deal with parishioners' applications where necessary. Staff from the St. Helier Community Services Department have transferred to the Social Security Department and cash payments are also now available from Social Security. I think it is fair to say that the Constables and I have been surprised by the small number of parishioners choosing to access income support through Parish Halls. At present there are about 35 payments across the Island that are made through various Parish Halls in each week. Income support advisers have attended Parish sessions. Income support advisers are also able to attend claimant's homes where necessary and 6 home visits have been made since February.

4.3.1 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

Would the Minister confirm that in fact there was an intention that staff at Parish Halls should be trained by the Social Security Department but this was never completed? Would he also agree that having a presence at Parish Halls is an advantage for some people who may find difficulty travelling to town or difficulty even parking in town if they are not particularly mobile and their Parish Hall always was a more convenient venue for them, which now seems to be basically being squeezed-out of the picture as far as possible?

Senator P.F. Routier:

The Deputy is right to say that there was a very early intention to have Parish staff trained up to be assessors for income support. It became evident that the amount of training that would be required for perhaps the small numbers of people that would be visiting the Parish Halls meant that in many of the smaller Parishes it really did not become a viable option and it just evolved that it just really was not a realistic thing to be doing. I do again recognise what the Deputy is saying about the importance of having the availability of information at Parish Halls and that is feasible right now because any determining officer from our department has a timetable to visit Parish Halls. If a parishioner goes into their local Parish Hall and wants to have their assessment made within their Parish Hall, they can have that done by appointment. That does happen. We do have, as I say, the ability to go to people's homes if they are unable to move themselves.

4.3.2 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

What consideration has the Minister given to the extension of the range of items which may be covered by special payments to match what used to be done on a discretionary basis by the Constables in their positions under income support?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I am not too sure exactly what the Deputy is getting at because if somebody has a request for a special payment that can be looked at. But does the Deputy have any specific thing in mind?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister has already has his department - and I have made him aware of it - refuse a large winter fuel payment under special payments and for the moment I cannot think of other instances but there are a couple that spring to mind.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I think if the Deputy checks *Hansard* and recalls only a couple of weeks ago I answered that specific question about heating allowance.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may, Sir, the question was what consideration have you given to extending the range of items to match what used to be covered by the Constables under discretionary arrangements?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I believe that the current arrangement is quite comprehensive and if it is particularly winter fuel - fuel allowances - I answered that question last time. The arrangements for people who have a requirement for fuel payments are that there are regular fuel payments which will be made with income support, which income support claimants have been receiving on a regular basis. If someone has a large fuel bill, as I said last time, because of the regular payments that are now made there should not be a need to have those big bills paid from income support.

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

I think the Minister said there are about 35 people who use the Parishes across the Island to receive monetary payments. Could he clarify to me whether all these Parishes are all signed-up to a service level agreement with Social Security and the people that are dealing with this money are either Social Security staff or have sworn the oath of Social Security staff, which was promised under the Income Support Law? Thank you, Sir.

Senator P.F. Routier:

The service which the Parishes have agreed to and signed-up to is to pay money over, which is an income support payment, which has been assessed by a Social Security person who has taken the oath obviously and followed all the instructions. All that the Parish is doing is to pay the money over and the claimant has asked that they can go to their Parish for their convenience to receive their cash payment. There is no need for the Parish staff to swear a Social Security oath in those circumstances. All they are doing is passing on the money.

4.3.4 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, Sir, he missed the first part of the supplementary. How many have signed a service level agreement and I would like to disagree with his second part about not swearing an oath because an amount of money that is paid across by a Parish official would be quite easy, if they look at the rates, to obtain the income or the non income of the person which is supposed to be completely secret under the Social Security Law and I would hope the Minister could assure the States Members that he is going to look into this and get it sorted out immediately.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I will certainly speak with the Comité des Connétables to see if they feel it is necessary to update the mechanism. But my understanding is that the system we have in place is working very well for those people who are getting their benefit. But if there are some concerns about it I certainly will speak to the Connétables about that.

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

I was going to ask for clarification on the question put by Deputy Southern. I believe the Deputy was asking the Minister about the discretionary payments that the Constables would be able to make under Parish welfare, which would have included help with expensive dental care, if it is a

question of dental repairs or dentures, false teeth. An emergency payment of outstanding electricity bills, where a welfare recipient suddenly found a bill that could not be paid, in which case, in the case of the electricity bill, it might be done under a loan system with repayments over a period and in the case of dental care it could be paid for in full or also by a partial payment or by loan assistance. Now, I think basically that is what...

The Bailiff:

Come to the question, please.

The Connétable of St. Martin:

The question is what is the current situation in income support in dealing with this situation for needy and vulnerable recipients of income support?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I am very pleased to be able to advise Members that certainly with regard to dental support, people can make a request for going to their dentist to have dentures and large dental bills paid for. But what they need to do is to make a request first before they go and have that work done, not to just go along to any dentist and pay any price that the dentist would be asking for. So as long as there is prior indication that the work is necessary for dental health... we have had a request for cosmetic work to be done and we have refused that because it was felt that that was not a health matter for that work to be paid for. But I think if anybody has any particular need for emergency dental work or necessary dental work, they can approach income support and that will be paid for. With regard to the help with electricity bills, we recognise that some people do have difficulty budgeting. Income support does have sufficient money within the existing budget to cover the costs of fuel and electricity. If there are people with large bills, because they have built up a bill, we will help them to get through that in some way, shape or form. But with regard to just giving a lump payment to pay off an old bill, I do not think that it is appropriate for us to be doing that.

The Connétable of St. Martin:

I raised the question, Minister, of the situation of an assisting loan. Does the department offer income support recipients, a loan situation of where they can be helped out immediately and pay it back out of their benefits?

Senator P.F. Routier:

We do have the ability to do that.

4.3.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

It appears to me, Sir, that the Minister has just given 2 completely contradictory answers. When I suggested and described an electricity bill as an emergency, as a high fuel bill, I was told: "No, we would not cover that." When the Constable said high electricity bill the Minister appeared to say: "Yes, we are prepared to cover that." Can the Minister explain the contradiction?

Senator P.F. Routier:

There was a bit of a difference between what the Constable was asking and what the Deputy was asking. The Deputy was asking for us to pay the bill whereas the Connétable was suggesting the possibility of a loan. There is a big difference between the 2. As I said, the income support system does have sufficient money in the ordinary budget to pay for fuel and we would anticipate that people would not run up large bills. So far as a grant to cover a large bill, we would not be suggesting we should do that but if someone is in financial need and does perhaps need help with working their way through budgeting for it and it requires some assistance in dealing with the fuel supplier, we can help with that and also possibly in the way of a loan.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I thank the Minister for his answer. One of my constituents who came to me will be much comforted by the fact that you appear to have changed your mind.