

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

3.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Will the Minister for Social Security inform the House of whether he is satisfied with the return-to-work rate of people who are on, for example, long term income and disability support?

Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Clement (The Minister for Social Security):

As the Deputy knows, there was a re-organisation of benefit for those who were long term incapacitated. As I have answered in a question earlier today, the change allowed people to then receive the benefit and, at the same time, work. As I have said in my written answer, that level has been around the 40 per cent mark since 2004. The Deputy will also be aware of work undertaken by Professor Stafford which said we needed to do more work in this particular area. We needed to review earlier to see if there were ways that we could encourage people to go back to work. I should say that the department does encourage people back to work but these people sometimes, once they have been out of work for a time, do find it very difficult to re-adjust not just to the working environment but to the whole process of getting up in the morning and going to work. On top of that, sometimes people have illnesses in this category which can differ from one day to the next, which makes it difficult as well.

3.1.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Given the difficulties for which we all obviously sympathise, would the Minister identify the areas where he feels more progress can be made and where he feels if the department, for example, were given more resource or used its resource differently, there could be substantial progress?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

It has been part of my department's Business Plan to carry out some of the changes recommended by Professor Stafford. You will be aware, like I hope most Members are, that we have somewhat been thrown off-track this year with various, I have to say, good causes and we have responded to crises as they have arisen which means that we have been short of resources. We have not been able to carry out that piece of work but it is a priority and I hope that we can start it by the end of this year.

3.2 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Can the Minister please inform the House why he applied to the Economic Stimulus Package for funds to extend the protection to the long term income support people when a lot of people are having minor changes to their circumstances and then being treated as a new claim and losing the protection that they were previously afforded? The way things are going in a few months' time there probably are not going to be so many people under the protection, so why is he claiming the money from the stimulus package to fund extending that?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Departments were asked to put forward bids from the Economic Stimulus Package which met the 3Ts (Targeted, Timely and Temporary) outlined by the F.P.P. (Fiscal Policy Panel) and I am aware that some Members of this Assembly feel that the extension of transition is not an appropriate use of that money. However, I should say that, in my analysis, the extension of transition does those 3 things - and here I am putting my head on the block - perhaps better than any of the other applications. People are, we must remember, in the low income bracket; they are more likely to spend than save because of the nature of their income levels; and they are, on balance, more likely to spend that locally and the step-down will continue but just at a slightly later date. So that is why my department - after much discussion, I should say, and disagreement politically - put forward that particular application to the Economic Stimulus Package.

3.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

My question is about the subjective use of discretion by definition within the department and also perhaps the lack of communication. Just to put the question in context, if I may, I called the Social Security Department perhaps 2 weeks ago following a contact from a constituent of mine regarding the Active Card system and it was my understanding that anyone who had been referred by a doctor and was on income support is able to claim for an Active Card free of charge. So I did ask someone on the front desk and I was told that it is discretionary, so even if someone does apply through those means and is referred by a doctor, it is up to the department whether they issue it. I followed this up by an email and I was told something completely different whereby it was not discretionary and that anyone, so long as they had been referred by a doctor, would get an Active Card. So I did email further to ask why there was this discrepancy of information and I still have not received a response. So, firstly, could the Minister clarify what the situation is and why there were discrepancies of information being given out to the public and even to States Members?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am quite pleased to be able to clarify the situation, and I was not party to the conversation that the Deputy had with the member of staff. If I outline what the procedure is, then, hopefully, that will then satisfy the Deputy. The procedure is that anyone on income support who is referred via their G.P. to ... and I forget exactly what it is but it is a period of classes at the Fort that deal with exercise and that sort of thing. If that individual has been referred to that course of exercise by their G.P., they must complete that course to show that they are committed. I think it is an exercise referral course and, if they complete that course, they will be granted by the Education Department an Active Card which gives the access which that gives. So if the Deputy was misunderstood or perhaps if my staff member did not make it clear in the way that I would have hoped they might have done, then I can only apologise in this instance but the procedure is as I have just outlined.

3.3.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am grateful for the answer to the first part of my question but I believe the second part has not really been answered. Why is there a discrepancy in the information being given out and what steps are being taken to make sure that accurate information is given out on the front desk because, quite simply, this would not be tolerated in the private sector if false information was given out over the phone and it should not be tolerated in the public sector?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As I tried to indicate in my opening response to this question, I was not party to that conversation. As I understand it from reading the Deputy's email - and perhaps I am misinterpreting what was said - the department member said that there was some discretion. Now, it might be that the department member indicated that the discretion lay with my department. As I explained, the discretion lays with the G.P. and the completion of the exercise referral class. If the exercise referral class is not completed then the Active Card will not be granted. That is my understanding because a commitment has not been shown that they will be exercising in an appropriate manner. With regard to training, we have introduced a buddy system. There is extensive training to departmental members. Any organisation which relies on human input may, from time to time, unfortunately, distribute information which is not complete and, as I said, if that happened in this instance, then I do offer my apology to the Deputy.

3.4 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Several weeks ago, I visited with the Minister to discuss matters in relation to opportunities for the unemployed. Among those were issues relating to computer companies who offered small courses that people could undertake and present themselves with certificates. What steps, if any, has the Minister taken in regard to the suggestions of mine and does he have any information?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I spent a useful hour or so with the Deputy listening to some of his suggestions with regard to helping those unemployed get back to work. I have had conversations with my officers but I have no positive feedback or update to provide him at this particular time. He mentioned, if I recall, also the insulation scheme and perhaps we could adapt that to help employ those who find themselves unemployed, and I hope shortly to be able to have a conversation with the new Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment with special responsibility for environment about those very issues as well.

3.5 Senator J.L. Perchard:

I know the Health Insurance Fund has a value in the region of £60 million. Is the Minister able to confirm the exact value of the Health Insurance Fund as to how much it increased by in 2008 and to give his view as to how this fund should be best deployed into the future?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

This is an interesting area and perhaps I should preface my answer by saying that, in the past, I am afraid that sometimes departments have not worked together in the way that we, as a government, believe that they should and certainly in a way that I, as Minister, would like to see and I am afraid that perhaps this is one of those areas; the relationship between Social Security and the Health Department and the relationship between secondary care and primary care. In answer directly to the Senator's question - I see a Deputy bobbing up and down there - I believe that the surplus in 2008 was £5 million but the actual capital balance stands somewhere just over £70 million. I believe that the law currently says that this fund should be used for the purposes of primary care and in relation to the benefit to individuals of primary care, so it is a piece of work that I am keen to push forward. I have several people knocking at my door that would like to use this money for their particular area. It is my responsibility to safeguard it and ensure that it is used appropriately and, where necessary, bring amendments to the law to ensure that it can be used appropriately.

Senator J.L. Perchard:

I did ask if the Minister had a view as to how this fund could be best deployed into the future.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I just answered that question in my final remarks. The fund is there set up and controlled by lawful primary care around benefits to individuals. Perhaps the Senator did not realise that when I was trying to be polite about the past activities of both departments, I was indicating that we need to get our act together, particularly with some of the outcomes that have not quite materialised from *New Directions*. There is an exciting piece of work that we can undertake. There are some real positive benefits that the community can see from these funds. However, as I said, part of my role is to safeguard those monies and ensure that they are used appropriately.

3.6 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier:

I am just seeking from the Minister whether he can give an indication to the House how many people are covered by the transitional relief scheme, bearing in mind that a number of people have fallen out of it.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I do not have those numbers directly to hand but what I can do is copy written questions. I have copies of written questions here and update them. He is quite right. Individuals do fall out as income support benefits increase. For those who have a combination, their income support allocation might rise above what they would be getting on a transitional protective payment and, therefore, they fall outside of that but I can email the Deputy the written answers that I have given quite in-depth on this particular subject with regards to transition.

3.7 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Can the Minister inform us what progress is being made on the projet for long term residential/community care insurance and when will he be able to lay this proposal in front of the States?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I have given a commitment that a Green Paper will be before the States by the end of June and I should say that I shall be having quite a period of leave during the course of June but officers have been working on this. My Assistant Minister and I had the pleasure of recently visiting Guernsey and reviewing their excellent scheme, I might say, and I believe - I am putting words in my Assistant Minister's mouth and that is an extremely dangerous thing for me to do - that she probably agrees that it is an excellent scheme as well and will be very supportive of it. However, we learnt some interesting things and areas that they felt had been missed out of their scheme and are now starting to look at, particularly in relation to long term care for the elderly which could take place in the individual's own home. Whether we could go to that in the first step or we would have to do it one year and then the next year, we still have to see. We also learnt some interesting things the Housing Department and Planning Department will be keen to know about such as lifelong homes for the elderly over 55, and they were saying that some of the decisions that we have made, they are now going to have to make. So it was a most interesting visit.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

That concludes the 15-minute period for the Minister for Social Security.