

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

The Bailiff:

We now move to questions to Ministers without notice and the first period is to the Minister for Social Security, Deputy Trevor Pitman.

4.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I should say that my question is about public perception and not an accusation. Nevertheless, given that some people wrongly tag all of those needing to claim benefits as scroungers or as playing the system, could the Minister just clarify that neither he or his Assistant Minister are among those Members of the Council of Ministers seemingly not content with claiming States' expenses but are also using and getting their BlackBerry bills paid on top of this at the considerable expense of the taxpayer.

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

I certainly would not want to associate myself with the sentiment that all those people receiving benefits are scroungers. That is certainly not to my understanding. I think it is a matter of public record that I have and use a BlackBerry provided by my department. I think it is also a matter of public record what my 6-monthly bill was. I cannot speak for my Assistant Minister. However, I would say that the assumption of the question was that I also claim my States' expenses and that is not the case.

4.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Could the Minister for Social Security inform the House since the end of the school academic year this June how many 16 to 18 year-olds have approached the department on the Actively Seeking Work scheme which allows them around £90 a week and of those young people how many have been passed on to the excellent scheme from Economic Development that will enable them to have the £90 a week, but work 3 and a half days and attend college for one and a half days, as I think it is a very good scheme.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I would agree with the Deputy that it is a very good scheme. It comes out of the Skills Executive of which I am a member. It is my understanding that there are roughly 153 possible places on that scheme. It has been funded via the Economic Stimulus package. Unfortunately, I cannot tell the Deputy exactly how many people have approached my department, but people approaching my department are referred to the careers service, which are running the scheme. I can, however, tell her that to date there are 53 people on that scheme and people continue to be referred to that scheme. It is an excellent scheme which aims through the course of the year to ultimately help people get into work through training and on the job experience.

4.2.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, supplementary. The actively seeking work that are not on the scheme ... How many 16 to 18 year-olds are claiming this? Again, my concern is that it has not been well publicised, they are not being directed to Social Security and therefore they are not being directed to the excellent scheme being run by Economic Development. So the numbers, if the Minister has them, and if not I will have the numbers later.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am quite happy to see if I can provide those numbers for the Deputy because I do not have them with me today. I am told by Education that all those pupils within their system were told of their eligibility, if they were going to be eligible for income support they were also told about the apprenticeship schemes and the new schemes coming forward, as I say, promoted by the Skills Executive but funded by the economic stimulus package.

4.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Given the announcement from both British political major parties that they will be giving substantial assistance with regard to residential care, given the Guernsey insurance scheme for residential care, given that the department is developing a system and proposals to finance a continuum of care both in the community and residential care, would the Minister tell us when these proposals are going to surface and when will this House be presented with a policy which it can either approve or not.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I do not like having to come to this House continually saying we are not quite there, but unfortunately in this instance I have no choice because we are not quite there. We are mostly there with the Green Paper. Unfortunately, as we have already heard from other departments this morning, even if it is mostly there from a department it then, unfortunately, has what perhaps can only be described as a slightly bureaucratic process before it comes to Members and that is it must go to Treasury. It must go to the Corporate Management Board, and then it must be presented to the Council of Ministers for comment, as we heard from the Housing Department. So that unfortunately builds in some delay. I am not happy about that. I believe that that policy was agreed by the previous Council of Ministers. I believe that it needs to be reviewed, because it does add unnecessary delay into something which needs to happen quickly. Unfortunately that then means that I am aiming for a date at the Council of Ministers in November. After that it will be presented. I am not sure whether there were earlier parts of that question regarding other political parties' proposals. As I understand them, we are about to approach an election period in the United Kingdom and we seem to be in that season of parties making suggestions or pledges. Most of those pledges seem to be around a premium approach to this problem, i.e. an individual pays what in effect might be a lump sum insurance premium and then gets cover should they need it later in life. That is not like the Guernsey system, but Members will ultimately, and I hope the public, be able to choose what is most appropriate for our jurisdiction. I suspect that a more like a Guernsey approach would be more acceptable than the upfront premium approach, but that will be part of the public debate.

4.4 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Since being elected last year, I have asked the Minister several times if he would consider reversing the previous Minister's decision to provide free prescriptions for all Islanders. Bearing in mind the recent increase as well in the price of prescriptions, is he looking into reversing this decision and maybe putting the money into funding free doctor's visits for those that need it?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I have given my commitment to this piece of work. Even now members of my department are reviewing the prescriptions to gather the information in the format that I require. That is, I have given a commitment that over-65s and families with family members under 5, I do not believe should have the prescription charge reinstated. I therefore need to know what level of benefit will be produced to the fund if we are to reintroduce prescription charges on that middle group, as it were. The department do not have that information to hand. I would intend to introduce a prescription charge to the group in the middle, as it were, between those 2 groups. However, I should say that over-65s and under-5s are the individuals which, in experience, most frequently have to visit the doctor and therefore most often require a prescription charge. So we need to understand what level of benefit will be returned to the fund. How that is used, again, will be a decision for this House and not for me.

4.5 Senator A. Breckon:

I wonder if I may ask the Minister about statistical information. First of all, why there is no pension or other benefit rates posted on the Social Security website? Secondly, when the unemployed statistics will be available for August this year?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I must admit I am not an avid internet browser. I cannot say why those rates are not there. I shall ask departmental officers why that is the case and put them there, because they have recently been, as the Senator knows, up-rated and while they are a matter of public record they should be on our website so that people can easily access them. With regard to the actively seeking work numbers for August I am afraid they should be there. I have a copy in my pack. We are aiming to get them on the website and released around the 20th to 25th of every month. So they should be there. I will ensure that they are there by the end of today.

4.6 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

Would the Minister inform the House whether or not he does private work outside of his political role and if so to what extent?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not certain whether this is in relation to my portfolio as Minister for Social Security and whether it is strictly relevant. However, should the Deputy care to look at my declaration of interest - which is lodged with the Greffier at Morier House, which as I understand it is a publicly available document - she will be aware that I am retained by an accountancy practice on this Island and undertake work for them. I am careful, I hope, always to make sure that I make a declaration of interest in this House should there be a conflict during a debate.

4.6.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

I do think it is appropriate as his role as a politician, as I have tried to work with him on a number of cases with people who have problems with income support and other benefits and he has either taken a very long time or has not replied to me and those people. I also understand other colleagues have had the same problem. So I want to know if his work is impinging on his work as a Minister.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I hope that it is not the case. I do not believe that it is the case. I, like many Members, have outside interests, be it paid work or other interests that we are involved in from the charitable sector to the parochial sector and I, like many Members, spend many hours, which members of the public might think are my own free time, working on political matters.

4.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

What steps has the Minister taken to initiate a fundamental root and branch review of social security contribution levels to include the issue of supplementation over the coming years?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As the Deputy will know, being on the Scrutiny Panel with responsibility for my department, that review will be starting next year.

The Bailiff:

That brings questions to the Minister for Social Services to a close.