

4.7 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier of the Minister for Social Security regarding assistance with the costs of school clothes, shoes and equipment:

What agreement, if any, exists between the Education, Sport and Culture and Social Security Departments in assisting recipients of income support, long and short-term incapacity benefits and invalidity benefits, to pay for school clothes, shoes, equipment and other necessary items that the school require their pupils to have?

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

Parents claiming long or short-term incapacity benefit or invalidity benefit have a medical condition. Receiving any of these benefits does not provide a robust indication of their household income. Parents claiming income support receive a child component for each child in the family. This is currently £60.90 per week and will increase from 1st October to £62.09 a week. The child component covers the normal living costs of the child, including buying clothes and shoes and other items for school. However, parents can face a large bill, particularly when a child starts secondary school for the first time. Financial assistance is available from the Education, Sport and Culture Department to vulnerable low-income parents of secondary school pupils. Families are referred through a number of routes, including Social Services and educational welfare officers. Assistance is only provided to families who are already receiving income support.

Deputy S. Pitman:

Sorry, I may have misheard. Did the Minister say that those on long-term and short-term invalidity benefits did not receive any assistance?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I did not say that. What I said was that a recipient of those benefits that does not indicate what the extent of their household income is whereas a recipient of income support that does indicate the extent of their household income, and if a household could be receiving both benefits, that would indicate that then they would perhaps be entitled to some help with their school expenses.

4.7.1 Senator S. Syvret:

Will the Social Security Minister acknowledge that both these departments, and certainly these departments' clients, would also find it a great deal easier to understand where they stood if Jersey, in fact, had a dedicated purchasing power parity study figure undertaken?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Perhaps there might be some benefits from undertaking such a study. I suspect the difficulty would be with what jurisdiction or where we were to use that comparison were it to be produced.

4.7.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

Will the Minister comment on the level of proactivity of his own department on making those on L.T.I.A. (Long Term Incapacity Allowance) or income support aware of their eligibility to exercise referral as part of the Active programme?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I, on a number of occasions, and it is part of what we will be doing in 2010, and Members will note that I have submitted to them by email a copy of my response to

the Scrutiny Sub-Panel review and I hold our hands up and say that we have not dealt with communications in the way that we ought to have done in the past, and the Deputy makes a very good point. Part of the communication strategy for 2010 will be just ensuring that people may be eligible if their doctor agrees for that exercise within the scheme.

4.7.3 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Will the Minister not agree that communication of benefits and help that is available to recipients of income support and other benefits is insufficient and that the department should be looking to put out more communication so that people know what is available and what they are entitled to?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As I have just said in the answer to my last question, however, I would pose the response; perhaps then Members will not be supporting an amendment that we have to the Business Plan later on the agenda which would remove the budget from communications to the Council of Ministers.

4.7.4 Deputy S. Pitman:

Sorry, I did not hear the Minister again when he spoke of the figure of £62 as a component of income support. I did not hear what that component was.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As I said, that was the component which a family is entitled to for each child within the family if they are an income support household.

4.7.5 Deputy S. Pitman:

May I ask a supplementary, Sir? It does not sound like that is specifically for schools, that component. May I just read out the following information given to me by a mother of twins, of 11 year-olds, who are at secondary school, and she is on income support. This is just the basic, what she has to pay for one of her children: a winter jumper, £18.50, times 2; trousers, £18.50 times 3; tie, £5; shirts, £12; school shoes, £40; trainers, £30; polo shirt, £18; rugby shirt, £39.50; socks, £7; boots, £40; school bag, £40. Then we have the summer clothes. This subject needs to be addressed properly within income support and other benefits. This is far too much expense for people on income support. I did ask the previous Minister for Education, Sport and Culture to give an undertaking to look at this issue and come back to the House, and he did not do that. I ask now, would the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture and the Minister for Social Security look at this issue together and bring back some proposals to the House in which they will help the recipients of these benefits?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure whether the Deputy did hear my initial response but I think I covered the answer to her question in that. I am pleased that she believes that income support reaches ... should be extended to cover some of the monies that Education currently has to help with these costs. I am more than prepared, and I have discussed this prior to this sitting, to meet with the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture and he is happy to work with me to see if it would be more appropriate to incorporate this help which has extended to those families on low income within income support. All I can say is to the individual case, if she wishes to approach the Minister for Education,

Sport and Culture on behalf of that individual, I am sure that he would be delighted to have that approach.

4.7.6 The Deputy of St. John:

Would the Minister agree with me that some of the figures that have been given this afternoon like £18 for a jumper, £7 for a pair of socks, *et cetera*, sound rather high, given you can buy school packs. I have seen my wife do it because we have got 12 grandchildren but considerably less than some of the figures we have been quoted this afternoon. I just wonder where some of these people, Minister, are doing their purchasing.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Perhaps some of the difficulty is that the Deputy, like myself, recalls an era where I had a hand-me-down blazer from my elder brother and times were indeed very different, but that does not mean to say that if schools demand uniforms for individuals and those individual families do find it extremely difficult to find the money to pay for that equipment, then that should be available. But it is not for me necessarily to do a High Street comparative study of what things cost in today's climate for those garments of clothing.

Deputy S. Pitman:

May I suggest that the Deputy of St. John goes out and looks at the prices.
[Approbation]