

2.9 Deputy T.M. Pitman of the Chairman of the Comité des Connétables regarding the employment by some Parishes of private debt collectors to pursue late rates payments:

Would the chairman clarify whether certain Parishes have employed private debt collectors to pursue late rates payments?

Connétable K.P. Vibert of St. Ouen (Chairman of the Comité des Connétables):

The short answer to that question is yes. But I would point out that the decision of how to pursue late rate payments is a decision for each individual Parish authority and not subject to any policy of the Comité des Connétables.

2.9.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I thank the chairman for his answer. Is the chairman also aware of the increased difficulties now being faced by some on the lowest incomes, indeed particularly income support, when viewed alongside some Parishes requesting rate payments earlier and earlier each year, in this case I am referring to a constituent of mine in the greater St. Helier No. 1 district of St. Clement.

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

Yes, I am aware of that. But I would point out that the earlier and earlier payments which the Deputy mentioned are contained with the rates law, there is a 3 month period in which to pay the rates and a surcharge is then inflicted if the rates have not been paid. The Connétables continue to offer a facility to any parishioner who feels in difficulty or unable to pay the rates to come along and arrange a system of payment which will ease the situation for them. Also, the Comité des Connétables have been in discussion with the Minister for Social Security about the fact that there is a rates element in the income support system. Unfortunately that rate element has not, I do not think, been clearly pointed out to the recipients and when the rate bill comes in that money has been used for other purposes. The Comité des Connétables are quite keen that if such a payment is to be made through low income or through income support, that (a) the recipient is aware that there is an amount for putting towards rates or, alternatively, that an arrangement is made with Social Security that the rates are paid from Social Security funds and that that person is debited that amount throughout the year.

2.9.2 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

The prospect of debt collectors around the Island in Parishes or in a Parish is obviously not a pleasant one for some individuals who are in financial straits. The Chairman of the Comité des Connétables has said that there is no Comité des Connétables policy. Would he undertake to arrange an item of business on the next meeting of the Comité des Connétables to undertake an understanding of what each individual Parish is doing so that we can have a collective code of practice for employing the right sort of people that are conducting themselves in the right sort of way? We do not want a repeat of the clamping issues that we have just undergone.

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I can give an assurance that it will go on the next agenda of the Comité des Connétables but, as I pointed out in my original answer, the decision of how to deal with late rate payments is made by each individual Parish authority and, in that term, I can only answer for the Parish of St. Ouen in that the Procureurs du Bien Public

who, after all, are responsible for insuring the monies of the Parish, and myself meet together and make that decision. The decision in St. Ouen was not to employ private debt collectors but to pursue the persons through the Petty Debts Court.

2.9.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Notwithstanding the absence of policy on this issue, will the chairman condemn the use of private debt collectors and court proceedings to pursue debts by those who are struggling to get their finances in order in the first place? It is a singularly inappropriate way to treat our poorest people, surely.

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

While I do not disagree with the questioner, I cannot be responsible for the decisions of other Parish authorities. As I have answered to the previous questioner, I am prepared to have the matter discussed by the Comité des Connétables but, ultimately, each Parish authority makes that decision.

The Bailiff:

Very Well. Deputy Martin, do you wish to ask a question? You do not have to. [Laughter]

2.9.4 Deputy J.A. Martin:

No, I think he may have answered this but the problem is when the people on low incomes, who are now... and this has been going on since income support was ... there is an element in income support. Fortunately a lot of the low-paid people who used to get their rates if they went down and saw the Constable and said well, you know: "Do not pay us" or: "Pay us a couple of pounds a week" or you know ... it does not happen now. We do not need people to get into debt. We really need the Constables to work with Social Security and someone to take the lead on this because people, if they are getting it, they should be saving it. I did not say the Constables, I would never ask the Constables to take the lead on anything; I said that someone should take the lead on this.

The Bailiff:

Was that a question, Deputy? [Laughter]

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Yes. Will they get together with Social Security and sort this problem out?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I think the Deputy was quite correct when she said that I had already answered the question. The Comité des Connétables have been pursuing this matter with Social Security ever since the new system came in. We are aware that there is a breakdown in the system and we are pursuing it but it does take 2 to tango.

2.9.5 The Connétable of St. Helier:

As all of the supplementary questions have come from St. Helier Deputies, could I ask the chairman of the Comité des Connétables, is he aware that the Parish of St. Helier does not use a debt collector but we have an in-house officer who also doubles as an electoral officer?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I am aware.

The Bailiff:

Deputy Pitman, do you wish to ask the final question?

Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Several people have asked my question so I will not labour the point.