

4.1 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding cuts in benefit budgets contained in his departmental C.S.R. proposals:

Will the Minister justify the cuts in benefit budget contained in his departmental comprehensive spending review proposals and indicate to Members how he proposes to achieve 10 per cent savings within 3 years?

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

As Members are aware, all Ministers agree to put forward proposals for 2 per cent cuts for 2011 as part of the comprehensive spending review process. These proposals will ultimately be lodged and the Assembly will decide which, if any, of the proposals to accept. In respect of social security, most benefits are governed by legislation and changes to benefit entitlement will also need to be approved by the States. I will be working with my officers over the summer to identify proposals that would amount to a 10 per cent overall budget reduction if I am required to make savings at this level in 2013.

4.1.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister feel justified in removing something like £1.25 million from the pockets of the least well-off in our society?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I have made my 2 per cent proposals. As I have said, it will be for this Assembly to agree or seek to amend them in the debate in September.

[11:30]

I have endeavoured, in bringing forward those 2 per cent proposals, to limit the effect of those least well-off in society. The Deputy should be able to see that from the proposals which I have made public.

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

From the 2 answers the Minister has given, I get that he is less than enamoured with the idea of making any savings. He is going through the motions. Is he just going through the motions or does he believe in what he is saying?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

It does not seem as if I can win. I have put forward proposals and I am prepared to make those proposals, but it is only right and proper that it will be this Assembly that decides whether they are acceptable or not. What I have done is look through my departmental budget and put forward proposals which I think are most acceptable.

4.1.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister state at this stage whether he has any alternative proposals to achieve 10 per cent cuts, apart from reducing the benefits of those who are the least well-off in society?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

With my 2 per cent proposals, I have sought to mitigate the effects on the least well-off, I think that is quite clear from the proposals I have put forward. We will have a difficult piece of work to do through the summer months to see where it could be possible to make a 10 per cent saving. They will then, if I am able as Minister to accept them and bring them forward, leave this Assembly with those very difficult

decisions, where would the Assembly find it appropriate to cut my budget. The Deputy is quite right, the vast majority of my budget is in benefits, there is a way that we can ensure that the most vulnerable are protected, and that is through how we look very carefully at income support. But there are other benefits which are not means-tested which also could be looked at.

4.1.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

It is said that there is quite a level of fraud within the area of benefits claimants. Has the Minister factored this into his calculations and how is his analysis of that which is going on continuing?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Yes, the analysis is continuing. I am proposing to employ extra people to ensure that we are capturing that. I should say, however, that it is the opinion of the department that we do not see the organised fraud that we do see in other jurisdictions, I think that would be extremely unlikely. I have asked officers to look at that and they are satisfied that that is not the case. There perhaps are elements where we can tighten that up, and that is what we are doing, that is what we are proposing to do. But if we look at other jurisdictions, the majority of fraud is around organised fraud and it is not believed that we have that level of fraud on the Island.

The Bailiff:

Final question, if you wish it, Deputy Southern.

4.1.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Yes. Proposal SS10 to freeze rents and accommodation components of income support saving £250,000. In what way does the Minister think that that is not hurting the most vulnerable and poorest families in our society?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Because one would hope that the most vulnerable are being housed in States housing and the Housing Department will not be increasing their rents because I am not increasing the rental component.