

3. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Social Security

3.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister any nearer to deciding which groups he will target to have their benefits reduced to achieve £1.2 million worth of savings in 2012, and £2.2 million worth of savings in 2013? If not, will he assure Members that those groups will be identified before he brings the Annual Business Plan 2012 to the House?

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

I, like all departments, am working on finalising the figures for the Business Plan and I am just trying to think when they are going to be presented to the Assembly - very shortly. Members will already have seen my income support proposals which are part of that process.

3.1.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Income support proposals which are, in effect, a saving. The Minister has committed to analysing his review of income support to be completed by Spring 2011, to identify which groups will have their benefits cut. Is this not saying that it will just be a general cut in income support, and how will it be delivered?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As I have said, I have put some proposals before the Assembly. They are in the public domain. Members can see what they are, and they will be part of the proposals which are in the Business Plan, which I bring forward. We take these issues very seriously. We have ongoing a review of income support, the first element of which was around employment. Members will see what I am proposing around that, which we will be debating in July.

3.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture or the Education Department to ascertain the number of students leaving school this and next month, and the number of graduates likely to come back to the Island who are also likely to be unemployed and join the 1,300 people currently unemployed, and how does the Minister and his fellow members of the Council of Ministers intend to deal with this increased unemployment figure?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

We are members of the Skills Executive and officers do meet regularly around these issues. The Deputy is probably aware that we persuaded the Minister for Treasury and Resources to allocate another just over £2 million towards these issues, going on to August of next year, because we are cognisant that families – individuals - are still finding it difficult to find work, and we are keeping in place those schemes that we currently have available.

3.2.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Supplementary. Can the Minister give us any figures of what he anticipates the unemployment figure to be, for example in August, based on the existing number of people unemployed and the likely number of students coming on to the market and graduates returning?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I cannot give any anticipated figures. Many people have said many things about unemployment across the globe for many months and many years. I have tried to be extremely cautious. We cannot from one month's increase or decline in numbers, in my view, give any indication of where we are going to be. Suffice to say Ministers are continuing to put money into skills and into training because they recognise it as a priority. But equally, we recognise that many families are still finding it difficult to find work.

3.3 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

How does the Minister intend to promulgate the availability of the G.S.T. food bonus for 2011?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

This is a bonus which we have quite openly confirmed to Members that there is not the appetite that we expected there to be when we had the numbers available. I am hoping that debate that we have had over the last number of months will hopefully come to the debate of this bonus later in this sitting. We are considering again putting an advert in the *Jersey Evening Post* as we do with the Christmas Bonus. We do write to individuals who have received the bonus in the past, and we probably need to make more use of the Parish Halls to make sure that application forms - which are very straight forward - are available but it is up to us as well, as State Members, to tell individuals who come to us who perhaps are struggling. We ask the simple questions, have you been paying tax? Are you in receipt of income support? Provided we can tick the answers of "no" to those 2 questions, then we should be suggesting to them that they come forward for their G.S.T. bonus.

3.4 Deputy D.J. De Sousa of St. Helier:

Is the Minister aware that recipients of income support for whom they have had H.M.A.s (Household Medical Accounts) since the onset of income support, are systematically having these removed? Is the Minister aware, and if so what is the reason?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

They are not being systematically removed. There have been some people who claim that. The Deputy will know in response to questions that I gave to Scrutiny, there has been a reduction in the number of H.M.A.s because we are reviewing people's circumstances and their claims, as one would expect us to do. In some cases where individuals have got extremely large balances on their H.M.A.s we are drawing them down; in other cases we are closing them and sending those individuals the money because they are, at the end of the day, a savings mechanism, and they do not determine the amount of benefit that an individual can receive. But they are still available, but they are under review, as are all benefits that we provide.

3.4.1 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Supplementary. Is the Minister not aware that some of the people that are having their H.M.A.s removed are those that need to go to the doctor more often, and they are being told as well that they cannot have a review against this decision?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Obviously I do not know the individual circumstances, and I never get into that. But decisions made by determining officers within income support are available for review as the law quite clearly says. They can be reviewed by a second determining officer and then there is an appeal position. If there is a problem that the Deputy is encountering with a specific individual I am more than happy to consider that and make sure that it is dealt with appropriately.

3.5 Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

Some time ago, I think in the last time the Minister answered questions without notice, he advised the House in answer to a question from me, that his officers would work with the Honorary Police Association in order to promote to job seekers the personal benefits and skills that can be gained from joining the Honorary Police and serving within it. Will the Minister advise what progress has been made, please?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

The Connétable is absolutely right. I did, and that same day I believe that there was a briefing to States Members and we discussed it there. I have got to say, as far as I am aware in all honesty, I

am not sure that it has been taken forward, and I suspect that is the reason that the Connétable is asking me. I think it is an excellent idea and if it has not, I am assuming that is the question, I will ensure that it does, because we have had other charitable sectors, the Jersey Association of Charities have done a display in the department to try and encourage people with voluntary work as well, and this perfectly fits into that. But I suspect I have got to apologise because I suspect it has not been taken forward.

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

May I just then remind the Minister that his officers should contact the Honorary Police Association to progress this? I am sure the Island ratepayers will be glad if their Parishes are not fined when sent arrears and needed to come forward.

3.6 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Job Seekers' Allowance: there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that when attending job interviews, some simply attend to sign-off their booklet for Job Seekers' Allowance. Does the Minister feel that the system that we have in place is sufficiently robust, or does the Minister think that more effort needs to be done in adjusting this?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

We must just remember that we do not have a United Kingdom system and we therefore do not have Job Seekers' allowance, but we do have components within income support and one has to be actively seeking work to have eligibility to that. The Member probably has not yet had time, because I lodged a lot of things at the last sitting, but he should be aware that part of my proposal around income support is to tighten-up to ensure that perhaps the anecdotal evidence that he is talking about there is not happening.

[16:45]

I like to talk about this contract that taxpayers have with benefit recipients, and we as a community must make sure that those providing, and those receiving, fulfil their responsibilities; and one of that is that those who are in receipt of income support must be doing all that they can to look for work, and work if they at all possibly can. My proposals are to tighten up in this particular area around how quickly we can say: "You are not really showing willingness and doing what we want you to do," and then giving you a notice to say you have not been doing that and ultimately to reduce part of that add-on component. Those who are seeking work, those who are doing that, need have nothing to fear because they will still have their entitlement to their benefit, but it is a matter of responsibility of those who we as a society are saying: "Yes, those people should receive benefit but with that comes a responsibility."

Deputy J.M. Maçon:

May I thank the Minister for his response and I will be going to the department. Thank you.

3.7 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

With regard to the Honorary Police, perhaps the Minister should put his rottweiler on the case. However, I am talking about the G.S.T. bonus. The Minister says that he will put notices in the *J.E.P.*; should he not be investigating other media outlets, like perhaps television, plus working through the N.G.O.s such as Age Concern, and get the information out? There are a number of people who have contacted me and have no idea that the G.S.T. bonus existed.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

The Senator gives a timely reminder. I would have gone on to say those things but, much as it might appear to the contrary, I do try to keep my answers concise. She is absolutely right, we have advertised on television websites in the past, and that is probably something we should consider, and on States-associated websites and we do talk to Age Concern and ensure that they

know but as I have said there is more work that we need to do. One of the things was I said we might put an advert in the *J.E.P.* because sometimes it is difficult to handle that and it is not necessarily picked up and targeted at those to whom we want it to be targeted.

3.8 The Deputy of St. John:

I sent the Minister a note earlier on but as he is responsible for Health and Safety - he will probably have this comment off-pat, I should think - given that ladders have been removed from the harbour at St. Aubin and they have not been replaced and there is a health and safety issue by somebody falling off their craft expecting to swim across the harbour to a ladder to get back to a secure place or a sanctuary - and maybe even call the emergency services - and they have been removed. What are his officers going to do to make sure they are put back and for the safety aspect within the harbour to be reinstated?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Of course, the Health and Safety Inspectorate does sit within my department but they are, to all intents and purposes, independent, and they must be because of the role that they must perform under the law and their interaction with other States departments as well. So it would not be appropriate for me to request them to put back the ladders because I do not know the background to why the ladders were removed in the first instance, and they would not take lightly to political interference. Of course, I will always point out to inspectors if there is a perceived health and safety risk in any environment and they will appropriately review and consider if that is the case.

The Bailiff:

Very well. That brings questions without notice to the Minister for Social Security to an end.