

Urgent Oral Questions

The Bailiff:

Now, I have given leave for Deputy Southern to ask an urgent question of the Minister for Social Security and so I invite him to ask it now.

5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding a survey into the possible introduction of a ‘youth rate’ set below the minimum wage in Jersey commissioned by the Employment Forum:

I just seek your guidance on the formats. I have got 3 starting points there. At what stage should I be asking any supplementaries? I suspect some will come after the second.

The Bailiff:

I think you should ask your question and we will get the response and then see how you go.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister aware that the Employment Forum has commissioned the company Island Analysis to conduct a survey currently underway into the possible introduction of a ‘youth rate’ set below the minimum wage in Jersey? Does the Minister accept that in any survey of opinion, questions must be thoroughly vetted to ensure balance if the survey is to be valid? If so, is he satisfied that all questions on the employee survey and, in particular, questions 9, 10 and 12, are fair and balanced and not leading or misleading? Will the Minister agree to request the forum to suspend this survey activity until the questions have been checked by the Statistics Unit for balance?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley (The Minister for Social Security):

Before I respond to the Deputy, I would like to clarify whether this question complies with Standing Orders. Under Urgent Oral Questions 15(3) it says: “The Bailiff should approve the question if he or she is of opinion that it does not contravene Standing Orders.” The question is 117 words and I believe it contravenes Standing Order 13(2).

The Bailiff:

Well, whether it does or not, can you answer it please, Minister? **[Laughter]**

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I was proposing to answer the first 70 words and leave the rest if that was alright. I am aware that Island Analysis has been commissioned to undertake some research on behalf of the Employment Forum. In December last year, I met the forum to explain that the Back-to-Work Ministerial Taskforce had agreed that the matter of a youth minimum wage rate be urgently reconsidered as part of our wider strategy focusing on unemployment. We would be failing in our duty if we did not consider all options available to us. I directed the forum to review the potential impact of a youth rate and I set a tight time scale for that work. Island Analysis is a specialist research company with experience of undertaking research on behalf of other organisations locally. As well as the written questionnaires, representative samples of individuals and organisations will be surveyed using different methodologies including face to face meetings with employers and focus groups with young people. I am satisfied that the research provides a fair and balanced approach to explore perspectives of youth employment and pay. The Statistics Unit has indicated that it will require 4 weeks to provide a meaningful review of this survey. A 4-week delay in the contracted timetable is not manageable and would require the search to be terminated and restarted at a later date with obvious cost implications. Island Analysis has provided the forum with a cost-effective approach that is achievable in the tight timescale available. The survey is already underway. Island Analysis has allocated staff to the project to ensure that our deadlines are met. Stakeholders have been invited to participate on given dates and a full timetable of work is planned during the next 6 weeks. While the Deputy is, of course, entitled to his views on the wording of some of the

questions, I believe the questions to be both fair and balanced and can see no good justification for suspending the survey.

5.1.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

That is very clear. If I may just follow up. I already have a response from the Statistics Department. I have got 7 comments on one of the particular surveys. In particular, on question 7 of the young people's survey it says: "There are multiple concepts here." Now, if the Minister knows anything about devising questions, you do not ask questions that involve 2 concepts at the same time. That just gives you wrong answers. The main issue here is more perhaps how likely you would be to accept a job which paid (a) the minimum wage £6.32 an hour or (b) the new minimum wage e.g., £5.32 an hour. The question is badly phrased, misleading. It starts off: "If it meant that you were more likely to get a job, would you take a job below the minimum wage?" That is obviously leading. Does the Minister not consider that that question in particular is misleading because the Statistics Unit say that it has multiple concepts and is wrongly phrased?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I have received the same comments that the Deputy refers to from the Statistics Unit. I am fully aware of what he is talking about. I can only leave it to the Members to make a decision on this to ask whether, in their opinion, this question is misleading and I am going to read it out because I think the Deputy is really being very particular on this.

[11:45]

"If it means that you were more likely to get a job if you are/were under 19, would you be willing to work for a youth rate which may be lower than the current minimum wage which is applicable to all adults?" I find that is a very straightforward question and I have no difficulty with it.

5.1.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

I think that grammatically it should be "if it meant" rather than "if it means" because it is conditional so I think that is already one mistake there for a start. The question I have is quite simply can we be circulated a copy of these questions so that we can all make our own minds up as to whether they are leading at all? I think it would be helpful perhaps if the Minister has a steer from more than one States Member on that.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

All the questionnaires are available on a website which I can circulate the details of the website to Members. There are 5 questionnaires. There is one for employees, which is the one that Deputy Southern is referring to; one for an employer, which is accessible by a password that employers who presently take part in consultation with the forum use. There is one for young persons. There is one for Advance to Work and Advance Plus participants and there is one for general organisations. I have to stress that these questionnaires are the product of work done by the forum. They are not work done by the Social Security Department.

5.1.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister consider that the questions are fair and balanced and will lead to an outcome which can be trusted because that is the key question. In particular in the light ... and I will make one more comment from the Statistics Unit, question 8 on this particular survey says: "Do you think that a youth rate should be introduced as an option to Jersey?" Could stop there. That is a perfectly clear question. "As currently utilised in the U.K., Guernsey and the Isle of Man." Leading. It is totally acceptable. The comment from the Statistics Unit is: "Seems unnecessary to quote U.K., Guernsey and the Isle of Man" except to indicate that it is an acceptable thing and therefore leading. Can the Minister be sure that when he returns to this House with a proposition to say youth rate or no youth rate that he will be basing his statements on material that can be trusted and not material that is open to question as being leading?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I think it is a matter of fact, and I am sure the Deputy will agree with me, that there is a youth rate in the U.K., Guernsey and the Isle of Man. I am sure he will not dispute that as a matter of fact. Therefore the fact that that has been put in a question, I do not really see that that is an issue and I really find it hard to understand why the Deputy is challenging that particular question. I can only suggest that some of the Deputy's concerns stem from his known adverse beliefs about a youth minimum wage which is ...

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Sir, that is a slur on my integrity. That is absolutely ...

The Bailiff:

Deputy, one moment.

5.1.4 Deputy S. Pitman:

Could the Minister inform Members has he consulted the Statistics Unit on the questions and, if not, will he do that subsequent to Deputy Southern's concerns?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I have already explained that the survey is underway and I have no intention of withdrawing the survey.

5.1.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Just to repeat, my interest in this issue is to get a straightforward and reliable answer out of this survey. I fear that the Minister will be coming back to us in some months' time with something that is totally shoddy, leading and inaccurate and I do not want that to happen. Will the Minister reconsider his position on this issue so that he comes back to the House with something that he can put his hand on his heart and say: "I trust this survey and the evidence is that we can or cannot go ahead with the youth rate." Will he do that?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I would never come to this House with a proposition that is shoddy, misleading or inaccurate. The forum makes recommendations only to the Minister. The Minister has to take into account many other factors and this survey is only a very small part of any information that I would take into consideration before bringing a proposition to this House.

The Bailiff:

Very well. Just before we leave this, the Minister at the beginning raised the question of whether the question complied with Standing Orders. I directed him to answer it because Ministers must answer questions whether they think they comply with Standing Orders or not, the Chair having ruled. But just to give him comfort, I can perhaps explain that the limit on 70 words only applies to Oral Questions on Notice during the 2-hour period. It does not apply to urgent questions. Very well. There are no matters under J or K so we come then to Public Business.