

2016.11.15

#### **4.4 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding statements made during a Scrutiny Panel hearing in relation to the use of food banks: (9719)**

In light of the recent report into the use of foodbanks, will the Minister accept that her statement to the Health and Social Security Scrutiny Panel on 5th May 2016 that “a very large proportion of the people” claiming food parcels were not entitled to income support and had not been in Jersey for 5 years was incorrect, and what was the evidential basis for that statement?

##### **Deputy S.J. Pinel (The Minister for Social Security):**

The recent survey, commissioned by the Minister for Housing, has given us for the first time a demographic breakdown of foodbank users and we are very grateful to her for commissioning that. I think it is true to say that I was a little surprised by the results, which did not match the anecdotal information that I had been given previously. The report confirms that users were more likely to be male, born in Jersey, age 35 to 54, and single with no children. During the Scrutiny hearing on 5th May, it was confirmed that a survey was being undertaken and we were waiting for the results.

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It was also confirmed that officers from the department were now working much more closely with foodbank organisations and were gaining a better understanding of the users of this service. The published report has now recorded this information as a point for future reference.

##### **4.4.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Could the Minister inform Members what these anecdotal sources were and whether she normally uses anecdotal sources to base her policy decisions or policy statements on?

##### **Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

It was not a policy statement. It was answering a question at a Scrutiny Panel and I have a very strong association with charities, many of them and, having spoken to them, this was the anecdotal evidence. That is all I could rely on at the time. Now we have the survey and there will be another one conducted at the same time next year, which will give us the comparative results.

##### **4.4.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of St. Helier:**

Does the Minister agree that the information that has been given to us in this report, combined with the information we received in the Scrutiny reports on living on low income, is a demonstration that her policy to cut support for the people, who are already the poorest in our society, has been the wrong thing to do?

##### **Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

No, I do not agree with that. I think that we have been through this argument so many times in debate and it is not cutting support; it is trying to be fair and targeted, which is the whole *raison d'être* for the benefit system which is a safety net. It is not supposed to be a choice of living.

##### **4.4.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:**

The reports into the usage of foodbanks said that a significant number of people, who were resorting to this, were resorting to foodbanks because they have had their support cut, so can I, therefore, ask the Minister: is it in fact intentional that they want to see more people resorting to this charity, rather than to provide the support themselves, which I think is what the welfare state should be all about?

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

I think the welfare state does its job extremely well. It is a safety net; it is not a choice to live. It has also been reported in comparative times from, I think it is June this year to June last year, that the foodbanks were handing out less food parcels this year than last year.

**4.4.4 Deputy J.A. Martin:**

Yes, now the Minister does know that it is not people, who have not been here 5 years, and it is the majority of men over the age of 35 with no children, is she just going to stick to her policies? These are Jersey-born people and they might have no children, but these are the people who, when a marriage splits up, or a relationship breaks down, they are the ones who find themselves on the street with less help and she has heard the evidence now. These are Jersey-born men and is she going to look at changing any of her policies, so that they do not all end up in foodbanks? Thank you.

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

As I have said before, the survey was quite a surprise: that it was people, who were born in Jersey, that were male and single between those ages. There is income support available for these people and the number of people claiming the food parcels during that survey was about 180, some of them claiming 3 or 4 times in that 3-month basis. So, it is very difficult to ascertain, until we have a comparative survey, as to whether it is the same type of people, or different people, so we will wait and see for the next survey.

**4.4.5 Deputy J.A. Martin:**

A supplementary. Will the Minister then at least work with the Minister for Housing with this? A 35 year-old single Jersey male is not entitled to social housing, so they are out in the private sector, paying extortionate rents, even though they are qualified. So, I would just like reassurance that the Minister for Social Security will work with the Minister for Housing so these people, that are part of our society, are not left out in the cold, literally. Thank you.

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

Of course. I work very closely with my colleagues, but the Social Security Department providing income support cannot dictate how people receiving it spend it.

**4.4.6 Deputy M. Tadier:**

Would the Minister put on record the fact that there is a risk - and this is the reason I ask this - that there is a message going out that when she thought, or when other people thought, that it was only less than 5 years who were claiming foodbanks, that was okay, but as soon as it is local people, who have been here for 5 years, that is more worrying? Could she put it on record that it is very important that we do look after those who do not yet have their 5-years qualification, so are living in unqualified accommodation and not in mainstream work and that there is a body of work to be done to find out what provision is being made for those who live in relative poverty, under the 5 years, who are basically below the radar in many ways?

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

I do not think that anybody, who is suffering from, as the Deputy says, relative poverty would be ignored at all. We have a huge history of charitable giving and the voluntary sector is much admired by all. There are over 800 charities in this Island and it has always been a very commendable and appreciated charitable giving area. I do not see that this is a particular area other than any other, be it children, adults or whatever, that should be accepted and I praise the people who support it.

**4.4.7 Deputy M. Tadier:**

Does the Minister recognise that the evidence put forward in this new survey is a salutary reminder that we should avoid taking anecdotal evidence, otherwise called “pub talk”, and is really just often unfounded prejudice and not substitute that for hard evidence?

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

Yes, I do agree, but there was no hard evidence before this report. I am very grateful to the Minister for Housing for commissioning it, as I said, and all one can do, without the survey and the analysis of that survey, is to talk to charities, which is what I did, and it was not in the pub.

**4.4.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Is it not the case that the fact that anyone has to resort to foodbanks in order to survive is an indictment of what she calls her “safety net”, the income support system? Is it not a measure that indicates that the safety net is not working?

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

No, I do not believe it is an indication of the safety net not working. As I said before, in answer to somebody else, we cannot dictate how people spend their income support money.