

2016.11.15

**4.9 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding the effect of recent changes in benefits policy on the use of food banks: [9720]**

What assessment has her department made of the effect of recent changes to benefits policy on the increased use of foodbanks and what other factors does she consider are responsible for that increased use?

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

I apologise in advance for any repetition in answer to very similar questions from Deputy Southern. Following on from the previous question, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for Housing for her informative report on the use of foodbanks. Media reports in 2015 suggested a growth in the use of foodbanks compared to previous years. The recent changes to benefits, mentioned in the question, took effect from January 2016. The survey ran from January to March. As this is the first time that such a survey has been undertaken, it is not possible to say whether the use of foodbanks has increased, or decreased, in respect of any specific factor. As has already been announced, the survey will be repeated next year and that will allow us to understand any trend in usage. At that time we will be able to review any changes against a range of factors, including the number of people claiming benefits, such as income support and long-term incapacity allowance, as well as considering underlying economic factors such as the rate of inflation and employment numbers. It should also be recognised that charities rely on volunteers and voluntary fundraising and the level of activities, of any particular type of charitable enterprise, will also depend on the number of organisations and individuals involved from time to time.

**4.9.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Does the Minister not accept that this survey was conducted at a time when benefits, particularly disregards on income support, were being enacted and taking place; and that the responses as to main reasons for having to use foodbanks can say it is about 40 per cent of them are something to do with benefits reduced, benefit sanction, do not qualify for benefits, awaiting approval, about reductions in benefits? Does the Minister accept that reductions in benefits were responsible for this use of resorting to foodbanks and, if not, what does she think is responsible for the existence of foodbanks on this Island?

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

There have always been foodbanks, the same as there has always been considerable charitable action in this Island. I have to say to the Deputy, with some figures in front of me; in June 2015, 96 parcels were distributed; in June 2016, 82. As I mentioned in the previous answer, I do not want to read out all of the figures, the foodbank parcels have been reduced as at June, July, August and September. This is public knowledge. Last year the Grace Trust handed out 1,253 parcels to 320 people, so it does prove that people are going back time and time again for the same parcels.

**4.9.2 The Deputy of St. John:**

Could the Minister advise what efforts her, and her department, are, or will be, making to identify exactly which benefits or components are directly correlated to what is identified in the report provided by the Minister for Housing with regard to the usage of foodbanks and make an assessment to bring forward next year amendments, if necessary?

**Deputy S.J. Pinel:**

I thank the Deputy for her question. We have already met with a lot of the distributors of food parcels and charitable situations like the Salvation Army, which are not necessarily food parcels, but hand out living parcels to people and have a long record. Now, it increased in the survey done by the Housing Department of working with them so that we can identify that, but this is the first survey that has been done, so we need to use that analysis in order to work with the various charities and further improve the situation.

#### **4.9.3 The Deputy of St. John:**

Could the Minister advise then on that basis how she will inform either Members or even the public as to her results and when that may be?

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

As I said in a previous answer, that survey will be conducted again next year, so that we have some sort of comparison. All we have are the figures I have just distributed by the Grace Trust. We need to analyse the figures of the parcels that are distributed and it is an ongoing piece of work. I cannot answer the Deputy's question as to when the results will come forward, but we need the survey from next year in order to make comparisons.

#### **4.9.4 Deputy S.M. Brée of St. Clement:**

Would the Minister not agree that the very fact that such an affluent island has foodbanks and has a large number of charities, that people rely on, is a complete indictment of this Government's policies and her own policies on the treatment of the less fortunate in this Island?

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

No, I would not agree, because, as I have said in answer to previous questions, the income support system is a safety net. It is not to be a choice of living and the charities have always, historically, provided support for people across the board and the foodbanks, or food parcels, have come to the fore in the media in the last couple of years, as they have in the U.K., with supermarkets asking to buy 2 cans of soup and donate one to a charity, and so they have been much widely publicised.

[11:00]

In St. Clement, my Parish, we have had the community support scheme in operation for a long number of years, who have always taken food parcels and hampers to people who need it. It is not an indictment of the Government at all. It is just helping people who need it and that is what the charitable sector does.

#### **4.9.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:**

The report on foodbanks itself says that a significant proportion of the people, who are having to resort to foodbanks, have done so because of their support from her department being cut. Does she completely ignore the correlation that is evident in that report and, if she does not ignore it, what is she going to do for her own policies to try and reverse it?

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

No, I am not ignoring it and, once again, I refer to the report, which is the first one of its kind, and so we now have figures as opposed to assumptions. It was 26 per cent of people in the report who said that the reduction in benefit was one of the main reasons for seeking food assistance. But, again, to repeat what I said last time, we, as a Social Security Department, cannot dictate to people how they use their money. If they use it for reasons other than buying food; we cannot tell them how to spend their money.

#### **4.9.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:**

Supplementary. The implication I hear behind what she is saying there is that if people on income support are having to use foodbanks it is their own fault, because they have just not spent their own money responsibly enough. Could she confirm that that is not what she is implying, because it certainly does sound like that from the words she has used?

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

No, that is not what I was implying at all. Some people find budgeting very difficult and this is where J.A.C.S., the Jersey Conciliation Association, have been extraordinarily helpful with people. People do find it difficult to budget from week to week.

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

Does the Minister recognise that using the phrase “choice of living” in a sentence that income support should not be a choice of living, is tremendously insulting to those who have to steel themselves to go and seek charitable sources to eat? Will she withdraw that statement?

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

No. I think it is ... ever since income support came into being in 2008, which replaced the Parish Welfare System, it is a safety net and the whole idea behind income support is to encourage people to move into financial independence and to encourage them to get jobs. It is a safety net. It should not be a choice of a way to live.