

2019.06.04

8 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for Social Security regarding the amount paid in maintenance by absent parents to lone parents: (OQ.140/2019)

Given maintenance payments are taken into account in the administration of income support, how much money was paid in maintenance by absent parents to lone parents in 2017 and 2018?

Deputy J.A. Martin (The Minister for Social Security):

An estimate of the value of maintenance provided to lone parents has been calculated as approximately £1.4 million in 2017, spreading across 518 families and rising to approximately £1.5 million in 2018, spreading across 535 families. Just over half of lone parents receive maintenance in different forms and in different amounts.

4.8.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

You may have just answered part of the question I was going to follow up with: the proportion of lone parents. Which proportion are estimated to be receiving the payments they should, the ones that should be receiving them from absent, or separated, parents?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, the figure is estimated, the amount is calculated by what the working partner, or the absent partner, if you like, is able to pay. The average is between £10 and £100. You have some very wealthy absent partners and you have some who earn nothing and these absent partners pay nothing i.e. if they are on income support themselves, obviously if they are deceased, if they are in an abusive relationship and definitely if they are in prison, earning 84 pence an hour.

4.8.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister outline what assistance is available from her department to chase up the absence of maintenance, or their ability in the regularity of maintenance payments; what help is available?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

The Deputy knows from the department at the moment there is advice given and it is always to contact Citizen's Advice and go through Legal Aid. We know Legal Aid is out for review at the moment and it will be interesting to see if this comes under the new Legal Aid Guidelines, but we will know more in the next 6 months.

4.8.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may. Given that the department knows, by and large, where people work and also how much they earn, could they not be far more proactive in chasing up maintenance payments from lax, absent, parents in order to make the lives of these particular clients, single parents, better?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

If the Deputy presumes that the department knows where these people work and live, why would the department need to do it? It is the law that they have to pay this money, the money is paid and then, if they do not do this, they are breaking the law. But I think he is thinking of something like the Child Support Agency, that is something like £3.8 billion in arrears for supposedly really chasing up the lone parent, who should be paying for their children.

4.8.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Minister confirm whether separated individuals, coming out of an abusive relationship, are expected to chase up their former partners in order to get maintenance?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

No, we asked that specific question to officers and I thought I knew the answer and the answer is definitely not. If it is an abusive relationship, no, they are not to contact that partner at all.

4.8.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

How does the Minister know that is implemented correctly in the department and to what level of questioning would she subject individuals, to prove that they have come out of an abusive relationship, as opposed to an ordinarily human relationship?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I, myself, would subject nobody to some sort of interrogation of how abusive their relationship was, but officers in the department do sit and listen, they go through people, we have 5,000 families, over 10,000 people, on income support. If you are in an abusive relationship, you are probably asking for other help from, say, Andium, because you need to move out of the family home, even if it has been purchased. I hope the Deputy is not saying that the department does not realise when somebody is in an abusive relationship.

4.8.6 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Does the Minister believe that, perhaps, we should be trying to give more assistance to, not just those in abusive relationships, but lone parents, who do seem to have to take full responsibility for tracking down the absent parent and gaining the money that they so much need for their children? It can be a really difficult situation. Can more assistance be put in place by the Social Security Department, perhaps with some named contacts within Social Security, for example, to assist people at a really difficult time in their lives?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

As I say, I am always open to suggestions how to make things easier. If we know that the people are getting their money from the lone parent, who is working, it just gives more money in the pot that we can distribute, or it is not coming out of the taxpayer. Again, I say, I am really looking forward to the guidelines of Legal Aid and where this can take us and if there is something in there that can help I am willing to listen.