

2020.05.12

**5 Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat of the Minister for Children and Housing regarding seasonal workers (OQ.128/2020)**

Will the Minister advise whether he is aware of any seasonal workers who have lost their accommodation due to the coronavirus crisis (as highlighted by the Shelter Trust) and, if so, how many; and will he state what Government investigation, if any, there has been (or will be) into this matter?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec (The Minister for Children and Housing):**

In March, at the outset of this crisis, I set up an emergency housing team to assist members of the public who were at risk of being made homeless during this crisis. That group includes people from the government policy team, the Affordable Housing Gateway and Andium Homes, and has dealt with a very wide variety of often very difficult and challenging cases of Islanders who have needed help with emergency accommodation. We have been pursuing our allocations purely on the basis of those emergency cases for the time being. I can say that of those that have come to us, 7 of those have been cases of seasonal workers who have lost their accommodation due to this crisis. In the main, these were informal lodging arrangements that were not caught by the amendments to the Residential Tenancy Law that this Assembly passed, and for all of those cases that came to us we have found them either permanent housing solutions or at least temporary housing for the time being. My understanding of the payroll co-funding scheme is that one of the conditions attached to that is that employers who provide accommodation to their employees cannot evict them and if they were to do that then it would be a breach of the conditions provided in the co-funded payroll. So hopefully that will be an extra protection. But I would say to any instance where Members are aware of homelessness cases, whether it is seasonal workers or not, is to please get in touch with us as soon as possible.

**4.5.1 Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:**

At a public hearing on 5th May with the Minister for Social Security, the Minister made the same reference to the co-funding as the Minister for Children and Housing has just made. Can he please confirm to me that no firm or no company has been provided co-funding, so that each of those that have been made homeless an investigation has been made to put each and every one of them to ensure that that business has not received funding?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I cannot give that undertaking because the operation of the payroll scheme does not fall within my portfolio. But I think the Member absolutely raises an important point and I certainly hope that the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture is listening. But I am happy to have a conversation with him to say that this is an issue of importance because of the public health implications, so could we have a double check of this to make sure that everything is being done properly.

**4.5.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:**

Does the Minister believe that the C.R.E.S.S. (COVID-19 Related Emergency Support Scheme), as set up, is suitable and good enough to protect workers from homelessness, those who have been here under the allotted time or those seasonal workers?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

In terms of homelessness, the C.R.E.S.S. scheme is not necessarily the deciding factor there. The most important thing that was done to protect people from homelessness was passing the amendments to the Residential Tenancy Law, which provides that protection in law for people in their tenancies. Whatever contractual obligations that employers have to their employees they have obviously got to meet that. There are obviously implications for rental arrears where people are able to continue living in their home otherwise, as usual, but do not have the income to make up the full rent, so that will obviously be something that causes stress and anxiety to people in that situation. That is why we have published guidance on how that can be arranged between tenants and landlords. Again the number one piece of advice I give to people in that situation is speak to your landlord, engage in that conversation and provide evidence where you can of what your income is and try and work out what is the most acceptable situation for you.

#### **4.5.3 Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:**

What is the Minister going to do to ensure that this situation does not continue in the future?

#### **Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I believe that we have done really, really good work in the last couple of months providing access to emergency accommodation for people in Jersey. We have had 149 individuals or families get in contact with us. The vast majority of those have had solutions provided to them and the rest we are continuing to work with the social housing providers. The charities who have been able to have additional capacity to help vulnerable people as well because of the generous support that has come their way to give them that capacity, and also the very generous support that some in the private sector, including Jersey Heritage, who have been absolutely fantastic in providing us with some extra capacity to help people. So I think we have done a really good job there. But we do not know what we do not know. So if there are cases out there where people are not coming forward asking for help or are not being directed to us, then I simply reiterate if you are in that situation please do get in contact with us and if there are Members who are aware of those specific situations, and the more specific details we get the better our response can be, is to please get in touch.

#### **The Bailiff:**

Members on chat are expressing concern about the time that we are taking to get through questions. That is a concern I share and I was about to make one or 2 observations. Firstly, I think it is reasonable to extend the time at the moment by 5 minutes for injury time because that is probably the time that we have spent trying to put right technical difficulties. Secondly, might I remind anyone responding to a question that generally they should not respond for any longer than 90 seconds. Any responses longer than that really are outside what is accepted and normal practice within the Assembly. I would ask Members also to restrict themselves to only asking those supplementaries which they believe to be essential and obviously the usual Standing Order the question should be succinct apply equally. My perception is that the difficulty is arising both as a result of the nature of the answers and the nature of some of the questions. With those things in mind we will continue. If we reach a point where I think that there is a risk that a material number of the questions will remain unanswered then I may have to withdraw the right to ask any supplementaries, which is a matter within my discretion but we will see if we can continue under the current regime for the time being.