

2020.03.24

5 The Greffier of the States on behalf of Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier of the Minister for Social Security regarding the feasibility of making cash payments to all adult Islanders during the Coronavirus pandemic: (OQ.89/2020)

Will the Minister advise Members whether she will make a cash payment to all adults, possibly on a monthly basis, as a form of universal benefit, so that no member of the public goes without during the current pandemic and so that businesses can continue to operate and workers to be employed?

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

The universal benefit scheme for every adult would be untargeted and would cost the taxpayer an enormous amount of money. The Government is not considering a universal monthly payment. There are many targeted schemes. One to keep employers in work, income support, the work we are doing on trying to keep people in their houses, but universal payment to every adult on the Island, when some on the Island are still extremely rich, is not going to be considered by this Government.

3.5.1 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Given what the Minister has just said, will the Government be considering a targeted monthly payment to those who have lost their income as a result of the coronavirus?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I am upset that the Deputy has not got the message of the work that is being done on the payroll to keep people in employment. Income support: I have had to now reassure old age pensioners that the pensions is paid; it is coming in. It is going to go in their bank account. Am I misunderstanding the Deputy's question, because there is so much being done? Unfortunately, if we are missing getting it to the Deputy something is wrong.

3.5.2 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

The reason why these questions are continuing to be asked is because backbenchers are consistently being told by businesses that employers are having to lay off staff and staff are not able to support themselves, because they have lost their income and not getting any benefit from the Government. So the question still stands. What is being done to ensure that people who have lost their incomes are not eventually going to be homeless, because they cannot afford to pay for their rent, or for their food, or for their families? If there is a fantastic scheme in place and money has gone into the hands of those people then will the Minister endeavour to share it with us by some means today?

[11:30]

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I can share with the Deputy everything. My comment was not a comment that we know and you do not know and maybe you have missed something. It was if we do not all in this Assembly and the Island work together, we have got no chance of beating this. Everything we are getting out, the payroll, income support is there, the new forms, everything is moving and I have 50 emails every 20 minutes to try and answer questions. I cannot pull officers off when they are doing the high level. If we need to communicate better with everybody I would accept that, but there are schemes. They are not completely finished. Officers need to know they will work for the industry. It has been announced as long as you can keep your people in work we were going to meet £200 and that would bring about a payment of about £320. Some think that is enough and some think that is not. Then

there is income support. Then there are people on pensions. Sick pay, we have waived ... if you have only been here 3 months and you are sick, contributions; I have put that out there. That was a question 2 weeks ago. Phone up, we will not stop your sick pay. You will be seen in the hospital if you have not been here for 6 months. There is so much going on. What we keep trying to get out there in the main is how to stay safe. All the schemes, we need to find a way to filter in firstly for the Assembly Members who are going to have these conversations. You know your constituents best. You need to keep them calm and you need to explain. If they are not reading it in comms (communications) and they are not getting ... some people do not buy the *J.E.P. (Jersey Evening Post)* now, some listen to this and they have just missed the news. So if I can do anything to work and get better with backbenchers I look forward, I really mean that, for your suggestions.

3.5.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

For those who lose their jobs tomorrow, when can they expect to go into Social Security and be able to claim under income support, or another scheme, to make sure that they can hold their families together?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I said we are designing the scheme, sorry not the scheme, the form, so it is so quick. You do not have to go in. Please do not go in. There is an online form and the number is 444444. It is falling over. We have pulled the whole of the officers across. We are teaching them as we speak and we want to get money out to people. The money is there. I think we have had a rough 200 and something on Friday and another 200 ... we are up to 410 in 2 days. These need to be processed and we want the money out to them.

3.5.4 Deputy C.S. Alves of St. Helier:

The Minister has mentioned that obviously the evictions will not be processed and has mentioned income support and so on. I have had constituents, who were lining up to do seasonal work in the next couple of weeks, who do not have contracts in place because a lot of them were done verbally and contracts would only be given to them after starting work and who also do not have 5 years residency, so would not qualify under the income support scheme. My question to the Minister is: is part of the schemes that the Minister is looking at, will that cover individuals like the ones I have just described? Also, there is the issue of utility bills. It is not just rent that is costing people but also utility bills.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

As I said, the schemes that are already in place, we are trying to make them simpler but the people under 5 years, we are trying to make sure, as I say, keep a roof over their head, we keep them fed and people are ... I think there is some great work being done from the Polish consulate. They have chartered a plane. People are desperate to go home to be with their families and we try in any way we can and probably will do it for other nationals. It is a long piece of work. I have been asked can I pay some of their fares for some, as the Deputy says, have not even started work, they have no money. So we are wanting to keep ... get people who want to leave if they can and it is so hard at the moment. All countries are different. Then we have to make sure we are keeping the people who have been working in the staff accommodation, or the lodging house, we have to keep them fed and there has to be a buy-in from everyone in this. It is 3 months. We are going to keep assessing it. I, and the rest of the Council [of Ministers], do not want anyone on the streets, or without food, or medicine. That is our pledge.

3.5.5 Deputy C.S. Alves:

I think some of the other Members were trying to get at this. I have also heard from constituents who have put in income support claims recently that have been told that it is taking up to 6 weeks. I think that is the point that the other Members were trying to make. If somebody has no money right now, how long are they looking at for their form to be processed and to get some money?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I have been in touch with my officers who ... that is what it cannot be. I think you are talking universal credit in the U.K. We pay in advance and, as I said, there is ... we are not asking people to come in with their bank statements, or anything like that.

Deputy C.S. Alves:

Can I just clarify ...

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I will check that, but I would like the Deputy to speak to me after, because we need to check that it will not go ...

Deputy C.S. Alves:

Because it is new claims, it is not claims that are already ...

Deputy J.A. Martin:

No, as I say, no new ... massive claims have come in since Friday. Sorry. Friday, 200. We are up to 410 claims. so that was yesterday. I have not got the number today, so my officers are saying process them quick, we have the means, bank account, that is all we need. Do not need to come in. The form is online, the money will be there. So, at the moment, if you get a bit more it does not matter. Things can calm down. There will not be people waiting 6 weeks.

3.5.6 Deputy I. Gardiner:

First of all, to follow Deputy Alves, I would like to let the Minister know there are other claims that have been told to me yesterday personally that it will take to process 6 weeks. So, would the Minister look into this with me as well as with Deputy Alves? Second, at the last sitting the Minister indicated that all people under 5 years residency if they will lose a job they will get support. Yesterday, people called to the helpline and they have been told they are not getting support because they are under 5 years. Can the Minister state clearly what the situation with under 5 years residency is on the Island and when it will be in writing?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

The support I said that we would waive last time in the Assembly was for contributions and if someone was sick they would be entitled to their £222 a week. Whether they are here 3 months they have not paid 6 months' worth of contributions, that was the question I had and that is what I said. As I have said, the income support scheme is for over 5 years. We are looking at that now and people are ... as I said, we will try and if they want to leave the Island they can get off the Island. We need to help them as much as we can with the scheme that keeps them in their accommodation and food.

3.5.7 Deputy I. Gardiner:

It is clear that now anybody who is under 5 years and lost their job because of coronavirus during the last week or so or going to lose a job, what current support, if they do not have job, if they do not have money to buy their food and to pay for their accommodation, they need to do?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

We are hoping that they will not lose their job, because their employer will keep them on.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

They have lost.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

If they are self-isolating, that they think they are sick, they are entitled to sick money. I know the Deputy wants me to tell her an answer and I am telling her the answer. We are working on this one. That is all I can tell her.