

2021.09.14

5 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding households in relative low income (OQ.192/2021)

Further to the response to Written Question 145/2021, will the Chief Minister agree to publish such data as is available through Statistics Jersey on households living in relative low income based on the 500 household responses received prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, by the end of quarter one 2022; and if not, why not?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (The Chief Minister):

Before giving my answer, I remind the Deputy of the final paragraph in my answer to Written Question 145/2021. I am equally keen as he is to receive the data; let us be really clear there. However, I cannot answer his question with a firm yes, the reason being, as has previously been explained in that written question: "Statistics Jersey is an apolitical body formally constituted under the Statistics and Census (Jersey) Law 2018. Under Article 7(2) of this law the Chief Minister must not influence any decision of the chief statistician in the exercise of his or her responsibilities under Article 3(1). Article 3(1) of the law includes (g) the form, timing and methods of dissemination of statistics compiled by Statistics Jersey." I am therefore unable to commit to Statistics Jersey publishing such data to the deadline requested because that is solely the decision of the chief statistician. However, having consulted with the chief statistician, I can confirm that Statistics Jersey are using their best endeavours to ensure that the data is finally analysed and published during quarter one 2022. But, as I say, unfortunately I cannot commit because it is not in my gift but we are very, very keen it does happen.

8.5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

It is quite worrying because I believe the timescale for publishing the new Government Plan is going to be far tighter than end of quarter one 2022. How is the Chief Minister going to assess whether he has been successful in reducing income inequality unless he uses some other forms than the information and data that will be available by the end of quarter one 2022? What will he base his first drafts of the Government Plan on?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I do apologise, I did not get the very last sentence: on what basis would I ...?

The Bailiff:

On what basis would you base any plan on presumably because you would need data in order to do so, is that a fair characterisation, Deputy?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Yes, indeed. He is supposed to be producing a Government Plan sometime this year, not by the end of March 2022, so what is he going to base his assessment of his policy so far on?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I think you will find that the Government Plan is due to be published in the next very few weeks and obviously debated towards the end of the year. To be honest, I have a degree of sympathy for the Deputy, i.e., we would all like to see the data for the survey produced so that we can have a better analysis. As I said, he and I share exactly the same objective there. What it will mean is that alternatively we will have to revert to the, if you like, existing data that is there which lies in various

reports and publications that are produced, including the information that comes out of Social Security.

8.5.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Just to follow up on those questions. If there is not the data to assess where we have come, how is the Chief Minister, can I ask, going to address future plans in this Government Plan to address the Common Strategic Policy of reducing income inequality if there is no data to tell the Minister what it is? How is that planning process happening? Or is reducing income inequality no longer a Common Strategic Policy?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The policy firstly remains unchanged; that was approved obviously by this Assembly. In terms of looking ahead for future plans and for the next C.S.P. (Common Strategic Policy) that the next Government of whatever nature will put together, I am absolutely assured by the chief statistician that far better data will be available on time for the then Council of Ministers to be putting that data together, bearing in mind, as I said, I really emphasise my frustration as well because this was commenced in 2019 and it has been hugely impacted by a combination of events, but not least COVID. But all that means is we are then with the, as I said earlier, other existing data that we have within, if you like, the government systems, which is obviously information that will come out of Social Security and other areas which we can then give some indication as to where we are and how well we have achieved or not on addressing income inequality. I do make the point, and I have addressed that in previous answers, that measures have been taken at a variety of times during the course of the last few years to assist Islanders. As I said, one was the access to G.P.s, which was announced by the Minister for Social Security and implemented just before Christmas, and has assisted around 10,000 Islanders.

8.5.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Chief Minister what actions he sees will be pertinent in the Government Plan, given the lack of data, to see where we are and whether we have addressed income inequality that he would like to see? I thank him for pointing to Deputy Southern's proposition on reducing G.P. fees; I am glad that it was supported. But what actions would the Minister like to see in the Government Plan to address income inequality even with a lack of data?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

On the basis of the Government Plan that is going to be published in the next few weeks, I shall allow the Deputy to find out at the same time as everybody else.

8.5.4 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

What advice, if any, has the Chief Minister and his Government received in the absence of Statistics Jersey being able to present this information now about the numbers of people in Jersey living in relative low income? Has he received advice to tell him that the numbers are going down or going up or any advice at all?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Specifically myself I have not received direct advice in the nature of the question that the Senator has asked. I make the point, as I said previously, we have been addressing a number of actions which are designed to assist Islanders, particularly those at the lower end, not least, the minimum wage has gone up 3 times by great inflation since April 2019, excluding the recent proposition that

has been lodged. There are various other measures, as we know, that have been put in place, particularly during COVID. I do make the point there has been a lot of assistance put in. We cannot demonstrate what the impact has been in terms of the survey that we are all very keen to see but that does mean that the measures we have put in will be having some effect.

[12:15]

8.5.5 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Will the Chief Minister therefore agree that it will be a key measure of his success in this term of office whether that information, when it is published, reveals whether or not income inequality has increased or decreased in his term of office? When the statistics are made available to determine whether income inequality has got better or worse, will he ensure that those statistics are publicised far and wide so that we can measure his success against those?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The difficulty with that comment is we have, and continue to live through, a pandemic, and therefore would not want to essentially prejudice or predicate my responses on something, which has been one of the most extraordinary events on this Island since the Second World War. But, as I said, we should be in no doubt that this Government has sought to assist all Islanders, but particularly those in the low-income areas, and I would hope that will be shown. If it is not, then it is not through lack of will, it means there is still further work to do but let us see what the data says as and when it arrives.

8.5.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In answering that last part of the question, the Chief Minister paints himself into a corner. Let us have a look at what happened in 2019 pre-COVID to those living in low income. Surely he has to at least use this data on the 500 households compared to the normal 1,250 they usually do. It is not the best information but it certainly would paint a picture of what the trend was in 2019 pre-COVID. Can the Chief Minister assure the Assembly that he will return with this data and indicate in a broad-brush sense how things were developing up to 2019 pre-COVID and will he publish this?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

There are 2 corrections I need to make to the Deputy. Number one is, and I accept the frustration by the way, I do not have the power to instruct the chief statistician. I would hope this Assembly would not want me to have that ability, because it is about the independence of that body, but I do not have the power, as identified in the law, to instruct or direct for statistics to be brought out by a particular time; that is very clear. So, this is not of my making in any shape or form and, as I said, I have been equally as keen to get the data as early as we could precisely so if there are extra actions that need to be taken, we could have sight of that. The other point, it is my understanding, is the data started being collected in 2019 and does or did go into 2020. The difficulty at that point when COVID started really having an impact and lockdown came in was the impact on that data then. The issue they are now trying to establish is making sure of the data they have been able to collect and whether it is of an appropriate quality to be able to make appropriate publications for then decisions or judgments to be made. So I think the problem is that I do not know if the end of 2019 will be a sufficient representative period to make the comparisons that the Deputy is stating. As I have said previously, if he would like to have a meeting with the chief statistician I am very happy to arrange it or, alternatively, I am sure the chief statistician would be delighted to directly hear from the Deputy.