

21.03.23

8 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for Social Security on behalf of Deputy C.S. Alves of St. Helier, who was absent through illness, regarding the detection of overpayments made to those people on Income Support (OQ.84/2021):

Will the Minister advise how long it takes, on average, for overpayments made to those on income support to be detected by the department in cases where the detection is not prompted by the claimant informing the department of a change in their circumstance?

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

Thank you, Deputy. I am sorry but it is not possible to provide an average figure for the time taken to detect an overpayment where the income support claimant has not advised the Customer and Local Services Department of their change in circumstances.

3.8.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Is there a possibility of knowing what the range of time is: so the longest time and the shortest time and the consequences of that?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

No, I cannot answer that question. The officers would have to go into every single case and it does not give a timescale of how far you would like to go back. It should be every claimant who gets a letter are asked if any circumstances change they have 14 days to notify the department, otherwise it kicks in a range of possibilities to the claimant itself. I am sorry about that but that is what it is.

3.8.2 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

The Minister will obviously know that the longer it takes for these issues to be discovered, the greater issue it can cause for both the department and the claimant in resolving it. Does she think that anything needs to be done to assist the department in preventing these sorts of mistakes being made or at least discovering when they have been made as early as possible to prevent further issues arising? What sort of things does she think would help the department in reducing this problem?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

There are many ways. I would say the majority of claimants do inform the department as soon as, say, their hours increased or even if they got a job, adult children move out, get work or even stay at home and get work. All these things the majority are very good at. I cannot think of one single thing the department has ... we get anonymous phone calls for different reasons, which will result in people being found out that they have maybe done something wrong or they think they have done something wrong; it will all be looked into. It is always looked into and 9 times out of 10 there is a good reason why, say, somebody else might be staying in the house but if they have not informed us and the reason is not right, it does affect the claim.

3.8.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is it not the case that because we pay income support a month in advance that is automatically when there is a change in circumstances, there is either an overpayment or an underpayment? The Minister must have some record of what those overpayments are and could she reveal them today, especially if there is an overpayment then the staff are directed to arrange repayment as soon as possible?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Yes, the Deputy points out the very good way we pay income support in advance, so nobody has to wait for months for their money or even borrow their own money like Universal Credit. There was a written question, I think from Deputy Higgins, in the last Assembly and the roll-up in the last 5 years was around about £3 million and it happens because people start work. If you are on a claim and you are not working and your circumstances do not change, for the majority of those people nothing changes, their claim is fine; they do not get any overpayments or underpayments.

[11:15]

It is when people are doing part work, part income support and it is about telling us as soon as possible the way they get paid. As I said last time, the majority of people, they get paid an extra £100 last month and they have got £100 from us, they quite willingly pay that £100 back straightaway.

3.8.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is it not the case that the repayments have to be set at a reasonable level and increasingly nowadays it is set not at a reasonable level but at a level to reduce the overpayment as quickly as possible, which can and in some cases does cause some hardship?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

That is a good thing of being a smaller island and we know the clients, we talk to people, we know exactly what some can repay. The minimum is normally £3 a day out of their benefit. Sometimes it can go less than that and that amount has not changed since income support was introduced. Again, I have to emphasise if these have been long payments, some people have got thousands of pounds that they were not entitled to. They have to pay them back, we do look at the circumstances but, again, that money that comes back will help another family.

3.8.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I could, could I get the Minister to address the question, especially around that the emphasis has changed from easy repayment to repayment as quickly as possible? Has that change occurred?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

The Deputy has just made a statement and he made that statement in the original question. I have got no evidence of that and if the Deputy has can he bring it to me and we can look at it?

The Bailiff:

Deputy Ward, you have a final supplementary on behalf of Deputy Alves?

3.8.6 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes. Really to go back to the original question. There are a minority of cases we have been told where the overpayments could be tracked but we do not have statistics on. Can I ask the Minister, because it is a minority it would be a good idea to get some data on that? Just finally, there was also a consequence in her answer about the repayment money of the previous question of £3 million; can the Minister confirm that that money is not lost as it is returned from previous years' payments and that it goes back to the department, or does it go back to central funds?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I did not say it was a minimum of cases that were on an average, I said we cannot tell the average of every case. The money that comes back to a certain point, it comes back into Social Security, but when it is a debt it is the debt to the Treasury Department.