

23.05.23

6 Deputy L.V. Feltham of the Minister for Social Security regarding the Community Cost Bonus (OQ.99/2023)

Will the Minister update the Assembly as to what steps, if any, have been taken to ensure that eligible people are encouraged to apply for the community costs bonus before the application deadline?

Deputy E. Millar (The Minister for Social Security):

I thank the Deputy for her question. As Members will recall, a significant advertising campaign to encourage take up of the community costs bonus was initiated as part of the Council of Ministers mini-Budget last year. I am very pleased to confirm that over 3,800 claims have been approved for the 2022 payments, which was 4 times more than the previous year. An update to the media was issued at the beginning of March, highlighting the mini-budget measures and, again, telling people how they could apply. The most recent communications were issued earlier this month to remind individuals that the 2022 scheme remains open until the end of June 2023. This included social media coverage, a press notice and an article on our Government to ask them to highlight to government employees and encourage them to spread the word to people they knew who may not have claimed. However, the number of new valid claims being received is now very low, with a significant number of duplicate claims being received made by households who have already received the 2022 payment.

3.6.1 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

As the Minister will recall, I did bring forward a successful amendment, which did expand the numbers of people that were eligible for the community costs bonus that would not have been eligible before. Those people are likely to be the least likely people to understand that they could claim. Has the Government undertaken to take any direct contact with the people who may indeed be eligible?

Deputy E. Millar:

I have already shared some of the extensive work that we did. It is difficult to identify sometimes people who may be liable and we need to expect people to come forward. As I say, we have had 4 times as many people claiming this bonus than have done previously. We have asked all States Members as well to remind their constituents that there is ... beyond routine and normal channels, I really think there is little more that Government can do to spread the message about this.

3.6.2 Deputy R.S. Kovacs of St. Saviour:

As Deputy Feltham mentioned, her amendment doubled households eligible now to apply for this bonus. What does the Minister think is the reason behind the continued low application, despite the increased need due to the cost-of-living crisis?

Deputy E. Millar:

I do not know. I really do not know. We have promoted this heavily. It is a very simple application process. As I say, we have worked with Deputy Kovacs, Deputy Porée and Deputy Alves to try and spread the word as much as we can within these communities. I would hope that Reform Jersey, who tell us that they speak to the most disadvantaged people all the time, are sharing the information. We have done very much all that we can and I simply do not know why people have not come forward. We have done everything we can to spread the word. As I say, 4 times more than

previous years, we make big estimates about people who may qualify. Those estimates are over-ambitious. “Over-ambitious” is the wrong word. We need to be cautious in making estimates to ensure that we have funds there to meet claims. I cannot explain why if we have a cost-of-living crisis and if people need this money they have not come forward for it.

3.6.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister have evidence of her success or otherwise in attempting to reach what are called hard-to-reach groups, i.e. those perhaps with English as a second language?

Deputy E. Millar:

I believe all the material is published in different language versions. We have gone through numerous stakeholders, schools, headteachers, Parish magazines, and charity stakeholders. We have asked the forum to help us in circulating that message around. I can only say, again, we have 4 times more applications this year. That in itself is an expression of the success of our efforts. There is very little more I can say.

3.6.4 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Sorry, I am just getting my head together after hearing the Minister for Social Security say “if there is a cost-of-living crisis”. Given that, as the Minister has said, the take up has been lower than expected, will the Minister commit to collaborating with other Ministers and with colleagues within the Income Tax Department to see if there is a way that households that may indeed be eligible, based on their tax payments in previous years, can be contacted directly to be told that they could indeed apply for this particular bonus.

Deputy E. Millar:

I apologise for my slip of my tongue. I was simply trying to emphasise that the Council of Ministers has done a great deal to try to improve and make funds available, through numerous measures, for people who are struggling with the acknowledged cost-of-living crisis. Nobody has any doubt of that. It is difficult to draw information from tax systems. The Comptroller of Tax receives information for the purposes of assessing tax and it is difficult, I believe, for other parts of Government to access that information for purposes other than the purpose for which it is gathered. That is a consequence of our data protection and privacy laws. I can only emphasise, we have done everything we can to reach people who are entitled to this money. It is not a difficult process. They can apply online. They can apply in writing. They can drop into La Motte Street. They can phone. We have numerous channels for people to claim this benefit. We have done everything we can to extend awareness of it.