

23.02.28

2 Deputy L.V. Feltham of the Minister for Social Security regarding the evaluation of existing benefit areas (OQ.30/2023)

Will the Minister provide an update regarding the high-level evaluation of existing benefit areas, as outlined in action MSS P5.1 of her Ministerial delivery plan?

Deputy E. Millar of St. John, St. Lawrence and Trinity (The Minister for Social Security):

I thank the Deputy for her question. I refer Members to the answer to Written Question 75, which asked broadly the same thing. The high-level review across benefit areas is underway. The outcome of the review will be a work plan in respect of individual areas to develop in more detail during 2023 and 2024. I would say, however, that certain elements of that review will be subject of a discussion at my Ministerial meeting later this week, and there are areas in which I would like to see early progress. I am not in a position to provide further details today but expect to be able to do so in the very near future.

3.2.1 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

I would like to refer the Minister to page 7 of her delivery plan, which states that the action referred to would be undertaken by 28th February 2023. If I am not mistake that is today. I would like to ask the Minister why that action has not been completed as yet?

Deputy E. Millar:

With respect, I did not say the action had not been completed. The review itself is very well underway and, as I say, I will be meeting officers this week and we will also be consulting with Ministerial colleagues, and we will provide further details in the near future. While we can do a review, and the review is underway, the actual outcome of that review and progressing and making decisions depend on a number of factors, some of which will require consultation with Ministerial colleagues and it would also be unwise to make any decisions regarding benefits until we have seen actuarial reviews of the funds, which would be due at the end of quarter one. I will say the draft at the end of quarter one and I hope to be able to publish that early in quarter 2, as we discussed at the last sitting. But I can assure the Deputy that work is very much underway. My team are very clear that this is a priority for me and that we will be trying to make changes in developments as soon as we possibly can.

3.2.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister have any specific changes to qualification levels for short-term and long-term incapacity in her high-level review?

Deputy E. Millar:

The question of incapacity benefits is already subject of a separate and very far-reaching project, which I think we have discussed in the past. Short-term incapacity and long-term incapacity are their own project, if you like, and very detailed work is continuing on those benefits right now.

3.2.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Given that the Minister has just missed a deadline - her own self-imposed deadline - can we expect to see some of the meat on the bone in terms of long-term and short-term incapacity by the end of this month?

Deputy E. Millar:

Firstly, I do not agree that I have missed a self-imposed deadline. The deadline was to try to do an initial high-level review of benefits to see where obvious changes need to be made and to then progress those changes over the course of the year. I am sorry if that is not clear from the plan. Again, as I said, the whole question of incapacity is a huge piece of work. We have discussed it previously. That work is ongoing. It will address both short-term incapacity. For example, we are trying to bring in a new structure to incapacity, which does allow people to work if they are able to do so and does not require them to sit at home and not be able to work or volunteer or do anything that might otherwise be beneficial for their health. So the incapacity review is very much underway and on track. But I do not immediately have in front of me what the timeline for that piece of work is.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will she return to the House with that timeline please? Can we ask that?

The Bailiff:

No, that is a supplemental to the supplemental.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

It is clarification, Sir.

The Bailiff:

You do not get points of clarification in question time either, Deputy Southern, sorry.

3.2.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Does the high-level evaluation include areas such as overpayments and the repayment of and the level of offset? Genuine question because I do not know how high the level goes.

Deputy E. Millar:

The review that I asked the officers to conduct was to look at our benefit landscape as a whole, to see are there known issues, are there known problems, are there known gaps, what works well, what does not work well and what we can change. The question of offset, I think the Deputy means what I have been referring to as disregard, that is very much part of the review. The disregards are something that I have asked to be considered as a priority, particularly in relation to pensions. The question of overpayments is a separate policy matter and does not specifically form part of the review, although I am aware that it is an issue in some quarters.

3.2.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I think that builds on the question that has just been asked. Could the Minister just be clear to the Assembly what direction she has given to those undertaking this review for the kinds of outcomes she would want to achieve by the actions that the review will no doubt recommend to her.

Deputy E. Millar:

I do not think I have given direction as to the outcome. What I have said is that I would like to have an understanding of our benefit framework because I know there are multiple benefits. When I looked at the Social Security Law I was staggered by the number of underlying pieces of legislation under the Social Security Law. The review is really to look at our benefit framework as a whole and to see whether it is still fit for purpose or the benefits that are no longer needed potentially, other benefits that can be improved, and I think until we have looked at what the benefits are, and it is trying to look at known issues, known gaps and how we can make improvements but until really ... I am particularly conscious of the need to deal with pensioner benefits but beyond that I do not have a fixed view. It will very much depend on the outcome of the review.

3.2.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I think what the Minister has just described sounds more like an assessment than a review if it is simply to see what the system is like now rather than to review where specific things could be improved. Can she confirm whether or not she has given direction to those undertaking the review, that she has specific aims she would like to achieve following that review, which could be things, for example, like how do we make the system more user friendly, how do we prevent so many overpayments being issued and whether there are particular benefits that need to be made more generous? Have any of those kinds of things been things that she has posed to those undertaking the review, to instruct them to come up with actual points to assist her after that?

Deputy E. Millar:

I think I have covered some of that. The purpose of the review or the assessment, and I do not think there is any point in arguing over terminology, we are trying to look at our current benefits to look for gaps, to look for areas where we know there are shortfalls, to look at the areas where people perhaps just fall outside. There may be benefits where we feel we need to enhance, for example, particularly we have had some questions recently about optical care for children in early years. We will look at benefits that are available to children. Optician's benefits, particularly again the Pension Plus benefits. There are a number of pensioners who fall outside Pension Plus. So I particularly would like to look at that. The question of overpayments, the basic policy that someone should not be allowed to keep money to which they are not entitled I think is not unfair. It is reasonable. I agree we are doing a huge amount. It is an operational matter. The department are doing a huge amount to try to increase and improve flows. We are trying - I know it does not suit everybody - but we are trying to encourage those who can to provide information online, and change of circumstances online can be dealt with more quickly, and that we reduce the risk of overpayments arising. One of the main reasons we have overpayment - I am conscious I am probably going over my time - is that we do pay benefits in advance and not in arrears, and that is why we do sometimes have overpayments arising. But the department is very aware of that and we are doing everything we can to try and reduce the level of overpayments and we do manage those as sympathetically as we can.

3.2.7 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Page 7 of the Minister's delivery plan quite clearly says that it was the intention to develop a work plan for the remainder of 2023 based on the outcome of the high-level review by 28th February 2023. The Minister has stated that there is not a work plan in place. Can she give us assurance about when that work plan will be in place and that she will indeed publish it when she has it ready, and can she also detail how can she be assured that she will be in a position to propose the right changes in order to secure funding in the next Government Plan, if it is required by her portfolio?

Deputy E. Millar:

If funding is required I would expect we will be able to do that within good time for the Government Plan. Funding depends very much on ... funding for benefits does not necessarily come from Government, it comes through social security contributions. We cannot, as I have already said, make decisions. It would be unrealistic and unwise to make decisions about increasing contributory benefits until we have seen the actuarial reviews, which will take us forward some considerable time. I apologise if the 28th February deadline, if anybody considers that as being missed, that is possibly my own optimism and lack of reality in terms of how much can be done. But I can only assure the House again that this work is very much underway, it is absolutely a priority. My team aware of that, and that we will be progressing as soon as we can.