

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
BY THE DEPUTY OF ST. JOHN
ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 31ST OCTOBER 2017**

Question

Given that the Income Support system places the onus upon the individual to advise Social Security of every single change in circumstance, could the Minister advise what obligation the Department has to ensure timely changes of these details so that overpayments do not reach a substantial sum?

Answer

Income Support benefit is always paid in advance, on either a weekly or four-weekly basis. Any change of circumstance that occurs after a payment has been made and during the period paid for, which affects the value of the claim rate, will result in the need for a payment adjustment in respect of the over or under payment. The alternative would be to provide payments in arrears which could cause hardship to vulnerable clients.

The most common reason for an adjustment (an over or under payment) is a change in employment/earnings. This could either increase or decrease the level of Income Support payment. In some cases, all the details of the change will be known in advance and the claim can be amended to pay at the correct rate for a future date. However, there is often a short delay before the claimant provides all the details to the Social Security Department, this is the responsibility of a claimant when accessing Income Support. When this change is processed, an adjustment will be included to take account of the underpayment or overpayment during this time.

To improve accessibility for customers and improve the speed of changes being actioned, the Social Security Department has introduced several initiatives to improve the service provided for customers in this situation and to minimise the size of any overpayment that does occur.

Process improvements have enhanced the customer experience and the speed at which changes can be actioned. The processing of many changes can now be completed as soon as they are received. The Income Support team now has an increase in staff capacity in customer facing areas with changes of circumstances being completed at the front desk, whenever possible.

The benefit of this method is that changes are completed with the customer present, the changes in rate can be explained in full to the customer and written confirmation is handed to the customer regarding their change of circumstance. This is helping customers understand the impact changes can make on claims.

The introduction of an online form for Income Support is also enabling customers to complete change of circumstances online at a time convenient to them, reducing the time taken to communicate and action a change of circumstance.

Further improvements in processing between Back to Work and Income Support have also been completed so that a customer starting work has their claim processed with the minimum of delay.

The Department has also introduced an assisted digital area within the main reception. Two computers are available for customers to use with help available from the Customer Service Centre staff as needed. This was set up to help customers who do not have access to their own PC or need support completing forms or changes to claims.

All Social Security applications forms and customer letters detail the terms and conditions regarding Income Support and the responsibility of claimants to notify the department regarding changes to circumstances.