

2.5 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding problems relating to the issue of benefit cheques which occurred over the recent bank holiday:

Will the Minister inform Members whether any problems occurred in the issue of benefits cheques over the recent Bank Holiday and if so to what extent were recipients of benefits affected?

Senator P.F. Routier (The Minister for Social Security):

All benefit cheques due on Good Friday, 21st March and Easter Monday, 24th March, were despatched by the department on the previous Wednesday, 19th March. All B.A.C.S. (Bank Automated Clearing System) payments in respect of Good Friday, 21st March and Easter Monday, 24th March were processed in sufficient time to clear claimants' bank accounts on Thursday, 20th March. Therefore no problems occurred through the issue of benefit payments by cheque or BACS in respect of the recent Bank Holiday. Sir, I could just stop there because I have answered the question, but I would just like to expand a little further. In addition to processing payments due in the days leading up to Easter and processing payments in advance in respect of Good Friday and Easter Monday, in the days leading up Thursday, 20th March, the department processed payments due on Tuesday, 25th and Wednesday, 26th March. It is obviously a weekly activity to process payments in respect of the first 2 working days of the following week in the previous working week. Of the 22,259 payments processed in the 4 days, Monday, 17th to Thursday, 20th March, 97 per cent were processed as scheduled. However one BACS payment in respect of Tuesday, 25th March, which was not the Bank Holiday, failed to complete. But the payments arrived in claimants' bank accounts the following day. These BACS payments would still have cleared bank accounts earlier than the cheque payments would have been in respect of the same day. However, the department is rightly proud of its usual 100 per cent record in transacting payments on their due dates and I have been asked to apologise on its behalf to customers who may have been affected by this delay as it knows how important it is to those clients to have those payments made at the right time. I wish to reassure customers that such a delay is a very rare occurrence but the department has nevertheless introduced further checks to minimise even further the chances that it could be repeated.

2.5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister aware that now that he is responsible, not only for the payment of Social Security cheques, but for the replacement of what was the safety net of welfare previously - and given that many of the recipients of benefits have extreme problems budgeting for a full week - any delay in the issuing of cheques may lead, in many cases, to hardship. What arrangements does he have in place to ensure that any case of hardship is immediately alleviated as it might have been previously by a visit down to the Welfare Department?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Of those people that had a delayed payment, 2 people contacted the department and we paid them cash immediately. Those were the only 2 people who asked for immediate support and we are able to do that. There were some people who phoned and accepted that a day's delay was not a problem for them and we apologised to them and they accepted that apology. As I say, the people, if they are in any desperate need, know we have a system of paying cash and they know we do that immediately.

2.5.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may, Sir? I refer to the actual case; the Minister has just said one of the people was given a cash payment immediately. Can I use her words? "The officer refused me a cash payment. I refused to leave and after 2 hours the supervisor's attitude changed and she gave me the cash I was owed." The person had to sit there for 2 hours while the supervisor insisted that she was going to generate a cheque. Can the Minister explain that behaviour?

Senator P.F. Routier:

The department deals with many people coming in asking for money and we need to deal with them and make sure we are dealing with them fairly. If someone has had to wait 2 hours there were obviously some checks that needed to be made. I would support the department ensuring that they do give money to the right people and at the right amount. So if someone has had to wait 2 hours for that to happen, well that may be the case but at least they have not had to wait another day.

2.5.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

May I push the Minister? In general terms, if at any time cheques are delayed from Social Security, what is his general broadcast advice that recipients who find themselves in difficulty should do in order to alleviate any hardship that may be caused by delay? Because while the Minister may have a target of 100 per cent efficiency, he must surely accept that from time to time, for reasons beyond his control, cheques will be late and at the moment there is no safety net.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I do not accept the point that there is no safety net. There is a safety net. People can come into the department as has been demonstrated by the 2 people who came into the department out of 22,000 people. The Deputy has had one person come to him and I apologise for that: the department apologises for those 2 errors. There is a system in place for people to come into the department and to receive cash when needed.