

21.01.19

12 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for Social Security regarding free phone calls to Social Security helpline (OQ.10/2021):

Given that pay-as-you-go mobile phone users can pay up to 39 pence a minute when held in a queue for Social Security or, indeed, the COVID-19 helplines, would the Minister advise whether there is any facility for members of the public to make these calls for free and, if not, will the Minister commit to enabling this as a matter of urgency?

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

I can reassure the Deputy that all calls to Customer and Local Services are answered very quickly. In fact, I have been trying it this morning and it does not even ring. The average is a few seconds but I do understand what the Deputy is saying. Income Support is the first option, so again should not wait too long. If somebody is waiting more than 2 minutes, and I have tried this many times to wait that long and I cannot, an automatic request for your number and a ring back will kick in. So, I am monitoring this. Nothing is free in this world. I have been told every double 4 number will cost approximately £40,000 each so we are looking at other options to get people to contact the department. But I am monitoring this.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

A supplementary, please, Sir?

The Bailiff:

Yes. Just to remind Members, Members can ask supplementary questions but there will not be supplementaries to the supplementaries.

10.12.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

The line is answered quickly, but then you are put into a queue and 2 minutes of that time is quite expensive for callers, particularly those on the lowest incomes. The notion that nothing is free I understand but when people are on pay-as-you-go they are forced to pay extra. Seeing as we are holders in Jersey Telecom, would it not be possible to set up a free phonenumber as part of the service, particularly as we are in the COVID emergency at the moment?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I would say the Deputy could be a mind reader. I have had my D.G. (director general) literally speaking to Telecom this morning because we were quite astounded by the 39p per minute from a mobile to a landline call, and they are being pretty receptive. So, it is really being looked into. We want to do what we can. As I say, there are 6 options on the 4444 number, many for businesses advertising jobs and everything. So it has to be appreciated and, again, there is the COVID pretty well answered early, but again when the vaccinations went out it did go up to about 5 minutes. So it is not acceptable if people are on the pay-as-you-go. We are working, we are talking to Telecom, and we are keeping all the options open. I hope that reassures the Deputy. It is a lot of money for somebody on a low income pay-as-you-go phone.

10.12.2 Senator K.L. Moore:

Has the Minister reminded Jersey Telecom that they are a States-owned entity, therefore, have a primary purpose, which is to serve the public?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I am sure that ... I was not on the phone to Telecom this morning. This has come about by this question and stating the amount of money. Yes, I know they put money back in and if it is anybody who can help us provide something, it will be firstly Telecom because of the buy-in that we have to Jersey Telecom. Again, it will not help people who do not have ... because sometimes if it is not the cheapest pay-as-you-go, they will go to the other providers, so we need to make this fair and we need to make the solution fit for the problem.

10.12.3 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Picking up on that last element of the Minister's answer, while the director general may be speaking to Jersey Telecom, I just want her to confirm that she is aware there are more than one mobile provider in the Island and, therefore, if she wanted to reduce the costs it is likely to be the case that she will have to speak to all mobile providers in the Island.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Well, I was answering the question from Senator Moore because of the stake we have in Jersey Telecom, absolutely, and I said there may be people go for the other providers because they think it is cheaper. It is the delivery, and the talks have just started, but we have been monitoring do we need a free phonenumber and what would be on it. Would it just be Income Support? Would it be business, the co-funded payroll? Would it be advertising jobs for the local market? So there are all things that we are monitoring, Deputy, and we are aware that now this has been brought to my attention of how much it is, how we can solve this problem.

10.12.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I am pleased to hear that the Minister is looking into this. I am slightly disappointed that she was not aware of those charges. I would ask her to really act on this as a matter of urgency as it came from a constituent. Particularly during this time of COVID emergency perhaps we can ask the mobile phone providers to take away this charge. I think it would be really beneficial.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I really cannot add any more. I have gone just out of protest to pay-as-you-go myself when my contract has run out just to check that I can monitor my spend. I do know that it is more expensive. Again, it is making sure we get ... we are looking at web chats. We are looking at what can be done. Obviously, again, that would not be ideal for pay-as-you-go phone users, but it is being looked at and I will keep the Deputy up to date on that.