WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR HOUSING
BY DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER

ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 15th JANUARY 2008

Question

The KPMG benchmarking report of February 2004 showed the Housing Department in the lowest quartile at 4.98% against a comparative median figure of 2.1% for percentage of arrears against total rent charges. What progress has the Minister made in improving this figure?

Answer

Since 2005 significant work has gone into tackling the level of rent arrears. Statistics are recorded on a regular basis, most recently at the end of December 2007. At that time the level of rental arrears had reduced to 3% of gross rental income.

Question

Does the Minister have any figures to indicate the length of time taken for staff to assess rent abatement/rebate applications? What period of time for this process appears in tenants' rental agreements, and if it does not, why not?

Answer

Historically rent abatement applications have taken on average approximately 28 days to process. This is a reasonable period and compares favourably with published figures on average times taken in the UK which show that in 2006, those local authorities in the top quartile took on average 26.4 days to process housing benefit claims. As Members are already fully aware, the Housing Department's Rent Abatement Scheme is to be replaced by the Social Security Department's Income Support Scheme on 28th January 2008. There has been a necessary period of transition leading up to Income Support and that has brought with it a considerable amount of extra administrative work which has caused a temporary increase in assessment times for a short period of time. Applications have and will be dealt with as quickly as possible and within the resource capabilities of the Housing Subsidy staff at the Social Security Department.

In answer to the second part of the question; No, this process does not form part of the tenancy agreement, nor should it as not all tenants seek or require a rental subsidy. The tenancy agreement does make it clear that tenants may apply for a subsidy if they wish, however, it does not compel them to do so.

Question

Will the Minister confirm that arrears due to processing delays are treated similarly, whether caused by the tenant or the department, and indicate what proportion of the arrears total is due to the time taken by the department in processing claims? Will the Minister inform members what measures he will put in place to improve times and will he agree to set benchmark targets for this process?

Answer

Yes, arrears that arise as a result of delays in processing rent abatement applications are dealt with in the same manner as other rent arrears. It should be pointed out that an applicant will have enjoyed the benefit of any excess subsidy paid during the period and any overpayments that are accrued as a result must be repaid. As with any other arrears , the Housing Department only asks that tenants acknowledge the existence of the debt and work with Officers to repay it by adhering to a reasonable repayment schedule which will be agreed with the tenant having due regard to their circumstances and ability to pay.

It is not possible to differentiate between subsidy backdates created by administrative delays within the Department and those delays caused by applicants not supplying the information required for the Department to carryout an assessment expediently. I would reiterate that applications have and will be dealt with as quickly as possible and within the resource capabilities of the Housing Subsidy staff at the Social Security Department.

It is not proposed at this stage to make any changes aimed at reducing processing times or to set benchmarking targets as suggested due to the fact that the Income Support Scheme will replace the rent abatement scheme on 28th January 2008. The Housing Department will work closely with their colleagues at Social Security to ensure that all applications for Income Support from tenants are processed as quickly as possible.