

3.8 Deputy S. Pitman of the Minister for Social Security regarding alleged administrative problems within his Department:

Will the Minister advise whether there have been longstanding problems in his department concerning the loss of documents, data being mislaid and conflicting information given out to the public from different members of staff and, if so, what measures will he be implementing to resolve the situation?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley (The Minister for Social Security):

I have been the Minister for just under 2 months and during that time, have spent many hours in the department, including a full day observing the reception, income support and work zone areas to understand how clients are dealt with. I have seen no evidence at all of the issues that the Deputy refers to in her question. My department deals with an enormous number of customers and individual claims. An average of 900 customers visit the department each day with a further 400 contacts by telephone. Tens of thousands of claims are processed each year. In any operation of this size, it is inevitable that individual documents will occasionally be misplaced despite having rigorous procedures in place. I can also reassure Members that the great majority of benefits administered by my department are subject to independent appeals to a formally constituted tribunal. If the problems suggested by the Deputy did exist, disgruntled claimants would be challenging the department through the independent process. In reality, in 2011, a total of 11 cases were considered by an independent tribunal panel with only one of those being decided against the department.

3.8.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

Does the Minister not agree or can he not understand that many people receiving benefits will not complain to the department for fear that they may lose some of their benefit? With regard to loss of records, *et cetera*, which was something I brought several times to the previous Minister who did absolutely nothing about it, he asked for evidence and I provided him with 3 cases and I have also experienced it myself, and I can provide that information to him. Recently, as he is aware, I brought a case to him in which the previous Minister went back on his word. The department was disputing phone records and the department said that they had only received one phone record and the client, who lost her teeth through epilepsy and cancer treatment, is still waiting for payment from the department of the initial treatment. That was back in January last year. She came up with 9 records from Jersey Telecom. Does that not concern the department that things are going wrong?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Deputy asserted that people would be frightened to complain because they might lose their benefits. I think that is an incorrect statement to make and certainly while I am Minister for Social Security, if anybody has a complaint, I am quite prepared to look into complaints and to take it up with officers, so I do hope that the message goes out that people should not be frightened to complain if they have due cause and I will look into those complaints. With reference to the particular case that the Deputy refers to, it is impossible for me to go into details about an individual. However, I would say that this particular claim is still open, the Deputy is well aware of that, and that there are some minor matters really that need to be finalised before we can settle that particular claim. The matter of telephone calls, when we looked at the list provided, some of the calls were probably while the person was on hold waiting to be put through to an officer.

[10:45]

The Deputy Bailiff:

Can I say from the Chair that I have a rough and ready rule of questions that we have something like 7, 8, 9 minutes per question. We have spent 5 minutes on 2 questions so far so there are, I think, 5 Members wishing to ask questions. Can they please be succinct?

3.8.2 Deputy T.A. Vallois:

I have been advised by a member of staff at Social Security that they are regularly losing paperwork. Does the Minister not agree that an appropriate organisational system is not difficult to implement as he has worked in finance, as have I, in the past where dealing with paperwork is normal trend? Is this not, in fact, just poor customer service and poor management?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I am disappointed to hear that a member of staff has remarked to the Deputy that there is a problem. I certainly was aware when I took office that this was an issue that a number of States Members had brought to my attention and for the very reason that I sat in the areas that I described in my answer to the first question. If it becomes a persistent issue, I will do further research. I am used to running offices and I am aware of procedures that can streamline processes.

3.8.3 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I appreciate that the Minister has only inherited his department recently but I too have been contacted by a member of staff who acknowledges this is a problem. Does he not concede that it is helping no one to keep up this denial? It is a real problem. I have sat in there myself, been told different information from different people. Now, there are some good staff down there and it is no disrespect to any of them but something is severely wrong in that department. Will the Minister promise that he will take it on board?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I cannot share the Deputy's view that there is something seriously wrong. I think the department is dealing with an enormous number of claims. It is one of the only departments of the States that handles massive amounts of paper and I think it is wrong to be over-critical, but I am aware that these are issues that Members are concerned about and I will look into it further.

3.8.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister has just committed himself to a very busy time, I think, if he wants to look into complaints about Social Security. Is the Minister not aware that, in fact, any delay for many of the clients who are seeking benefit from the department means that these people are placed in severe financial distress often? When he talks about referring complaints to an independent tribunal, will he remind Members when that tribunal was fully staffed last and how long it took in the last couple of years to achieve a tribunal hearing because the answer, I believe, is months and that sort of delay is unacceptable on any claim.

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The Deputy is straying into areas that I do not know about. I cannot talk about the tribunal because I have not had any experience of that but there is a process for redetermination of claims, which I

am sure the Deputy is aware of, where another officer will look at a disputed claim and that is used frequently.

Deputy M. Tadier:

I will not ask my question. I think it has been covered sufficiently.

3.8.5 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister not acknowledge, notwithstanding the enormous pressure that staff are under, that there is an issue with privacy in the office? Would he not also acknowledge that because of the need, it appears, for confidentiality to be respected with staff, cases are often dealt with by a series of different staff via phone calls. Is there any chance that a case officer system could be instituted in order to remove some of the inconsistency that inevitably arises?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I suspect today the States are trying to micromanage the Social Security Department but the issue of privacy is one that I have taken up since I have been Minister. We are looking at further soundproofing of the screens in the work zone and in the income support zone. We are also looking at providing further interview rooms on the ground floor, so certainly privacy. Some Members may have noticed that staff in some areas are now wearing name tags so that people know who they are dealing with, so I think there are a lot of things going on but I do not really want to spend today micromanaging my department.

3.8.6 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

As we are all aware, many of the people who are going to Social Security are the most vulnerable and many people are living hand to mouth waiting from one payment to the next and are really suffering. I have a concern, I have had concerns with lost paperwork and reports of that, it is an issue. Whether he thinks he is being told or not by his department, it is genuinely an issue but also an issue is the failure to send out cheques on time. People are waiting for the next cheque so they can go and get their food ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, that does not arise out of the question.

3.8.7 Deputy S. Pitman:

I think the Minister has no idea of the reality. I think he needs a reality check when he says that members of the public will report loss of documents, records, *et cetera*, to the department and himself, and I hope he realises or will realise after this session that sitting at the desks and sitting in the department with members of staff, this is not going to happen. He is the Minister and I hope he will listen to States Members who have a vast experience and knowledge of the department and take on board what they have said in this Chamber because vulnerable people are losing out on entitlements. He said that he is going to look at this further and I am very happy to work with him on this. Will he consider retraining staff and also looking at disciplinary issues when he has looked into this issue and finds that it is a big issue for the department?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The inference that I should be involved in disciplinary procedures for staff, of course, is not my responsibility at all. That is the responsibility of the Chief Officer. I am quite prepared to talk and meet and I have already offered such a meeting with the Deputy, which unfortunately did not take place, to discuss the issues that she raises and other Deputies have raised today, but I would stress that I have confidence in the department. I think we are dealing with an enormous volume of claims at the moment and I hope people will respect that that is the issue.