

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
BY DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER**

ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 12th FEBRUARY 2008

Will the Minister inform members:

Question

1. How many applicants for Income Support visited the department to seek advice and assistance during the week commencing 28th January 2008?

Answer

During the week commencing 28th January 2008 the Department received many enquiries regarding Income Support. I cannot provide the Deputy with the exact figures as to how many enquiries were received as staff were utilised fully to meet the needs of customers rather than to keep statistics. However, I can advise that during January 2008 the Department received, on average 1039 'walk in' customers per day across all service areas. For the same period last year the average daily figure was 1010.

Question

2. Can he confirm that the queue was some 20-strong for long periods of the week?

Answer

At times the Department has served queues of customers with Income Support enquiries. However, queues were rarely 20 strong as staff monitored the situation and deployed resources to manage peak demand, as is normal practice in the Department.

Question

3. How many enquiries did the department receive by phone during the same period?

Answer

The Deputy may not be aware that the telephone number provided on Income Support literature differs from the Social Security Call Centre number normally used by our customers. The reason for this is that Income Support enquiries, on average, take longer to resolve than other enquiries and the department would not wish for the Call Centre to be bottle necked and our other customers to experience difficulties in contacting us. When customers call the dedicated Income Support telephone number, their call goes directly to the Income Support Section to be answered by an Advisor. Whilst this deals more effectively with customer enquiries it does mean that statistical data on Income Support enquiries is not available as it would have been if dealt with by the Call Centre.

Question

4. Will he inform members how many of these enquiries concerned:
- wrong assessments;
 - incorrect payments (either by the sum paid or wrong method a payment);
 - missing payments;
 - requests for special payments (from citizen's fund);
 - new applicants.

Answer

The Department does not keep all statistics in the format requested by the Deputy, as staff have been utilising resources to meet customer needs, rather than keeping precise statistics. However, I can advise that the Department has received very few complaints about incorrect assessments. In the vast majority of cases involving people complaining about the wrong rate of benefit it is because the Department has been supplied incorrect data from which to rate the claim.

The Deputy will be aware that prior to the 'go live' of Income Support all customers who had returned their application form were written to and asked which method of payment they preferred. The Department has made payments in accordance with customer's instructions and where people have not informed the Department of their preference, the default has been for cheques to be issued.

During the first week of operation, of the 8,245 claims lodged, only eight people reported that they had not received payment. Where it was identified that immediate need for support was present an immediate cash payment was made.

During the first week of Income Support, six requests for special payments were made and forty new applications received.

Question

5. Can he state whether the 26-page IS application form is still in use, when he gave members repeated assurances that, following the changeover, this would be replaced by a user-friendly computer system?

Answer

There are a small number of households who have not yet made an application for Income Support, despite receiving several letters from the Department. If these claimants approach the Department before the end of February they will be asked to complete the transitional form, which collects information about the benefits that have been replaced by Income Support.

Any claimant seeking Income Support as a matter of emergency is given a printed form to take away and complete and a list of proofs that are needed. The claimant is given an interview for later that day or the next day and an adviser then interviews the claimant, works through the application with them, checks the proofs, and is able to make an emergency payment where appropriate.

Other new claimants who are not in need of emergency support are being provided with a form so that they have notice of the information required of them and so that they can collect the proofs that are needed prior to an interview. These claimants are then being interviewed within 10 working days. If the Income Support claim is successful, the benefit payment is backdated to the original date of application.

As expected and planned for, the first few weeks are proving busy and the use of the familiar form as part of the interview process, rather than completing the full application electronically, is reducing client waiting time. Clients do not, however, have to complete the application form themselves prior to the interview unless they wish to do so.

Question

6. What proportion of the staff involved had completed their training on the new system by the 28th January 2008 and, if this was less than 100%, would he inform members why this was so?

Answer

All the staff involved with Income Support have been fully trained on the new system. Staff transferring from the Parish of St Helier and the Housing Department, undertook some training before 28th January and are now receiving additional training. Staff training will obviously continue.

Question

7. What proportion of the staff involved had taken the required oath in Royal Court so that they could be fully involved in the process by 28th January 2008, and if this was less than 100%, can the Minister state why, and whether this situation now been resolved?

Answer

All the staff involved with the delivery of Income Support have taken the required Oath in the Royal Court. Staff who transferred from the Parish of St Helier spent their first week in training and took the Oath at the earliest opportunity, on 2nd February.

Question

8. Does the Minister consider that the timescale which required the introduction of IS by 28th January 2008 in advance of the introduction of GST on 1st May 2008, has proved stressful for both staff and recipients?

Answer

No, the timing of the introduction of Income Support is irrelevant; any challenges resulting from the scale of change involved which would have had to be faced whether we made the changes in January 2008 or January 2010. I would remind members that the Department has been working hard towards implementation for many months and has been developing, planning and explaining the system for years.

The Department has now completed the first two full weeks of administering Income Support. This change in benefits system is of a scale that would be impractical in larger jurisdictions. With the full backing of the States, the Department has introduced a coherent, comprehensive, fair benefit system which will help the States to support households who do not have the means to provide for themselves.

Any major change inevitably brings with it a degree of stress and, it is inevitable that there is an element of disruption and confusion at the time of the change. In the first week of Income Support the Department was, as expected, very busy and it is evident that the second week has been settling down. Already, people are getting used to the new procedures and understanding the new system. Staff are becoming more experienced in their new roles and recipients are getting to know and appreciate the advantages of the new improved system. I would like to pay tribute to the staff for their exceptional commitment and professionalism during this major change.