

23.11.28.

8. Deputy L.V. Feltham of the Minister for Treasury and Resources regarding the error rate on tax assessments (OQ.231/2023)

Will the Minister advise whether he has reviewed, or will review, the causes for the error rate on tax assessments and, if not, why not?

Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Mary, St. Ouen and St. Peter (The Minister for Treasury and Resources):

I meet with the Comptroller of Revenue regularly to discuss the operational performance of Revenue Jersey and I will continue to do so. We do review levels of error arising in the tax system every year and I, of course, support Revenue Jersey's compliance programme, which is also published annually.

3.6.1 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Given that answer, is the Minister content with the current operational performance of Revenue Jersey?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

It is easy in this Assembly to criticise officials. I was quite clear when I stood for this position that one of the jobs that needed undertaking was support for Revenue Jersey to improve their customer service and how they were providing that service to Islanders. We are in the middle of that programme. They are making good progress. Members will see from the F.O.I. (Freedom of Information) information that the level of errors in that particular part of the process is reducing, and we continue to make progress to ensure that they are. But, more importantly, that we modernise our processes through things like online filing so that errors are manufactured out of the system before it even gets to the individual taxpayers. It is a work in progress but progress is being made.

3.6.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is good to hear the Minister supporting the staff in the Tax Department. Can I ask the Minister: is he seeing a pattern in a decreasing number of errors? What type of error rate do we have as a percentage, if he has that, or has it levelled off?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As the Deputy will know from the F.O.I., of which there was great publicity recently in the J.E.P. (Jersey Evening Post) ... and I understand that other media outlets are also trying to dig up stories in in the same area. We will see from the F.O.I. that it is reducing but I do not take that for granted. I continue to work with Revenue Jersey to ensure that they do have the support, that they are modernising their processes but, most importantly, as I say, that we are trying to engineer out the possibility of error, whether that is on individual taxpayers filling in their form ... and Members will know that is not as straightforward as we would yet like it to be. So that is reducing error levels but also communication with Islanders to help them understand what allowances they are eligible for and what information they need to provide.

[10:30]

3.6.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Minister to reassure members of the tax paying public that they should not expect to see any major changes as the year comes to the end because the Tax Department is on top of it and that they can be reassured that if they fill in their forms correctly errors will not be made?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

It is a nice little trap that the Deputy would like me to fall into. Of course, he knows there are 2 elements to errors. There could be a missed completion of a tax return and there also can be internal errors within the department of transposition of numbers and all sorts of things, as you would have in any organisation that was dealing with numbers. My priority is 2-fold. One is, as I have said, trying to engineer out the ability for errors when tax returns are being made. Secondly, there is a stream of education and training within the department to make sure that there are not those type of transposition errors or departmental errors as well, which leads to an undermining in the public's mind of Revenue Jersey. They are making progress, they are doing a good job but there is more to do.

3.6.4 Deputy C.S. Alves:

I am extremely supportive of the staff in the department who have always been extremely helpful whenever I have contacted them with constituency issues. Can the Minister outline exactly what tangible things have been put in place since his election to Minister, apart from online filing, which he has mentioned, to facilitate things for the public?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I do not like to be boring in question time because I know there is a great element of theatre, but the reality is that this is quite a boring subject. One of the things that we have done is greying out elements of the return so that Islanders do not put in the pence. What we cannot then do, of course, is account for Islanders who put the pence in the pound boxes, that obviously leads to all sorts of errors. We have done that. We have also done more publicity. I have got some here but we have had complaints about the quality of the television, so I will not hold them up for Islanders to see. But it is an ongoing programme of communication and trying to engineer out in the system. I understand for some Islanders, they are concerned about the E.I.D. (electronic identification) for online filing. That is also something that we have been trying to work across Government on, ironing out that, because once that is done then the online filing is by far and best the way to avoid errors within the system.

3.6.5 Deputy C.S. Alves:

Can the Minister outline if there has been anything done through a more diversity and inclusion lens, for example, making the actual form more accessible, more readable or even changes in language? Has there been any work done around that?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

That is a good question to which I do not have the answer. I do know that I have individuals in the department whose job it is to be mindful of those issues and to think about language. Certainly language is thought of when it comes to communication, whether it is actually thought of because the return is based on the legislation and therefore the language is really driven by the legislation, but it is something that I will take back and see if changes can be made also to the language in the return.

3.6.6 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Given the effect on the individuals involved, through whichever means the assessment may be incorrect and also the possible effect on public finances of incorrect assessments on the anticipated revenue, could the Minister give us assurance that he feels that the department is adequately resourced in order to provide the types of services and the expected level of service that the Assembly and the public might expect. If he does not feel it is adequately resourced, what is he doing to remedy that?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I always work with my officials to ensure that we are seeking to deliver best value for money in the way that the Chief Minister just indicated in her answer some moments ago. Members will be aware that there is a part of the Government Plan to further support Revenue Jersey in providing customer

service and compliance work. I hope that Members will support that. We should not draw from this fact - if we take the F.O.I. question - that government revenues are less than forecast because of this process. That is not the case, that is not how we forecast income into the department and, therefore, it does not affect that forecast. That is driven by other things.