

## **2.9 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Social Security regarding measures in place to deal with enquiries arising from Income Support application forms:**

Following the issue of the 27-page forms IS.01R and IS.01T, what measures, if any, has the Minister put in place to deal with the volume of inquiries with any anxiety caused with concerns about any lack of privacy or with possible inconvenience and distress to disabled applicants who have received these forms?

### **Senator P.F. Routier (The Minister for Social Security):**

The department has a new dedicated section for income support inquiries and the Housing Department section, based at my department, is also dealing with any inquiries as they come in. There are private rooms available for people who want that facility. With regard to people with disabilities who may need assistance with filling in the form, the department can help in several ways and will do all they can to assist to meet people's specific needs.

### **2.9.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

What preliminary measures were put in place in advance in order to cope with some of these issues, in particular the privacy issue? I understand there was a whole queue of people queuing within 3 yards of people being interviewed about their financial affairs. Secondly, what measures to possibly arrange for home visits rather than ask disabled to come in, sometimes not once or twice but 3 times?

### **Senator P.F. Routier:**

It is recognised that the department is busy at various times. There is the facility, as I have said, - and there always has been the facility - of a private room to have a discussion with any claimant. They have been there since the building has been in operation. So, there does not need to be any prior arrangement. That has always been available and anybody who wants a private discussion can have that at any time. With regard to home visits, there are home visits that have been offered to a number of people and they have always been in our plans and that has been something which I think we discussed at the Scrutiny Sub-Panel during the early discussions last year. It has always been our intention, and we have a number of people who we will be visiting in the very near future.

### **2.9.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:**

I am glad the Minister added: "In the very near future." I think he would admit that they are planning to have a full complement of staff but there have been some difficulties. My question is, at the moment there are 2 types of forms and when we talk about going live - and it is all low income with different components. Will the 2,750 who are now having to fill in, between November and April, an updated housing rent or rebate abatement form have to fill in a different form: an IS.01R. If so, will they have to only after the Regulations are passed through this House, and will there only be one form - which I think we were promised - for low income support?

### **Senator P.F. Routier:**

The reason for the 2 forms is that one is being sent out by the Housing Department to their own people who are claiming benefits, and quite rightly they have sent those out themselves. They do include questions about income support. There is the second form which, as the Deputy has identified and is in the written answer I gave earlier this morning, those people will fill in the new form. But when the system goes live a lot of the interaction with claimants will be face-to-face and will be directly on to the computer, discussing with people and filling in the forms through an interview. So, the forms themselves will not exist. There will be a face-to-face interview with people and we will be able to work through, in an orderly fashion, with people as they come into the system.

### **2.9.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

With hindsight, will the Minister admit that he was under-prepared for the volume of traffic generated by this new form and, in particular, does he feel that they advertised with sufficient warning that home visits would be available to those who felt it would be appropriate?

**Senator P.F. Routier:**

I think the way we have approached the volume of work that is going to be required to be carried out by the people who are claiming the benefit, and by the department, has been very appropriate. What we have done is sent out forms in batches, in 100 and 200 a week, on a gradual basis. It has not gone out, as the Deputy might be implying, in a big batch. That just does not happen. We have tried to ensure that sending out the forms in a gradual process will enable people to hopefully return them in that sort of form as well so the department can cope with the number of forms that need to be reviewed and assessed. I would encourage as many people as possible who have received the forms to return them to us as soon as they possibly can if they do not want to be in a position of not receiving benefit when the system does go live. I would urge anybody who feels that they are having difficulty in completing the form to get in touch with the department. There are a number of mechanisms we have to assist people through the form. It needs to be recognised that not everybody has to fill in every section of the form. There seems to be comments being made that people are having to fill in every page of the form. This is not the case. What people need to do is just fill in the sections of the form that apply to them. If they do need assistance, we are very happy to give them assistance, by discussion within the department, over the phone. If they need further assistance, we are quite happy to sit down with them and go through with it, and to the extent of having home visits. With regards to home visits, we have always, always had that as an option and I would implore people that if they have specific difficulties - if they have a disability - that we are there to help them and we will help them fill in the forms.

**2.9.4 Deputy J.A. Martin:**

I am slightly confused by the Minister's last answer. He seemed to imply... I know when I asked which form will be used when the system goes live he said there will be no forms. It will be a one-to-one contact. It will be the computer, I presume in the Social Security Department, with an operator saying: "The computer says no, or the computer says yes." We have 7,000 households, Sir, on benefits. Is this what the Minister is telling the House? The last part of the question, Sir; is: is everybody in the system now, before it goes live? Will the Minister not confirm they will be assessed and in that system? Because one week on a low income without any money is not tolerable.

**Senator P.F. Routier:**

The way the system will operate when it goes live is that people will come into the department and sit down with an advisor. That is the whole purpose and the theme behind the income support system: to have contact with the people who are claiming income support. They will have a record within the system which will be reviewed on whatever basis is appropriate for their needs. Obviously, some will be more regular than others. So, there will not be a paper form in the future. It will be a record on the department's computer. The urgency is for people to return these transition forms so we can go live so that everybody is paid, and I am as concerned as the Deputy about people not missing out on any payments. We need the information sooner rather than later. I would ask that people do not leave it until the very last moment to return the forms because it could cause a backlog. I am not saying that we are not going to be able to do it. If people do not return the forms to us we will not be able to provide the benefit. So, we need to encourage as many people and with our assistance we will help them to fill in the forms. We want to have the information so that we can provide the benefit on time. If people do not respond, we will not be able to provide the benefit and we certainly do not want that situation to occur. I would encourage as many people as possible... **[Interruption]**

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

Thank you. There are 3 further questions to go, Deputy, and when you ask your question you perhaps prevent somebody else asking theirs later.

**2.9.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

If I can beg your indulgence, Sir, I will ask my final supplementary. In the written answer received earlier today, the Minister says he has passed the form to the Data Protection Registrar. Can he confirm that was merely to confirm the wording of the agreement to share information, and other details were not asked for, especially for example an opinion from the Data Protection Registrar - or Commissioner - on the requirement to declare any asset over the value of £1,000 held by any other member, not the claimant, of the household?

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

A precise answer please, Minister.

**Senator P.F. Routier:**

The form was sent to the Data Protection Officer and the comments that were made by the Data Protection Officer were included within the form.