

4.2 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier of the Minister for Social Security regarding overpayment of Income Support:

Will the Minister advise Members how many recipients of income support either starting or returning to work have been charged for overpayments and detail a range of sums and payments involved?

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

The income support system is designed not to make a charge for overpayments when someone returns to work, and when the department is informed in a timely manner. In general terms, if an individual fails to inform the department of an increase in household income then the department has the right to recover this overpayment of benefit when it is identified. The amount of extra benefit is normally repaid by means of regular deductions from future income support payments over a period of months. I would like to take the opportunity to remind income support claimants of the importance of notifying the department promptly when there is a change in the household income. I can assure Members that if someone does notify the department at the correct time and then there is a delay in processing a claim after it has been received, the department will not ask for any benefit overpayments made during that time to be returned. With regard to the specific question, the department does not hold the information in the format the Deputy requests but if the Deputy has a specific individual concern, I would be happy for my department to review the matter.

4.2.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may. Is the Minister aware that despite prompt information being received by the department about a return to work, and the final details being finalised within 3 weeks, a couple - a family - were placed in the situation of having a £300 charge made on them, which was to be reduced off their income support, thus putting them no better off on return to work.

Senator P.F. Routier:

I am not aware of that particular case, as I mentioned earlier, if the Deputy has a specific case he wants to discuss with me, I would be very happy to do that. The situation with regard claiming back from people is not something we would want to do but we have to ensure that if people do have a change of circumstances and they are earning more money, that we are informed appropriately and at the right time. There is, I believe, a need to ensure that people are given time to adjust to their new circumstances and the department will be working to those guidelines when we go forward.

4.2.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may press the Minister. Does the Minister consider that 3 weeks from beginning to end is too long a period and therefore those charges should have been made?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I think I would agree with the Deputy, certainly, that if after a period of 3 weeks someone has changed their circumstances and I would hope that we would be in a position whereby if somebody does enter the workplace and does inform the department immediately that a period of 3 weeks is too short. It is something I would like to work towards if that is not happening in a particular case. As I say, if the Deputy has a particular case, I would be happy to look at it.