

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SECURITY
BY DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER
ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 4th MARCH 2014**

Question

Will the Minister inform members what the average turn-around time for processing Income Support applications or Change of Circumstances forms from the date of issue to delivery of payment currently is?

Does he believe that this period can contribute to income support applicants getting into debt and, if so, what measures does he propose to reduce any such hardship?

What figures does the Minister have for over and under-payments in income support? To reduce the potential hardship through repayment of "overpayments" will he agree to re-instate the previous cap on such repayments of £21 weekly?

Answer

As stated in my answer to similar written questions tabled on 26th June 2012, 17th July 2012 and 15th January 2013, and furthermore an oral question on Tuesday 24th September 2013, Income Support benefit is always paid in advance, on either a weekly or four-weekly basis. Any change of circumstance that occurs after a payment has been made and during the period paid for, which affects the value of the claim rate, will result in the need for a payment adjustment in respect of the over or under payment.

This means that small overpayments are an expected and inevitable part of a benefit system that pays in advance, and in most cases simply result from the short-term repayment of extra income that households have received above their actual benefit entitlement. The alternative, which I do not support, would be to make Income Support payments in arrears - which could lead to real hardship amongst low income families.

As part of the States wide 'lean' initiative to improve customer service, officers of my Department have recently launched a same day service that allows many changes to existing Income Support claims to be processed in the customer's presence, subject to them supplying all supporting evidence. Based on the first few weeks performance, approximately 60% of customers visiting the department to notify us of a change of circumstances have benefited from this improved service. This was not a service available previously. For new applications for Income Support, the current time for processing is 10 working days, providing all relevant information is supplied at the outset.

The figure of £21 weekly for the recovery of over-payments is a guide used by officers to determine an appropriate weekly amount to be recovered from ongoing benefit. The recovery of overpayments is always set at a level that the customer should be able to afford, and those overpayments that exceed the guide figure of £21 weekly are typically agreed with customers who have started employment and wish to clear the overpayment as soon as possible.

As stated in my answers to previous similar questions, I do not believe these recoveries cause hardship. It is an important principle that taxpayer-funded benefits must be recovered whenever they are overpaid, particularly when the household has failed to take appropriate action required under the Income Support Law to notify the Department of changes.