

2015.12.01

4.14 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of the Minister for Social Security regarding the allocation of named contacts to clients of the Social Security Department:

Further to the response given during questions without notice on 3rd November 2015 by the Minister for Health and Social Services what consideration, if any, has the Minister given to introducing a system whereby individuals are allocated a named contact within the Social Security Department to save the time and distress of explaining their situation repeatedly to different officers and if so how will this be progressed and when?

Deputy S.J. Pinel (The Minister for Social Security):

Providing excellent customer services is a priority in my department and officers are always looking for ways to continue improving the service that we deliver to the public. Each day officers assist around 1,000 customers face-to-face and handle over 400 phone calls. This equates to approximately 350,000 customer contacts per year. Where possible initial contacts are dealt with by members of our customer service centre who are trained to be able to answer the majority of enquiries at the first point of contact, either by telephone or at reception. To aid this process social security information is held on a single I.T. (information technology) system that allows staff to check and record individual's details. However, the department deals with a wide range of benefits and services and more complex enquiries may be directed to a specialist in the relevant area.

4.14.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I thank the Minister for her answer. Is the Minister aware of the amount of distress that is caused by this? This is something personally that parishioners who contact me are needing help with this department and is something that is causing them great distress. Does the Minister accept that if she did try to implement something like this it would not only save the distress for people dealing with her department it could also save time and money for her department in terms of streamlining the processes?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I understand where the Deputy is coming from but it would not save money, it would cost an awful lot more money inasmuch as a named adviser for a client would be, possibly, sitting round waiting for that named client or those named clients for some time during the day and not being able to deal with other clients. We have implemented, further to questions previously, that all front-facing staff now wear name badges, which they were very reluctant to do before because of being stalked in some cases. These are magnetic name badges and they have introduced a level of respect between the staff and the client. Magnetic because without a tie the member of staff cannot be threatened and we have moved a long way in the process in the last few years with establishing client and adviser contact. If the client, as purported by the Deputy, has a distressing situation then they can request a private meeting in a private room. They do not need to be seen in the reception area.

4.14.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I think the Minister is missing the point and it is good to hear that the people on the front desk do now have name badges but I know, as Deputy Doublet knows, many people who ring up, they spend an hour or more on the phone asking their rights and they are told: "We cannot give our name to you." So if you have to ring back you have to start the process again. So it is not about the name of the adviser even, I think it is that you would like the name of the person who is giving you the advice. Secondly, I have noticed recently as well even if I, as a Deputy, email on a case I will get back an

answer from an income support adviser, no name. I do not even know who I am dealing with. So what has a customer got to do? It really needs some improvement. Does the Minister not agree?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I understand the Deputy's point that, yes, a name should be given.

[11:00]

Bearing in mind, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, that the number of calls per day are considerable we are always looking to improve our situation and I will take the Deputy's point on board.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Truly, a supplementary and a bit of advice. Maybe if you understand some times that it is not always suitable to give out a name but there must be a system, even if it is another, so the person knows who they are identifying and who has already given this advice because people do deny they did it and also you cannot stress the amount of times that people are put through again and again and moved around the department.

4.14.3 Senator Z.A. Cameron:

As a former G.P. (General Practitioner) I would like to reiterate the stress that is caused by having to give their story countless times to different individuals and frequently the advice received is different each time. It creates a feeling that they are not being listened to. It prevents that building of trust with the department and I would suggest wastes a lot of people's time and also where you are providing a service it means that the person providing that service remains unaccountable for their advice.

The Bailiff:

The question is?

Senator Z.A. Cameron:

Does the Minister not agree that perhaps offering some continuity of care might improve relationships and the service that her department is able to provide?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I thank the Senator for her question but, as I referred to in my opening remarks, we have an enormous amount of people crossing the reception and phoning every day and all staff are equipped to deal with most questions. If it is a sensitive issue, medical or benefits, whatever, they have a one-to-one adviser but a lot of the questions that we get through the phone, email, on the reception desk, are possibly just giving in a medical certificate, applying for a maternity grant or a parent applying for student credits. These are not going to have to be dealt with sensitively or as sensitively as somebody who is asking about a personal situation. So if somebody wants a personal adviser and a personal interview they can request it.

4.14.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister have the figures to back up her statement that allocating named advisers to particular clients would be vastly more expensive than the current system? Is it still the case that the argument for not having named individuals attached to a client is that it eliminates the danger of collusion between the officer and the client which might produce some fraudulent claims and

fraudulent beneficial looking at those claims as was stated to the Scrutiny Panel some 8 years ago when income support was being devised?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I do not know quite how to answer that. I was not in politics 8 years ago.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can we just deal with the first part of the question then? Will she produce the figure on the back of her ...

The Bailiff:

Honestly, Deputy, your question went on for such a long time I think the Minister and most of us had forgotten what it was by the time you reached the conclusion of it. It really does help to have a short, crisp question.

4.14.5 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

I think the Minister has missed the point. I do not believe the question is asking for this to be done for every case that approaches the department but in those cases, like I have done in the past, where you have a client who has regular contact with the department, in those situations I have requested that a specific officer follow a case that has been allowed. Can a mechanism, in order to do that, not be brought in? Not for every case, I absolutely accept that, but for clients who are repeatedly having to go back to the department.

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

That is already in place.

4.14.6 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I have been very fortunate in recent times that when I have been in Social Security with a client I have had named officers but if the officer does not wish to give a name surely an officer or adviser of 51, or whatever number is allocated to them, so that, as has been said before, clients do not have to repeat the entire case whenever they are speaking to somebody new.

The Bailiff:

You are right, it has been said before. Minister, have you got anything to add?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

No, I think I have answered that question.

4.14.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I am a bit surprised that the Minister seems to be dismissing this especially given other departments have recognised it, I think, at the 1,001 Days event. On Monday we heard that - is it the early health approach - this problem has been recognised and families will be given a named person. Could the Minister please reconsider given that so many Members feel this is an important issue and perhaps offer this service to more of the people that contact her department and maybe just use a bit of common sense. It does not have to be like she describes, people sitting in a room waiting for a phone call, but maybe just a little bit of flexibility and humanity and maybe expand this out to more people and offer it instead of waiting for cases to become so severe that they are desperate for it?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I think I appreciate what the Deputy is saying. There is a lot of hearsay involved in this; I have heard it myself, and we have moved on. We are constantly reassessing our services hence there is now a personal adviser for people who need it and a personal interview room should they request it.