

4.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of the Minister for Social Security regarding her Department's communication with benefit claimants: [1(490)]

What work, if any, is being undertaken to examine how the Minister's department communicates with benefits claimants to ensure that they are offered clear and unambiguous information about changes to their entitlement so that they do not inadvertently fall into hardship?

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

I can confirm that this work is already underway. We published our 2017 business plan earlier this year and this includes a specific commitment to continue the implementation of our customer service excellence and improved communication programme. This project consists of reviewing all of our customer communications. This includes updating all of our standard letters and the website content.

[10:15]

I am confident that this is already helping to improve understanding of the services and benefits offered by Social Security.

4.4.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The reason I am asking this question is because over summer I had a couple of instances where constituents got in touch with me having received the standard letter from Social Security informing them of a change to their income support entitlement, which upon their reading gave a very clear impression that they were to lose the entitlement they had and potentially face hardship. But then when I contacted the Social Security Department to find out how these benefits reconciled with their States pension entitlement or disability benefits found out that they were not as worse off as they had anticipated but the letter itself did not make that even vaguely clear to them because it only made reference to income support. Does the Minister agree that a helpful way to stop these misunderstandings happening would be for these standard letters to include the entire entitlement of these claimants, not just income support, so that they can see how it is reconciled against other benefits and pensions? Most importantly, a very clear number on the letter that simply says: "This is how much you will have put in your bank account" so you know how much to live off. Does she think that would be a step forward?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

In Social Security we administer more than 20 separate benefits and maintain contribution records for over 50,000 individuals and companies, plus we provide Back to Work and other services. We have over 1,000 letter templates and many hundreds of web pages, not to mention our other communication collateral. We are also working across departments to improve our communications. For example, we are working with Health to ensure that people who need to travel for hospital appointments are given the information they need at the time. More importantly, we survey our customers on a daily basis and systematically record and monitor all of our feedback, particularly any complaints we receive, and as I said in answer to the Deputy's first question, that we are changing ... we have already changed ... I am quite aware of what he is saying. We have already changed 250 of the letter templates to date.

4.4.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can I firstly praise the Minister for deciding to include details of the income support calculation on the back of their letters and for those who understand the system that makes things a lot clearer? So when the applicant comes to me and says: "What does this mean?" I know what it means and I can find out the details. However, what would be useful on all letters where there is a change involved in the benefit received, that it clearly says: "This is what you were

receiving, this is what you will now receive” so that people will know without going any further is whether their benefit has gone up or down. That would be a simple thing, which would solve a lot of queries on my part.

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

I am indeed delighted to have had the third occasion of praise from the Deputy in 3 years. **[Approbation]** I understand where the Deputy is coming from and we are trying to improve the information relayed to our customers at the same time as trying to offer the information from the staff in Social Security and on the website with a view to reducing the number of letters that have to go out. But the Deputy is quite right with the clear explanation on the back it does save an awful lot of time, both on behalf of the Deputy and our customers.

4.4.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

There did not appear to be any mention in there of a before and after statement at all. That was part of the question not answered.

The Bailiff:

Minister, before and after?

Deputy S.J. Pinel:

We are doing that. As I have said, we have already changed 250 out of the thousands of letter templates that we have. The before and after is available to ... certainly to pensioners with the latest uprate in pensions; some by letter and some on the websites.