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5 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier of the Minister for Social Security regarding the processes in place to help vulnerable people with their claims for benefits: (OQ.177/2019)

What processes, if any, are in place to help vulnerable people with their claims for the benefits available to them; and is the Minister's assessment that the current level of any such help is sufficient?

Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier (The Minister for Social Security):

Bringing Government services under one front door at Customer and Local Services makes it quicker and easier to access them. This includes all benefits and also customs, tax and planning, among others. We offer bookable appointments, communications, and are working with the Disability Strategy Delivery Group to improve our accessibility. I do think this represents a good level of help for vulnerable people but I am always open to hearing ways that the department, the Customer and Local Services can do better. I do recognise that helping the vulnerable is more than just bringing services into one building but we are also investing in taking some services out in the community, with the Closer to Home project and working in partnership with the voluntary sector. Closer to Home will be launched next Saturday officially and hopefully be rolled out into other Parishes and hubs very soon.

3.5.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I would like to recognise publicly, just before I have got a question, the work of some of the voluntary sector that help our vulnerable members of our society claim. Would the Minister consider a pilot scheme so that a named individual in Social Security is the first point of contact and always the point of contact for specifically identified, particularly vulnerable members of our society because sometimes they are seeing different people at different times and having to re-tell stories are the problems that people are facing? Mistakes happen and they just get amplified over time.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I thank the Deputy, we had a brief conversation yesterday in light of this question, what he actually needed from the answer. I went straight back to officers and discussed this. A named person, it is one of those ... it is a double-edged sword, as the Chief Minister has just said. But everybody that turns up now, their first interview is recorded. Anything that the officer thinks is vulnerability, it is all there. If people are not taking it in, people have not got English as a first language, if people have brought somebody, they have a contact for that somebody, we now only ask for a signed letter to have again voluntary sectors. It is not something I have ruled out. I discussed with officers yesterday and sometimes what we are trying to do is to get all officers to a competent level in all the new hubs so that everyone will be dealt with. Unfortunately, as I say, vulnerable people will be the ones that sometimes do slip and hopefully, again, every time the Deputies behind me - we have a very good working relationship - bring this to my attention I will do everything I can down in my department to help.

3.5.2 Deputy S.M. Ahier:

Will the Minister agree that since the claims form has become more detailed and complex that it will be helpful to include a question on page one: "Have your circumstances changed within the last year? Yes or no." This would assist the elderly and disabled from an often arduous task.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I am sorry the Deputy thinks the claims forms have become harder to fill in. This is what we are trying to avoid. I will speak to the Deputy and ask him exactly what he means. Yes or no. I mean we only ask people to contact us if their circumstances have changed in the last year. If we feel from other sources that we find out that things have changed that is when people are written to. But normally that is when ... as I say, we only contact people when they tell us and we do try to encourage people as soon as any circumstances change, whether you are earning more, earning less, moving someone in, moving someone out. You tell the department straightaway. We can assess your form. If you need more money you will get more money and obviously if it is the other way, unfortunately that is the way it is.

3.5.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is there not a case for sharing more information across all the benefit services in her department so that miscommunication and lack of information does not cause overpayments from time to time in benefit systems and that automatically the information is shared across all staff in the department rather than keeping it data protected and not shared, which can lead to serious problems?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

That is the only time if the department felt there would be a breach in data protection, but the Deputy has been in the room when we have discussed this. We are trying to get to a point where anyone who is receiving income support, who is working, who may have a long-term sick claim, or an L.T.I.A. (long term incapacity allowance) or a disabled payment, the department knows all this. It is there for them to see. We are working towards that, if we are not already there. As I say, these hubs will be people in different places.

[10:15]

A pensioner who needs income support is completely different to a person under 60 who is working who needs income support and we need to get this expertise across the spectrum. That again goes back to why would we have a named person. We need to move people around so they are all experts in these hubs.

3.5.4 Connétable S.A. Le Sueur-Rennard of St. Saviour:

In this day and age when we are trying to promote everything on computers, surely if the information is already in there the one person dealing with somebody just has to push the computer and all the information will come up on the screen. I do not understand why we have to go from one to the other to the other to the other because they do not have the information. Surely, if your name comes up on the screen your information should all be there and it would make life so much easier for people that are coming to these places because they are herded around like cattle and moved to different departments, and that is a worry for a lot of people. Could we have these general computers, which we all want ... we need to vote with computers, we need to be able to do this with computers? Why can we not just do the simple thing, your name comes up on the screen and all your information is there and you do not have to race around and you do not have to start panicking about being moved from A to B?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

I thank the Constable for her question. Basically that is what is happening. If you found yourself out of work tomorrow you do not need to even come down to the department, you can fill in the whole of the income support form online. It can be presented. You can scan in your documents. It can all be done. The initial question was asking about vulnerable people and how we dealt. The

information on the first interview is all in the computer. As for moving people around departments, that is what the new Customer and Local Services, as I said, you are unemployed, have you dealt with your tax, do not put that off until tomorrow? You have a massive tax bill on last year's earnings. You have just been made redundant. You need to find out if you have your benefits you need to find out everything that you are entitled to in one building. So we are trying; I do understand, I look forward to the day when the computer tells me what I need to do before I get up in the morning and we are sort of getting there. I really understand where the Constable is coming from. The information is on the computer. The question is vulnerable people, I never want to be in the situation where somebody says you can only apply for this on a computer. We know where that leads; it is not a good story.

3.5.5 The Connétable of St. Saviour:

We are discussing vulnerable people and this is why moving them from A to B in the same building is not helping them. I am sorry. To say that, if you get out of a job, you can put everything online, vulnerable people cannot always handle things online and they do tend to panic. So if they can come face to face to talk to somebody it is so much easier. We are discussing vulnerable people and I really think that to push a button for whoever you are talking to would make life so much simpler if they were pleasant and they had all the questions rather than saying: "You are going to have to go down there to be dealt with" or: "I can deal with this but I cannot deal with that" and I think a one-stop shop for vulnerable people, and for anybody, would be so much easier. I would like the Minister to look into that for me please.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

The Minister is not looking into it; the Minister is trying to deliver that, as I said. In the hubs a named person just for a benefit or a named person that is good on doing your tax and your benefits, and that is basically the majority of people. Somebody who is really good on pensions, so people across the board, because we will be able to deal with less-vulnerable people much more quickly; the training is going on. I fully accept where the Constable is coming from, we are not there yet. That is our aim and I fully expect to get where the Constable wants us to be as soon as possible.

3.5.6 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I take on board that you are trying in the Income Support Department but as a measure of success is it not the case that the vulnerable must not slip through the net because that is the very definition of what we are trying to do with the support systems that we have in our Social Security system. Would you take on board the notion of having advocates for a small but significant number of very vulnerable people, which is a role that is at the moment being taken on by the charity sector, ourselves and my colleagues, and friends that are taking this role on, which is so important for those individuals concerned?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

The people who do, and I am sorry to use that expression, unfortunately the people who we cannot get in the door, who cannot use the computer, are the people the majority of the time who are not getting the benefits and the services that they need. We are working ... I know the Deputy says an advocacy service, we can look into that, but if you cannot get someone to the local charity that supports them that their friends go to, the people they know go to, then they can advise them: "You should be getting this" or they talk to someone next to them and they find out they have exactly the same problem; they are getting help and they are not. It is the encouraging; it is making sure that once we know that there is a problem somebody is there. We have bookable appointments, we can

do people who do not speak English as their first language, we can always advise someone who comes along, and again for other disabilities. We are trying. It is very early days. Customer and Local Services only opened their door last year as a one-stop shop and it has grown and grown and grown, so we need to now catch the staff up and work with the Deputies. The Deputy knows I have been doing this job for nearly 20 years; I know the people who pick the phone up who want the help. Should it be a States Member? Probably not. But at the moment that is where we are. We need a Public Service Ombudsman - we need a lot - but we are where we are and I continue hopefully to work with the Deputy and his colleagues to find a way that we do not get anyone slipping through the net.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Point of order please; may I raise the question of Deputy Tadier's decision to unilaterally withdraw from this Assembly? I would like to ask, is that permissible? Because I was under the impression that we, as all elected States Members, are required to attend the Assembly. If it is not permissible, may I request that Deputy Tadier be marked *en défaut*?

The Bailiff:

It is every Member's obligation to attend sittings of the Assembly; that is correct. I was going to say something just now about Deputy Tadier in the sense that he raised a point of order, or said he wanted to, but then he left without raising it and I was not able to give any ruling on it. So I hope he is listening outside because what I was going to say was that question time is not a time for debate; its purpose is set out by Standing Orders to seek information on a particular matter or to ask for official action in relation to it. The time for questions is therefore to provide a focus mechanism for holding Ministers or Scrutiny chairs to account. Supplementary questions are in order if they relate to the matter; "the matter" is what is referred to in Standing Order 10. If they do not relate to the matter the purpose of question time is not accomplished. The time for questions at large is questions without notice. So, in relation to question 2, that was a question about *de minimis* exemptions from G.S.T. and that is what the Minister could be expected to have prepared for. It was not about G.S.T. generally and specifically it was not about 1(1)(k) income tax. That is why I made the ruling that I did and I hope that, if Deputy Tadier is listening to this, he might consider returning to the Chamber to ask question 8, which he wanted to ask of the Minister for Social Security. So, Deputy, I wonder, in your question which you have just raised about a point of order, whether you might want to raise it again in 10 minutes or quarter of an hour's time given that I would not wish to mark Deputy Tadier *en défaut* before he has heard the explanation. You are right that it is the obligation of Members to attend in the Assembly.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I will raise that matter after question 8.