

2021.09.14

**17 Senator S.Y. Mézec of the Minister for Social Security regarding Philip Le Feuvre House (OQ.197/2021)**

When will Philip Le Feuvre House be open for face-to-face walk-in appointments for their services?

**Deputy J.A. Martin (The Minister for Social Security):**

*Philip Le Feuvre House is open for appointments and has been for over a year. Customers can book an appointment over the phone. I am responsible for a range of benefits which are delivered from the C.L.S. (Customer and Local Services) Department at Philip Le Feuvre House. Other Ministers are responsible for other services which are available from the same building.*

**8.17.1 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

Will the Minister clarify that she was talking about appointments that are prearranged as opposed to walk-in appointments, as has been the case in the past where people have been able to drop-in to the department at a time that is convenient to them to avail themselves of the services there? I guess the ones I am most interested in are to do with those that fall within her remit, such as income support. Does she not accept that it is an extremely important way of being able to access those services and for claimants to present themselves at the department in that manner and not just through prearranged appointments?

**Deputy J.A. Martin:**

I absolutely disagree. Those departments have come on leaps and bounds through COVID and it is doing exactly what I have been begging it to do for years. If anyone has been down there with a constituent and you are sitting there with 50 people and you are trying to discuss your most intimate details about your change of circumstances, it has never been great. 88 per cent of customers are absolutely over the moon with the new service and it looks like this is the way forward and not sitting in there for hours with your children crying and the elderly sometimes with a disability not being able to find a toilet.

**8.17.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

There seems to be a direct opposition between what Senator Mézec and Deputy Martin have said here. Deputy Martin has praised her new system. Could you describe this new system and say how it is improved and also how easy it is to pop in and get a proper explanation from somebody about extremely difficult matters that are sometimes involved in social security?

**Deputy J.A. Martin:**

Sorry if the Deputy was not listening to my first explanation. It is 444444 for a telephone appointment. They are answered within about 20 seconds. The Deputy knows him and myself have been trying for years to get people to have a private appointment when discussing their most intimate details, especially when you find yourself on hard times. As I say, 88 per cent of people are happy. We are still in COVID by the way. It is my concern that I have to protect my staff. I have a duty of care to them and the public. The main thing is we have paid out millions and millions and millions of pounds and that is what keeps the Islanders happy. Pensions are paid out, sick money is paid out and co-funded payroll. Everything is paid out from that department and I just praise my staff for keeping it going or they would have been anarchy. **[Approbation]**

**8.17.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Yes, my experience of the Social Security Department and them seeking to explain things to me has been very frustrating. Often I get a reply which says the expert who is involved is not on duty, they will phone you back and rarely does, or I am sitting on the phone and it is ringing and ringing and ringing for up to an hour. I do not find the service is that much improved at all. Will the Minister make significant and measurable improvements to what is going in her department?

**Deputy J.A. Martin:**

Well, I do not know where the Deputy is ringing. Maybe it has been a different number.

**Deputy G.P. Southern:**

It is 444444.

**Deputy J.A. Martin:**

I test that number regularly and I thought at one point I might have a red tag so I try it on different people's phones. That number is picked up in seconds and, if you pay, you have people ringing it back. There is also, if you are waiting too long, you can put complaints in. I think it is a much, much improved system but if the Deputy needs to speak to one of my excellent advisers or somebody about something, if he is having problems, please let me know. I will make sure they phone him and he can have that conversation but the service is brilliant, people are getting their money and that is what we are hearing. No complaints.

**8.17.4 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

As with Deputy Southern, the Minister's explanation does not reflect the reality as I have seen. I recently attempted to help a constituent get a face-to-face meeting and found officers doing everything they could to avoid getting people in a room to try to resolve that constituent's issue. So can I just get the Minister to confirm that it is her intention to cease providing a walk-in appointment system entirely as used to be the case? I certainly agree that it was not always ideal and, in many cases, not the preferred way of engaging with the department, but those who it would be a convenient option, can she confirm that that will no longer be an option?

**Deputy J.A. Martin:**

There is nothing permanent yet, as I have said. We can see by today, some people are here and some people are not. We are still in COVID and I have to protect the staff and the customers. Nothing is set in stone but, at the moment, in COVID, it is working fantastically.