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Deputy Sam Mézec
President, Scrutiny Liaison Committee
Sent by e-mail

29th November 2023

Dear Deputy Mézec

Re: S.R.1/2023 – Income Support Benefit Overpayments

Thank you for your letter dated 13th November 2023. I am sorry for the slightly delayed response.

Firstly, I apologise if offence was caused by the comments I made during the States Assembly debate on P.73/2023. That was not my intention. I accept that the specific phrases I used during the debate are not words that were used in the Health and Social Security Scrutiny Panel's Report into Income Support Benefit Overpayments. I do hear those and similar words used in relation to the team at Customer and Local Services from others and it was an error on my part to conflate them with the Scrutiny Panel's report.

My purpose in speaking, following Deputy Ward's own speech in support of our Public Service, was to support public servants, such as the Communications team, who are often subject to generalised and broad criticism and to remind States Members that their comments may have a significant impact on the individuals involved, who have no right of reply.

I also intended to support the team at Customer and Local Services, who work incredibly hard every day to ensure that the Department provides excellent levels of customer service. This is borne out by the statistics captured on customer feedback, with the metrics used demonstrating that KPIs are met on a quarterly basis (this includes customer satisfaction being rated as 'excellent' or 'very good' by 80% of those customers surveyed).

When referring to 'evidence', it is important to note that the Report into Income Support Benefit Overpayments draws on the submissions received from 16 members of the public. This is in comparison to the more than 5,000 households who are currently claiming Income Support.

Whilst I accept that the words used during the States debate were not words that the Panel used in their report, I believe that my comments reflect the general tone of some of the Panel's communications surrounding its review. The Press Notice following the Panel's Public Hearing with me in the summer stated: *Deputy Rob Ward, Chair of the Panel, said: "The evidence that the Panel has received from members of the public who have experienced overpayments suggests that there is a systemic issue here regarding the way in which overpayments arise and are dealt with. We have found it disappointing and concerning*

to see that the Minister and her officers seemed surprised when we raised issues that we have been hearing about from multiple people and charities.”

Whilst I accept that the Panel may have heard evidence in private relating to some distressing individual cases, I do not agree that it is sufficient to suggest that there is a “systemic issue”. I accept that some people will find their interactions with the Department to be difficult and we make every effort to support people and to improve our service on an ongoing basis.

Some of the phrasing used in the Panel’s report, however, perpetuates a very negative impression of the service provided by the Department, stating that customers concerns are not listened to, individuals are left feeling disempowered and belittled, as well as a perceived lack of empathy. This is not my perception of the service offered by the CLS teams, nor, I suggest, is it the case for many of those with whom we deal on a daily basis.

As Minister for Social Security, I am acutely aware of the need for the Customer and Local Services Department to be trusted in terms of the interactions they have with members of the public. The use of damaging language can have a very real impact on people’s perceptions, particularly with regard to the attitudes they will encounter (or to use the Panel’s own language, “be confronted with”) when visiting the Department. I am concerned that this could stop people from seeking the support that they need, or from communicating in a timely manner with the Department (which the Panel will now understand is critical to the prevention of Income Support overpayments).

I am wholly supportive of the importance of Scrutiny in terms of holding Government to account and apologise if the comments I made implied otherwise.

Yours sincerely



Deputy Elaine Millar
Minister for Social Security