

23.09.12

11 Deputy L.V. Feltham of the Assistant Chief Minister regarding staffing of the Communications Team across the Government (OQ.176/2023)

Will the Assistant Chief Minister state the total number of people working in the communications teams across the Government, the total staff cost and the average salary of a member of these teams?

Deputy L. Stephenson of St. Mary, St. Ouen and St. Peter (Assistant Chief Minister):

Thank you for the question. There are currently 34 people working in the communications directorate with another 8 working under the leadership of the directorate in other communications roles across the government and emergency and public health services. The total staff cost is £2,468,325, making an average salary, which is the mean salary in this case, of £62,000.

5.11.1 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Could the Assistant Chief Minister describe for the Assembly the benefits that this cost brings to Islanders?

Deputy L. Stephenson:

Absolutely I can. The Government has a duty to communicate and to communicate in the best possible way that it can and ensure that those communications are accessible to a very diverse range of people and communities that make up our community but also wider beyond that. The people working in the communications directorate do so across a very wide variety of areas. They work at a local, national and international level. They touch basically on every part of government across the piece and there is a huge demand for the resources of the communications directorate. I would also add that the way communications works, not just in government but more widely in our community in general, has changed over the past 2 decades and we are seeing change on a continual basis. People now expect and demand immediate and instant communications, therefore the way government communicates has had to respond to that as well.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Sorry, I thought there was a supplementary, I might have missed that. Is it my question, Sir? Sorry.

The Bailiff:

This is your question, Deputy, yes.

5.11.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Assistant Minister, given that £62,000 happens to coincide with the highest level of the teaching pay scale, even with a 7.9 per cent pay rise, does the Minister feel that in the current situation with the teachers' strike this may be a strange communication to have, given what we have heard about the failure in the Communications Department recently?

Deputy L. Stephenson:

I may have misheard the Deputy but if we are talking about average salaries, and we are talking about the average salary in the communications directorate, obviously there will be people working at lower levels and higher levels and I know that is the same in teaching as well. Yes, it does provide an interesting comparison in this case. What I would add is that communications is a profession and

we expect and demand high standards from the people working in those areas, just as we would with other professions as well.

[11:15]

People may scoff in the Assembly at that kind of comment but I think we should be showing respect to those colleagues and demand respect is shown for others as well.

5.11.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is supplementary. I am certainly not scoffing, I am just pointing out the point that given that the average salary is the highest possible salary that a teacher can gain, does the Minister believe that that is good communication at this point, given that the teachers are outside at the moment demonstrating on strike? Would she say that that is another reason why teachers should be supported in the pay rise that they desperately need?

Deputy L. Stephenson:

I am not saying whether it is a good communication or a bad one, it is a matter of fact that I have been asked to provide some numbers to the Assembly, which I have duly done. I do not believe it is particularly helpful to compare the work or the salaries of the 2 in the nature of whether I believe teachers should have a pay rise or not.

The Bailiff:

I have been slightly permissive, I think, in allowing the ambit of questions to move away from the number of people working in communication teams and their salary. It feels to me that is the essential frame in which the question is posed and questions dipping into other salary bands in other professions or things of that nature seem to me to be out with the ambit and not clearly flagged within the question. Therefore, I would ask Members to bear that in mind when we come to the next question. I have got Deputy Farnham, Mézec, Howell and then final supplementary.

5.11.4 Deputy L.J. Farnham:

I just wondered if the Assistant Minister was content with the performance of the communication teams on behalf of the Government.

Deputy L. Stephenson:

I have full confidence in the communications team and the very able members who make up that team. I know a couple of years ago when the new director of communications came in he made it one of his priorities to look at performance across the board. I am confident a review was undertaken there. We continue, as we would expect across all departments, to monitor performance but also the model and those expectations and if they are meeting the demand in a way that is required and is preferable. I have full confidence in the team.

5.11.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Could the Assistant Minister please explain exactly what her role, as Assistant Minister, is in determining the head count for this particular venture in Government and what her strategy is on head count for communication officers and whether she thinks it ought to be decreased, maintained or increased?

Deputy L. Stephenson:

Head count is an operational matter that I do not get involved in on a day-to-day basis. What I do do is challenge and ask for justification where I see that new roles are being proposed. I do that not just within the communications directorate but I take it upon myself to ask the questions of other departments, should there be further roles that start to move in towards communications as well because I think it is important that I do so. As I say, I have got confidence in the model, as things currently stand, and I will continue to scrutinise and ask those questions going forward. I equally know that other Ministers do the same, often in a very robust way. I am sure other Members of the Assembly will continue to do so as well.

5.11.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Who is politically responsible for the strategic decision, which has, I presume, been made somewhere along the line, to see the staffing levels in this particular aspect of governance increase quite significantly over recent years?

Deputy L. Stephenson:

The advice that I have received, because some of this does come before my time so I do have to take advice on that, is that the numbers have remained largely static over the past 2 Governments. I suppose it comes down to the models that have been chosen to build the system around previously as well. As I say, I am currently content with the model that is in place and I will continue to scrutinise along the way. I would say that we have previously looked at using external contractors, off-Island resources, and it has been looked at and discounted as not being value for money. That is all I can really offer in response at the moment.

5.11.7 Deputy A. Howell:

While appreciating how important good communication is, does the Assistant Minister consider that staffing in this area is an area where efficiencies could be made?

Deputy L. Stephenson:

I think it speaks to my previous answers that not currently every member of staff within the communications directorate is working incredibly hard on a daily basis. Communications is one of those areas where the individuals working within it often have very transferable skills and are some of the first people to step up when needed at very short notice. We have seen over the past year or so numerous occasions, including the major incidents where this has been required, and the communications officers working with Government have been among some of the first to do so. One such example is the helpline that was set up in the wake of the floods, and there was a clear need to set up a helpline there and then and it was communications staff that stepped in to do that out of the normal hours of their working day until it could be picked up by C.L.S. (Customer and Local Services) colleagues the following day.

5.11.8 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

In previous answers to previous questions we have heard about a value-for-money review for the Health Department. We also now know, due to the answer to this question, that the average salary of somebody working in the communications team is in fact higher than the average salary of a teacher. Given that, would the Assistant Chief Minister give the Assembly her assurance that she considers that this team is providing best value for money to the public of the Island and if she cannot, will she undertake to do a value-for-money review of these services?

Deputy L. Stephenson:

The Council of Ministers has made a commitment to look at value for money across the entire organisation, and the communications directorate will absolutely be a part of that process.