

2.8 Deputy K.C. Lewis of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the amphibious vehicle service to Elizabeth Castle, St. Helier:

Further to the announcement that the Jersey Heritage Trust has entered into an agreement with a new provider of state-of-the-art amphibious vehicles to transport visitors to Elizabeth Castle, would the Minister inform Members whether the Trust can make arrangements for the existing amphibious vehicles to be used to cover the 2 month delay before the start of the new service and, if not, why not?

Senator M.E. Vibert (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

May I ask that the Deputy of Grouville - or my Assistant Minister, with the responsibility for culture and also a member of the Jersey Heritage Trust - to answer the question?

Deputy C.F.L. Labey for Grouville (Assistant Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

Members will know that the Jersey Heritage Trust is charged with the long-term operation, maintenance and development of Elizabeth Castle under an agreement made with the then Public Services Committee and approved by this Assembly on 10th December 1996. The Trust's responsibilities include securing an agreement with an operator to run transport between West Park and Elizabeth Castle. Although the matters to which Deputy Lewis refers are operational and are not, therefore, directly the responsibility of Education, Sport and Culture Department, I am happy to set out the position of the Jersey Heritage Trust in this matter. Members will be aware that the Trust has concluded an agreement with an operator to use new vehicles for the service. Those vehicles are in the process of being constructed and are expected by the Trust to be operational on 26th May this year. The castle was due to reopen to the public on 31st March 2007, 8 weeks before the new service is now expected to commence. While the Trust very much regrets any delay in reopening the castle, it believes that the long-term interests of visitors will best be served by the introduction of the new operation. The Trust had understood from the previous operator that it would not be prepared to use its vehicles to cover any delay in the start of this new service. Recent reports in the media, however, have suggested that this might not be the case. Consequently, the Jersey Heritage Trust has written to the previous operator seeking to clarify the position. While no formal offer has therefore been made to run an interim service, the Jersey Heritage Trust would consider any such offer carefully, taking into account the desirability of maintaining public access to the castle and of its obligations under the new agreement.

2.8.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Supplementary, Sir? Whilst I applaud the level of investment of the new operator, Sir, I am very concerned that with any operation like this needing specialist marine equipment, when ordering such equipment there can be sometimes very substantial delays; so it could be to a month, it could even be longer by the time the vehicles are tested, inspected and drivers trained. My information may be slightly different and I do believe that Heritage should go back and talk to the original operators who have provided an excellent service for the last 9 years. Does the Minister not agree?

[Laughter]

The Deputy of Grouville:

Firstly, I would most certainly agree that the Puddle Ducks - the people that have been operating the service for the past 9 years - have given an excellent service. I am possibly more of an optimistic than the Deputy and the date that we have been given is 26th May this year, the operation will be up and working and that is the date that we are all very, very hopeful that will be the start of the opening of the castle.

2.8.2 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Final supplementary, Sir. As Elizabeth Castle is one of our prime tourist attractions in Jersey, is the Minister willing to take that chance?

The Deputy of Grouville:

Yes, we are taking that chance, but we have also written to the previous operators, as I alluded to, in the light of the media reports and we are at this time waiting a response from them to see if they are, in fact, willing to operate an interim service.

2.8.3 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

Will the Assistant Minister advise why the public should be denied access to this cultural facility when they are able to make their own way to the castle?

The Deputy of Grouville:

Unfortunately we now live in a very safety conscious world and the safety aspects of people that walk out there and who - unaware of the tides and what have you - could be left stranded and, therefore, we feel it is in the public's best interest to have the operation up and running to allow the castle to open and I would agree it is one of the prime tourist sites.

Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I would suggest to the Assistant Minister that surely even when the amphibious vehicles are able to be used to access the castle, the public still have their own right and discretion to make their own way across to the castle anyway, so the response that the House has just been given, in fact, does not apply.

The Deputy of Grouville:

I would not agree with that. If visitors have made their own way out there, and the tide comes in, they still, with an operation in existence, have a means of returning back on shore.

2.8.4 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains of St. Clement:

Would the Assistant Minister tell us whether there is a plan in place should these vehicles not be delivered on time and, indeed, is there a penalty clause for non-delivery?

The Deputy of Grouville:

I would have to see if there is a penalty clause. I am unsure of that fact, but I am perfectly happy to get that information for the Deputy and, sorry, I have forgotten the rest of the question.

Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

Basically, if there is not a penalty clause and there is some substantial delay, is there a contingency plan for ferrying people if, say, the vehicles prove not to be operative for a considerable period of time?

The Deputy of Grouville:

We have been given a date that these vehicles will be delivered to us and will be operational, so at this moment in time, no there is not a contingency plan.

2.8.5 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

I am speechless. You know this is... [Laughter] I will pull myself together again. This is political correctness gone mad. Is it not possible to have a bell like they have at Corbiere to warn people before the causeway is going to be covered? Really. this is the nanny state run amok. Does the Minister not agree?

The Deputy of Grouville:

No, Sir. [Laughter]

2.8.6 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire of St. Helier:

The castle has more than one part of its facility that is not being accessed at the moment. I went there last year with the family and was surprised that the rear half of the castle has been closed-off for the large majority of the time. As a question of access, while it is important to ensure that there is an amphibious service that runs efficiently, would the Assistant Minister not look into the matter as to whether or not there could be a facility for providing deep water access to the castle from the pier, which is also another opportunity for people to be ferried across by a different form of transportation so that they could access this facility and enjoy the wonderful castle that we have. It is a great draw for Jersey in relation to tourism and I think it is really one of the poor accessible locations we have that is run by the Trust at the moment.

The Deputy of Grouville:

The date that the castle is due to be reopened is 26th May. That is the date that we are working to and when we have been informed that the new vehicles will be in situ. I have no reason to doubt that date. However, if for some reason they were not operational then, I am sure that the Jersey Heritage Trust would do all it can, including deep water access from the pier to the castle.

2.8.7 Deputy S. Power of St. Brelade:

Is the Assistant Minister aware it is an operating condition of the amphibious service to Elizabeth Castle that it runs from 1st April to the end of October? As this is now not the case, will the Jersey Heritage Trust be seeking compensation from the new operator for the loss of earnings from 1st April to the end of May?

The Deputy of Grouville:

I do not believe so, no.

2.8.8 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I believe this is a ridiculous situation. When I used to work at Elizabeth Castle any visitors who chose not to return to shore by the old-style DUWKs were frankly left there to wait until the tide went out and they could walk back. Will the Assistant Minister advise the House whether she agrees with me that the public of the Island are being held hostage by the operators of this new amphibious facility?

The Deputy of Grouville:

No, I would not agree with that. These new vehicles are being delivered 8 weeks after what we had hoped would be the date. They are new vehicles and they are far more versatile vehicles than the old ones and we believe that they will serve the Island and the people here very well.

2.8.9 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

What is to stop any member of the public accessing the castle by their own merits at a time of their own choosing once these amphibious vehicles have been delivered? At that stage, when the amphibious vehicles are in running order, are we then saying that we are going to police the beaches and stop people accessing the castles by other means?

The Deputy of Grouville:

No, we are not saying that all. We are just providing a facility of vehicle operation to and from the Castle. Anyone is at liberty to walk out there and walk back if they so wish.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

In that sense, Sir, the follow-up question is why is the castle closed then? Because if I want to walk out there and swim back, as I have done in the past, [Laughter] or swim there and walk back as I have done in the past, why can I not enjoy the facilities of the castle - perhaps go and fish, do whatever - enjoy what is really a fantastic historical site. We are being denied that opportunity, as are other members of the public and the tourists. [Applause] I really think that the Assistant

Minister should sit down with the Jersey Heritage Trust and come up with a better way of doing things because it is obviously something that the House is feeling the same sort of support for, that we love amphibious vehicles but we love the castle more.

The Deputy of Grouville:

I am not sure if there was a question in among that.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Would the Assistant Minister agree to sit down with the Jersey Heritage Trust to see if they could not come up with a better compromise than has been suggested so far of the delay that has been proposed?

The Deputy of Grouville:

The delay is 8 weeks. The Jersey Heritage Trust has written to the old operators to see if they are willing to operate in the interim. There is nothing to stop people walking out there and walking back but the castle is closed if there is no vehicle access for safety reasons. I am sorry that some Members feel denied of the facility of the castle but I wonder how many of those people that are stamping their feet have visited the castle this last season.

2.8.10 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

Will the Assistant Minister make reasonable efforts and do everything possible to encourage the... you have mentioned writing to the former operators but will you encourage them? Will the Assistant Minister try to find ways to encourage the former operators to operate over the intervening 6 weeks, I believe, from the beginning of April?

The Deputy of Grouville:

The indication that the old operator had given to the Jersey Heritage Trust was that they would not be willing to operate in the interim. However, media reports suggested the contrary so the Jersey Heritage Trust have written to the old operator to see if they would be prepared to put on the operation in the interim. I think the Assembly can rest assured that the Jersey Heritage Trust will do everything possible to ensure that the castle is open as soon as possible. 26th May is the date that we are working to and if the old operator is prepared to put on a service in the interim, Jersey Heritage Trust will be more than happy to open it before then.

2.8.11 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

If I may just seek clarification from the Assistant Minister. As I mentioned previously, I welcome the level of investment the new providers are putting in, but should there be some substantial delay due to who knows what - industrial action, hurricane in the Atlantic, whatever - does this mean that Elizabeth Castle will be closed indefinitely or until such time as they do arrive?

The Deputy of Grouville:

I can only reiterate what I have already said in that the Jersey Heritage Trust will do everything in its power to ensure that the castle is opened as soon as possible and the delay is minimised to the absolute maximum of 8 weeks but hopefully less than that.