

3.15 The Deputy of St. John of the Minister for Economic Development regarding Consultants employed at the Airport

Are A.F.Q.A. (Air Field Quality Assurance Limited) consultants employed at the airport and, if so, in what capacity, for what length of contract and at what annual cost?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean (The Minister for Economic Development):

I can confirm that Air Field Quality Assurance Limited, a local company, have supplied a consultant to Jersey Airport. The contract is for £65,000 per annum and provides support for 5 days per week for one year. Thereafter, the contract can be terminated with 6 months' notice on either side. The purpose of the contract is to provide expert advice to support the proposed changes to the £1.6 million baggage system and changes to baggage handling arrangements at the airport. The consultant is also providing valuable advice on optimisation of additional revenue sources and improvements to customer services.

3.15.1 The Deputy of St. John:

Can the Minister confirm that A.F.Q.A. are paid by cheque monthly and is this a usual way of paying a contractor as the money could be coming from unmatched purchasers? If this is the case, will the Minister look at an immediate audit undertaken at the Accounts Department at the airport?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I am not sure what the Deputy is driving at here. I have no doubt whatsoever that the airport, the Airport Director and the Financial Accounting Officer are following financial directions in all matters relating to the airport. I am perfectly satisfied in that regard and I think, with respect to the Deputy, we should get out of the weeds and concentrate on what is important at the airport. There is a big job of work to be done in the years ahead. We have done significant work in looking at the financial and operational position of the airport. It was showing in 2009 a £101 million deficit through to 2023. These are the works that the airport management are very expertly dealing with and I have full confidence in them.

3.15.2 The Deputy of St. John:

I asked the question: would he call in auditors to have a look at how this particular company is being paid and will he give us a yes or no answer, please?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The airport is regularly audited in a number of different ways and I am perfectly satisfied with the audit arrangements and I would leave it at that.

3.15.3 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Will the Minister confirm whether Air Field Quality Assurance is a one-man band, that the company is the consultant and that the consultant has no previous experience of electronic and mechanical baggage systems but merely was responsible for the baggage loaders on aircraft that came to Jersey Airport?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I will repeat my complete and utter confidence in the management at Jersey Airport, with the commercial decisions that they have made in terms of employing this particular consultant. As far as the company in question is concerned, or the

individual provided, or the number of employees, or the way in which it is paid, frankly, it is irrelevant. The point is that the company has been employed by an expert management team at Jersey Airport which I have total and complete confidence in.

3.15.4 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Minister again confirm that this contract was awarded through a competitive tendering process?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I think I have already stated earlier on today in an earlier question touching on this matter the process of how Air Field Quality Assurance Limited were appointed. It is indeed a one-year contract which was approved internally by the airport. As I have said, the expertise, as far as the management team are concerned, was perfectly acceptable. The individual in question who is acting as a consultant has been working at the airport since the 1960s and has the necessary expertise to provide the services that the airport required.

3.15.5 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

The Minister said he had full confidence in the management of the airport. Can we expect that that is in the same token as previous Ministers for Health and Social Services have had in the full confidence of the management of the hospital?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I am not sure what the Deputy is referring to but all I will do is repeat exactly what I have said.

3.15.6 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Notwithstanding the Minister's support and the fact that we do not wish to impugn obviously the integrity of individuals, would he not accept that there is high public concern because all increased costs at the airport automatically translate into higher fees for passengers and ultimately make the airport possibly uneconomic? Would he therefore not accept that he has to keep a very close eye on the use of consultancies in that situation?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Yes, I would agree wholeheartedly with the Deputy. Frankly, I am not surprised the public are concerned. I am sure the public, as well as myself, choked on their porridge when they read the headline in the *Jersey Evening Post*, the sensational headline which barely reflected the facts of the situation. I think that is disappointing because it does raise concerns among the public; unnecessary concerns. I will repeat again my confidence. Yes, the Deputy is right, we do have to keep very careful and close eyes on expenditure. A great deal of work has been done in terms of financial modelling at Jersey Airport. The work is difficult because it takes and requires very difficult and tough decisions. I suspect that the reason we are getting all these questions is because staff in some areas are concerned because we have to drive through change. Change is difficult and because of that these questions are being raised. But, yes, we have to bear down on costs; that is one of the main aims of the airport: optimise revenues and cut down on costs but it means change.

3.15.7 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Minister was implying that the *Jersey Evening Post* headline that air traffic controllers are being paid large sums for training and that an air traffic controller had failed his revalidation in Jersey and was being paid £68,000 was rather sensational. I think it is rather scandalous, to be honest, if that is the case. Most people who undertake training do so as part of their normal contract and if they have to go in on their day off receive payment in lieu.

The Deputy Bailiff:

What is the question, Deputy?

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I am just saying, does he not think that his statement saying the headline was outrageous is wrong and the practice is what is wrong?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

What I was saying was that the headline was sensational and therefore misleading. I was commenting on the fact when I saw it I choked on my porridge. That is not surprising; I am sure the public felt much the same. The facts are not as Deputy Higgins is representing them. The facts in fact are that the individual in question did not validate on one particular aspect. He has not taken the other part of the validation. Again, that is a management issue for the airport that needs to be dealt with by the airport. We should leave it at that. There is a lot of misinformation being represented as fact by Members - certain Members - within the Assembly and outside. Thank you.

3.15.8 Deputy A.K.F. Green of St. Helier:

I choked on my Rice Krispies, not my Cornflakes, but anyway ... or my porridge. Anyway, does the Minister not agree that the public have a right to be concerned and concerned over a couple of points, but particularly - and it is not just at an airport that this has happened; it has happened in other areas as well - that a member of staff leaves our employment and then reappears as a consultant? If they have got the expertise, why not use them while they are employed?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

In general, the Deputy is right, but in fact just for clarity's sake, the person in question was not employed by the airport; he was employed by a private company that ceased operations at the airport, so he was not an employee. But, yes, the Deputy is right. There needs to be acceptable accountability for staff who work in the public sector. Indeed, another area of concern is terms and conditions and those are being looked at. Those are the root cause of many of the problems, both at the airport and in the wider States. It is a big issue and it does need to be dealt with.

3.15.9 The Deputy of St. John:

Once again, I will ask the Minister will he call in an auditor to look at the accounts at the airport?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The accounts at the airport are, of course, audited. I am not quite sure what the Deputy is referring to. If he wants me to look specifically at the issue as to how this particular payment is made, I can see it is a matter that is concerning the Deputy

greatly. I will take it up with the Airport Director and I will undertake to get back to the Deputy with some more details if it will make him feel more comfortable.