

2.5 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire of the Deputy Chief Minister regarding the cost of compiling retail sales surveys:

How important are the retail sales surveys conducted as part of our understanding of the local economy and what do they cost to compile and publish in terms of manpower and resources.

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf (Deputy Chief Minister - rapporteur):

The quarterly Retail Sales Inquiry represents an important new addition to the suite of business surveys run by the Statistics Unit which help us monitor economic conditions in the Island. In addition to the Retail Sales Inquiry, the Unit publishes an annual measure of G.V.A. (Gross Value Added) and G.N.I. (Gross National Income), an annual survey for the financial services sector, a quarterly Business Tendency Survey, which explores the current and short-term future indications of confidence in the Island economy. All of these latter surveys are by nature backward looking, while the Business Tendency Survey provides a current and leading future prospective. The quarterly Retail Sales Inquiry provides valuable complementary information on the state of the Jersey economy and, in particular, consumer activity in the Island. All aspects of the Retail Sales Inquiry are conducted in house by the Stats Unit. In terms of manpower, I am advised that it is a total of one sixth of a F.T.E. (full-time equivalent), which covers the full calendar year. The survey form and report are printed by the Statistics Unit at a cost of approximately £100 per annum and the cost for postage - which includes sending the form to sample businesses and a business reply envelope - has a cost of £500 a year.

2.5.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I would like to congratulate the Minister, before I put the next question to him, on the management of the team and the costs that have been kept extremely low for this important piece of work. But I also point out the reason why I have asked this question is, having been given a copy of the Jersey retail sales survey for quarter 4, it was pointed out to me by one of the retailers that their sales for that previous quarter had been 35 per cent down. In this form that is sent out to all businesses the boxes only allow you to go 5 per cent up or 5 per cent down. You cannot tick further than 5 per cent up and you cannot tick further than 5 per cent down. If this is important supplementary valuable work, we need to get a true reflection of business being conducted and will the Minister agree that in the future these questions will take a true reflection of the retail sales activity by allowing for indications of greater than 5 per cent increases and greater than 5 per cent decreases?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I will pass the Deputy's compliments on to the Stats Unit for the cost about running this survey and I will also speak to them about whether or not there should be other opportunities to put greater levels of percentage for. I think the Stats Unit is well known among businesses and Members to be incredibly diligent in the way that they carry out their responsibilities. They are also very accessible and perhaps if the Deputy wants to suggest that the particular retailer makes direct contact with the Stats Unit, I know that the Head of Statistics would be more than delighted to engage with them. I will say to Members that as far as the information I have, the survey and the sample data is as good as the Stats Unit normally do in terms of getting coverage of businesses in an appropriate measure of retail sales. Clearly, if there is one business

with dramatic falls in sales, that does need to be factored but I do not think it undermines the overall number.

2.5.2 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

That is very encouraging, I will take it up with the Minister to perhaps speak to the Statistics Unit myself on behalf of the people that have spoken to me, because it is more than one retailer that is expressing this concern. I think that that retailer, as it happens to be a vender who is vending from one of the States-owned properties, they would be reluctant to put their name forward as having been the reason for this question. However, I do think it is important that if we publish in the public domain through the media the fact that sales are down 3 per cent, they may in fact be down 10 per cent, they may be down 15 per cent. We need better information, as the Minister has said himself in the past, does he agree with that?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I would not want the message to go out that the Statistics Unit's figures are wrong. The quarter 3 survey had a response rate of 71 per cent of businesses which was a total of 47 per cent of the total retail subsector. I will take up the issue of the individual that had a greater level of sales but I am sure that somewhere in the form there are further opportunities to mark additional information for the Stats Unit. I would also say that retailers and businesses generally should have absolute confidence in the confidentiality of data given to the Statistics Unit. They are independent, they are part of the Chief Minister's Department from an organisation point of view, but they are independent and they do not share data with other States departments, so that businesses can be safe in the knowledge that their data will not be shared and it will be used for appropriate reasons.

2.5.3 The Deputy of St. John:

Given the Statistics Unit comes under the Minister's remit, could ... some months ago I returned to the House, I put questions to the Minister referencing the volumes of bottled water imported into the Island. He said he would get me the information and also I could speak to the Statistics Unit. As yet, the response I got from the Statistics Unit, they had no information on this, yet I am still waiting for the full information to come from the Minister and, that being the case, will he instruct the Statistics Unit to keep records on the volumes of bottled water coming into the Island?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I am standing in for the Chief Minister in relation to questions for the Statistics Unit and the Deputy is asking me questions about the accounting records wearing my other hat as the Minister for Treasury and Resources. I need to say to the Deputy that his questions about bottled water and expenses incurred by the States has worked. The fact that the question has been raised meant that a number of departments including, I think, this building now no longer have bottled water but vendors go to the tap and simply chill water, which is cheaper. I am afraid that I cannot give an undertaking to ask either the Treasury or the Stats Unit to collect information on every single amount of bottled water imported into the Island. Such collection of information does have a disproportionate cost which is not worthwhile in terms of the administrative cost of providing it versus the benefit to it. But we can take sample information and I am happy to continue to engage to understand what the total estimate of the bottled water market in Jersey is.

2.5.4 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I do not think this retailer sells bottles of water but if I may press the point, I have a copy of the form, I will share it with the Minister afterwards. I do appreciate his answering in response to the Chief Minister who perhaps does know. But there does not appear to be an appropriate area on the form for them to add this information, and the reason why I have raised this is because I have been told by more than one retailer that sales were down significant sums and I ask again if the Minister will agree to amend the form to have a better reflection of the important information that his department - through the Chief Minister - is conducting? Will he agree with me to seek to amend the form?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I will certainly take the matter up with the Statistics Unit.