

3.9 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains of the Minister for Economic Development regarding the maintenance of the Weymouth route:

Can the Minister assure Members he will use his best endeavours to ensure our Weymouth route is maintained, including, if necessary, finding an operator with a suitable vessel for the purpose?

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

Yes, to the first part of the question. Weymouth is an important port for the Channel Islands and for Condor. Indeed, all parties are keen to see Weymouth retained if possible and at all viable. Indeed, Condor have invested in some scoping works to assist the harbour authorities in this regard. However, we understand that the Weymouth Borough Council have to date been unsuccessful in securing the estimated £10 million of funding required to dredge and refurbish the port to accommodate larger vessels in the future. The viability of our sea routes depend on the whole network, including car, passenger and freight. It should be noted that the northern route car and passenger service in their current configuration do not operate profitably. It is, therefore, hard to see how Weymouth can be viewed in isolation, especially if a larger, more economic vessel could serve the Channel Islands more efficiently, thereby helping to ensure a long-term, sustainable network of sea routes. This surely has to be the greater priority.

3.9.1 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

Would the Minister not agree that if Condor is choosing to use a boat that simply does not fit Weymouth, then are they not, in fact, putting their own convenience before that of their customers?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

The Deputy will be aware that there have historically been problems with Weymouth and their port. Indeed, in 2012 Condor had only 48 hours' notice before the port was closed. As a result, they had to react incredibly swiftly, which they did, to rearrange their summer schedules, adjust their marketing and so on. The problems at Weymouth are fairly significant and, as I have said, I think we need to view this as a network. We cannot simply view the matter in regard to one vessel that Condor may or may not be thinking of investing in that could, indeed, bring significant benefits to the Channel Islands. We are looking at a potential £60 million investment in a new ship, an Austal 102, which would have economies of scale, be more environmentally friendly, quicker turnaround and so on. If indeed that goes ahead, we need to view it in the context of the greater benefits to the Island, not just in the isolation of Weymouth alone.

3.9.2 Senator L.J. Farnham:

Despite the longstanding relationship we have with Weymouth, we have to remain business-minded about this, given the importance of rebuilding the tourism industry moving forward. I just wonder if the Minister could be clear; I am not sure I understood. Is he saying that it would be more feasible and more advantageous for Condor just to focus on one route with a bigger ship?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

No, I was not giving that impression and I hope to be able to clarify the point. I have already made a statement that Weymouth is important to the Island, but it has been interesting. There has been some market research carried out by Condor with regard to their customers in Jersey and, in fact, the preference of Jersey residents who were surveyed, the majority - 68 per cent -

preferred Poole as a destination, interestingly. I also found it of note that Portsmouth came second and Weymouth was third. But for absolute clarity, if Weymouth Borough Council can invest in their port, then the Islands I am sure - and I include Guernsey in this, and particularly Guernsey in this from their day trip market perspective - would be keen to see Weymouth still forming part of the service that the Islands have historically enjoyed.

3.9.3 Deputy S. Power of St. Brelade:

It was useful to hear the Minister refer to independent survey work done on Channel Islands preferences for port usage. Has the Minister done any market research with regard to fast ferries? So the question is a two-stage question. Number one: is he absolutely convinced that this Austal 102, which is a prototype, is appropriate for the Channel Islands? Number 2: has he done any market research to confirm whether fast ferries *per se* are ultimately suitable for the northern route and the southern route given the sea conditions that we face? Are they not more suitable to areas such as the Greek Islands or the Canaries or other archipelagos?

Deputy A.J.H. Maclean:

The Deputy may be aware, and I am sure Members are, that there has for many months been negotiations ongoing with Condor about the future of our sea routes, which includes the desire of Condor to invest in a new vessel, the Austal 102, a significant investment of around £60 million. It is part of the negotiations that the team have been looking at this particular vessel and, indeed, its suitability and the value that it would add to the Channel Islands market. Those negotiations are progressing. In fact, they are, I believe, nearing completion and I hope to have a recommendation within a matter of weeks from the negotiating team. I believe that that will likely point out, among other things, that this vessel would be in the interests of the Channel Islands market. With regard to fast ferries and suitability, interestingly one of the benefits of the Austal 102 is the fact that it can operate in far higher seas than the current 2 vessels that Condor have on the northern route and so there are going to be, if indeed it goes ahead, less cancellations as a result of poor weather in winter periods and, as such, I think it is very suitable for the route. Indeed, I am led to believe that it is also highly efficient being a new vessel. It is only 3 years old; it still has the wrapper on because I do not think it has been used in anger commercially. As such, I think the answer to his question is yes, indeed, it would be suitable from what I am told to date.

3.9.4 The Connétable of St. John:

Given that surveys can be designed in such a way to give any answer, as we have seen many a time, is the Minister in talks with the council of Weymouth and Portland as to the needs of both areas, both the Channel Isles and Weymouth?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

I am not entirely sure of the drift of the question from the Connétable. I have not spoken directly myself with the borough council. I see the Connétable throwing his arms up. However, Condor have had lengthy negotiations and discussions with the borough, who they have the relationship with, and indeed members from the Ports of Jersey have had discussions with the authorities in Weymouth to establish the art of the possible and, indeed, the sort of investment that would be required to ensure that the port can handle a new larger vessel if indeed one comes on to the route in the future.

3.9.5 The Connétable of St. John:

Is the Minister not aware that historically the Harbours and Airport Committee and the Jersey Transport Authority, the Ministers themselves or the Presidents of the committee or Members, would go out themselves and meet their counterparts from Portland and

Weymouth and other places? He is telling us he has not got involved whatsoever on one of our lifeline routes, is that correct?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

No, not at all. I did not say I did not get involved; of course I get involved in matters. Ministers respond to and act upon advice from a variety of different sources. I appreciate that the Connétable has acted before on the Harbours and Airport Committee and I know he has been on many nice trips to different places to talk to different people. **[Laughter]** The success of his Harbours and Airport Committee is in the annals of history. We are looking to the future now and, as I have said, as a Minister I look very carefully at the advice that I am provided from a raft of professional sources and will make a decision accordingly when I have that advice.

The Connétable of St. John:

Is that why we get less than 400,000 visitors to our Island a year because of the attitude of the Minister?

3.9.6 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

There are 2 parts to this question. First of all, will the Minister agree with me that Weymouth is the gateway to the west of England and the north and is more convenient than Poole in that regard? Could he explain how many vessels this potential new purchase is going to replace? Because it does seem to me if it is going to replace more than one of the existing ferries, and presumably it will, then when it breaks down, which at some time it will, would he agree with me that the inconvenience to passengers will be even greater than we have seen in the past?

Senator A.J.H. Maclean:

Weymouth, as to whether it is a gateway to the west or the north as the Deputy points out, is a gateway. It is not the only gateway. Poole is clearly a very important gateway and certainly Jersey residents who have been surveyed, 68 per cent say they prefer Poole. So it is not for me to second-guess; the statistics speak for themselves. Clearly, there has been a good relationship with Weymouth. I hope it can continue but it is going to require a significant, multimillion pound investment and, I might add, time, which I have not mentioned, because on top of the £10 million investment there is also environmental studies and suchlike which have been priced at over £1 million, I believe, and could take a number of years. So there are a lot of issues that need to be resolved. I hope they can be resolved and that we do maintain Weymouth. With regard to the vessel, the 102, if again it comes on to the route, it would be intended to replace the 2 current Condor fast ferries, one of which - and this is all subject to the negotiations - would be retained as a backup in the short term and there are other longer term provisions to ensure backup and security of service, which is clearly important for the Island and quite naturally the Deputy would understand forms part of the negotiations that have been ongoing and detailed for many, many months.

The Bailiff:

Very well, question 10 falls away in the absence of the Deputy of St. Martin, so we will come to question 11, which Deputy Le Fondré will ask of the Minister for Treasury and Resources.