

2016.03.08

3.7 Deputy J.A. Martin of the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the number of meetings held with employees of the Department for Infrastructure and the Unions about proposed changes to service provision:

How many meetings have been held with employees of the Department of Infrastructure and the unions representing them about the proposed changes to service provision and what agreement, if any, has been reached regarding the principle of outsourcing and the way forward?

Deputy E.J. Noel (The Minister for Infrastructure):

In addition to the regular staff team briefings and the weekly senior management meeting with the fulltime Unite the Union Works Convenor the department has engaged with its staff and with unions over the proposed changes to service provision in the affected areas by several methods. We have undertaken to communicate as much as possible with staff and with unions such as the chief officer briefings to all staff in the department in December giving the staff the vision for the future of the department and doing that for all staff. Over a dozen of these presentations were provided to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to attend across a multitude of sites. In January and February drop-in sessions for affected staff were set up providing an opportunity for staff to discuss on a one-to-one basis issues such as voluntary redundancy and other options with specialists covering pensions, income support, business set-up and any other H.R. (Human Resources) issues. These drop-in sessions were attended by approximately 100 employees and were considered to be very beneficial by the staff concerned. Individual section briefing meetings also took place in February with Parks and Gardens and Cleaning Services staff by senior managers. Additionally, 5 staff update newsletters have been issued to all staff commencing in December with the most recent being only last week. Furthermore, 2 formal consultation meetings with senior officials and the unions representing affected staff. These commenced in January and are scheduled to continue on a monthly basis throughout 2016.

[11:00]

To confirm yet again at this stage no formal ...

The Bailiff:

You have just gone past your 90 seconds that you should have answered this question within.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I apologise.

3.7.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Supplementary. Can the Minister pinpoint exactly then what is being discussed with the unions when the Minister himself, only 2 questions ago, said he has not even decided to outsource. So what is it? Is it just a meeting, jolly having a chat that this might happen, or are they discussing the terms and conditions of his workers when they outsource and not if? As the Minister already said, there is not a Plan B.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

The terms and conditions for those staff that move on into the private sector will be a matter for them and their future employers. It is not a matter for the States Employment Board or indeed my department.

3.7.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I never asked about moving on. I was asking, what were the discussions you, the Minister, or the officers were having with the unions. Is the Minister clear when they have these meetings because I am not? After this morning I am completely confused.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

The meetings between the unions and senior staff along with employee relations cover all aspects of what we are trying to achieve with the service reviews and discussions of the actual process. I do not attend those meetings. It is not appropriate for States Members to attend those meetings. Those are meetings between Employee Relations and the department and the union. So the detailed discussions I am not privy to.

3.7.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

In response to one of the questions from Deputy Martin, and also one earlier from myself, the Minister said that the pay and terms and conditions that these workers will have in the firms to which they are outsourced to is not a matter for his department; it is a matter between them. How can he possibly say that with a straight face when he also says that one of the criteria that they will be looking at is whether they provide training opportunities to these workers? If they can come up with criteria for the firms to outsource to why cannot pay and terms and conditions be one of those? Is it not just a case of the Minister not particularly being bothered because he wants to save as much money as possible regardless of the impact this has on these people's livelihoods?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

This Assembly sets the ... whenever the Assembly takes advice on the setting of the minimum wage and we do it ... so that is the appropriate forum for that part of the Deputy's question. When shortlisting or looking at third party contractors there are a number of issues that we look at but primarily it is the quality of the service that is being provided that is the most highest weighted, not necessarily the cost of the contract. So moving forward if we do decide to outsource some or part of our services then we will be ensuring that the quality of those services is not diminished.

3.7.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Supplementary. So can we confirm from this Minister then that to all of those workers who are worried about the future of their careers now, who may be listening in on this or who may check the Hansard afterwards, that they know that the Minister, who is responsible for their future, will not say anything whatsoever on the future quality of their pay and terms and conditions and that on this particular cause he is not their advocate. In fact because he is not advocating on their behalf on this particular point then they can consider him an adversary because what they need is a Minister who is prepared to stand up for them. Would he confirm whether or not that is the case?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I feel what our staff need, sooner rather than later, is certainty. They need to know what their future is going to be and we are working with the unions and with staff to conclude the service reviews and all the ancillary processes that need to take place prior to making a final decision but we need to do that as quickly as we can but we do need to follow the correct process. What is unacceptable is for that process to get dragged out for other reasons, and I am certainly not going to be tolerating that. Staff need to know what the future holds. I intend to ensure that that happens as quickly as possible.

3.7.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Thank you, Minister. Among the extensive lists of meetings and briefings how come the department has failed to give notice to its employees that the day before ... sorry, until the day after tender or pre-tender bidding had been advertised in the paper? Was that the actions of a good, caring employer?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

My chief officer has already, through a newsletter, written to all staff apologising for that slight delay. It was one of those things that was an oversight, an unfortunate oversight, and it occurred due to both himself and myself being distracted by other matters which we may be coming to later.

3.7.6 Deputy J.A. Martin:

It may be better, I think, if the Minister could circulate the meetings that have been with the department and the unions, not the employee who is a member of the union on his staff side. Could he circulate a list and keep us updated with that list please?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I am happy to do so.