

3.16 Senator S.C. Ferguson of the Minister for Treasury and Resources regarding the financial justification of J.T. for charging for paper bills and for bills paid by cheque or cash: [1(123)]

Aside from J.T., will the Minister advise whether other utilities in which the States has a stake provide a discount on bills paid by direct debit rather than charging for a paper bill; and will the Minister be requiring J.T. to provide the financial justification for its stance on charging for paper bills, bills paid by cheque or cash, and I understand I should also include bills paid online which will also incur ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am afraid you cannot move beyond the form of the question but you could perhaps put it in a supplementary.

Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Yes, Sir. It was worth trying.

The Connétable of St. Peter (Assistant Minister for Treasury and Resources - rapporteur):

First of all I think we need to acknowledge that J.T. operate in a competitive environment with 2 other on-Island telephone companies and their performance needs to be optimised wherever possible. Dealing directly with the 2 elements of the good Senator's question. Firstly, there are 2 utilities: Jersey Water and Jersey Electricity who provide discounts. However, it is wrong to compare them directly to J.T. as they both differ significantly, that they are both only partly owned by the States and, secondly, and most importantly, both of those are monopoly operators; they have no market competitors in Jersey in which consumers would have a choice based solely on prices. Jersey Water provides a discount of £1 for payments made by direct debit. While e-billing is encouraged there is no discount offered for that. Jersey Electricity provides a discount of £2 for direct debits and £1 for e-billing. The net result is the same whether the standard tariff includes all charges and discounts for e-billing and e-payments or additional charges to cover the costs of bills by mail and payment by cash or cheque. Additionally, both Sure and Airtel, J.T.'s direct market competitors, make similar charges for bills by post and on direct debit payments. The financial justification for the proposed charges is due to the additional costs for bad debt management and collection costs of circa £1 million per annum and this is a straightforward administration cost which in efficiency terms can be avoided or reduced significantly. Additionally ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Connétable, I am afraid you are well past the one minute 30 seconds and, again, this was one of those ones where you were allowed a lot of leeway in the first answer.

The Connétable of St. Peter:

I will pick up the other points later perhaps.

3.16.1 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Is it reasonable to impose a £1.25 charge for paper invoices and £1.25 payment for cash or cheques or online payments when it represents a significant percentage of a pensioner's phone bill? We have already heard that the Consumer Council quotes pensioners who have got ... the charge represents something like 25 per cent. Is it reasonable? Surely there is another way such as quarterly bills or even 6-monthly bills for people with very small ...

The Connétable of St. Peter:

I will pick up the last part first. Yes, we can do that, certainly quarterly bills is on offer and I am certain that, if it were appropriate for the individual, J.T. would consider a 6-monthly bill as well. Just to go back to also the good Senator mentioned the Consumer Council and the Consumer Council has made a comment on this, if I may: “the Council is committed to ensuring that Jersey’s most vulnerable members of society are not left behind” so I am pleased that J.T. has been prepared to engage constructively, listen and adapt. While I appreciate that behaviours change over time, as a States-owned company J.T. has added responsibility to ensure that no customer is unfairly disadvantaged and J.T. stand by that commitment.

3.16.2 Deputy S.M. Brée of St. Clement:

We have had a number of questions this morning relating to the charging policy of J.T. and the Assistant Minister has obviously drawn the distinction between Jersey Telecom and the other utility companies whereby it is wholly States owned. Would the Assistant Minister not agree that, as it is a wholly States owned company, we can give direction, as the shareholder, towards that wholly owned company’s social responsibility towards the community as opposed to just worrying about the dividend we receive at the end of the financial year?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

Of course the Minister for Treasury and Resources does have the power of direction although it does not apply particularly with regard to *Jersey Post* so it is one of the early incorporations; I am not sure that is included in their M.O.U. (Memorandum of Understanding). But equally if you were to do that it would have to be in the interests of the people of Jersey, not a very small group of people on their own.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am afraid that brings the period for questions to an end and accordingly there is no time to deal with the last 2 questions on the list.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can I ask the Assembly if we could extend question time so we do finish the 2 remaining questions as I believe that the public have the right to hear them?

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am not sure that is possible because that would require removal of the Standing Orders which provides for question time of itself and therefore there will be no basis for a question time at all if one extends the time. But I will check, if you wish me to do so, Deputy.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I would, Sir, because there are important public issues at stake here in one of these.

Deputy E.J. Noel of St. Lawrence:

If I may help, one of the questions is addressed to myself and I have questions without notice immediately afterwards so I can answer that question then.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Very well, that is helpful. The Minister for Infrastructure of course has questions without notice immediately afterwards so he will be in a position to answer that.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I am particularly interested in the one to the Attorney General.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am sorry, Deputy, it is not possible. There are certain provisions for an extension of time, for example where questions deal with ministerial statements but the question, the Standing Order 63 which provides for the existence of question time at all specifies it has to be for 2 hours and no greater than 2 hours.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can I ask then that this question is put as the first question on the Order Paper for the next sitting?

The Deputy Bailiff:

I think it is a matter for you to re-lodge it straight away and it will then, in the normal course, be placed upon the Order Paper for the next sitting.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Thank you.

Deputy M. Tadier:

May I ask a point of order, notwithstanding what some other parliaments in the Commonwealth do and they do lift Standing Orders on a regular basis? Is it not the case that where Standing Orders does not provide for a course of action it is within the Chair's capability to prescribe what happens, and because there is nothing that says what happens when we lift Standing Orders it would be down to yourself, Sir, or any Chair to say: "In this case we will allow 5 minutes for one question to be asked before moving on to questions without notice?"

The Bailiff:

If the Chair construes Standing Orders, Deputy, it has to construe the Standing Orders as a whole. Given that there is a section within Standing Orders that permits the extension of time in certain circumstances it must be presumed that the Standing Orders do not permit the extension of time in different circumstances, and the Chair has previously ruled, on more than one occasion, that to lift Standing Orders means the lifting of the entire Standing Order which removes the possibility of question time in any event because that is provided for in the same Standing Order. So I regret that I cannot allow any proposition to move forward, it would need to be a matter for P.P.C. (Privileges and Procedures Committee) I think to address any difficulties that arise.