

2019.10.08

9 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of the Chief Minister regarding cost statements included in responses to States members' written questions: (OQ.230/2019)

Will the Chief Minister advise whether any thresholds have been set in relation to the cost of work undertaken when answering States Members' written and oral questions; and, if so, what are those thresholds and how will they be used?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (The Chief Minister):

No, no thresholds have been set. I assume this is in reference to a set of decisions I put in play last time around in terms of putting the costs on certain questions. I just really want to clarify that over time, in terms of both now and in the past when I have been an Assistant Minister, it has been quite clear from officers' points of view that certain areas do generate a lot of questions and sometimes they take quite a long time to answer. I hold my hand up very particularly in the past as having asked some quite penetrating questions. I have been given some information previously about how the volume of questions has changed over the course of the Assembly, so I was just curious as to what that mirrors into in terms of the costs to produce. That is the only reason we are doing it, it was a curiosity and it is a trial basis and intending to run it from the point of view of the Chief Minister's Department out until Christmas and then we will see what that looks like. But it might also give us an indication as to whether we should be handling questions differently and we process that a bit better. So, it is purely an interest point of view, nothing should be attributed to it and, at the end of the day, it is absolutely clear it is the Assembly's right and duty to hold Ministers to account and, therefore, it would be clearly wrong to impose any form of threshold.

4.9.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

So, doing a bit of research about this, other parliaments around the world, including the House of Commons, do have an advisory cost limit known as the proportionate cost threshold. Roughly, for written answers in the House of Commons, it is over £800; the average cost is £140.

[10:45]

So, I just raise that because I understand the Chief Minister's curiosity for penetration - I think I got that right - but it can be perceived that it is not all questions. One could be perceived that there is an objection to one written question to another, for example £41 for one question, where there is little detail and a long answer where there is no cost. Just the perception of this trial possibly, maybe, could have brought through via P.P.C. (Privileges and Procedures Committee) that the Assembly could have looked at this and I just ask if that is something he had broached.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

If P.P.C., at some point in the future, want to look at that, that is completely up to them. I have just wanted to do something and set it in motion, which is what we have done. Obviously, sometimes, with the greatest respect to the workloads that P.P.C. has, it can sometimes take longer to implement. I thought, from a ministerial point of view, it is something under our control, let us put the information out there and see what it is. P.P.C., obviously, do some very good works about recording the number of questions asked by Members and things like that and that is what they record in their work. Just for clarity, number one is the costs do not include what I will call admin time in terms of processing and deciding who goes where or, obviously, ministerial time; that probably would not be appropriate. Also, just to give a flavour, obviously this week we had about 36 written questions, excluding the last time around the previous 2 sittings were about 38 and 40. That

is purely written questions. Obviously, technically and that is arguably around depending how long it takes and it is interesting that some of the questions are very quick to answer, but if that was an hour each time, which is not what we are seeing at the moment, that would be a working week. But, as I say, it was purely just to get some information. I thank the Deputy for his comments around other parliamentary views. I was not aware of that; that is again something we have learned out of the process. But, no, it is purely to see, by the end of Christmas and then we will get some feedback from Members and see where we go. Obviously, I am discussing it slowly with other Ministers as well, but it was purely a curiosity question.

The Bailiff:

Both the question and the answer there were very long. We have lots of questions to get through.

4.9.2 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Does the Chief Minister acknowledge that for information gathering purposes this could have been done as part of the work carried out by officers and gathered for his own personal perusal before, necessarily, just jumping straight into publicly publishing cost of questions? Does he acknowledge that for Members, particularly backbenchers, it could be perceived as a deterrent when it comes to asking about particular topics, or indeed for particular volumes of information?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

We live in the age of transparency is the obvious answer. There is that dilemma between do I get the information and hold it to myself, or do we just say let us see what it looks like. At the moment we are in the territory of let us see what it looks like. Members should not be deterred and, as I said, I will very happily point the Deputy at a very long question I put to Treasury, I think, 2 years ago and I do not know how many hours that took and I suspect it was a long time. But, no, it is purely, as I keep reiterating, just curious to see how it works and it generated a little bit of spark among certain Members, which is always good and, therefore, I think I will be damned if I do and damned if I do not, if I kind of held information to myself.

4.9.3 Deputy K.F. Morel:

If the Chief Minister was genuinely interested in the views of his parliamentary colleagues on this, would it not have been better for the Chief Minister to speak to his parliamentary colleagues, before embarking upon this course of action? Because, making the base of an answer to a question, suddenly, out of nowhere, appeared these cost descriptions; it only comes across as intimidating. Does the Chief Minister accept that and does the Chief Minister understand that, in order to get the views of parliamentary colleagues, you have to speak to parliamentary colleagues?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

You will find the Deputy will have, or various Members will advise that I do speak to colleagues. Over time, in fact, we had a useful conversation yesterday. But I refuse to believe that the Deputy would be intimidated by me and, if he did, (a) I would apologise and (b) he should not be.

4.9.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Would the Chief Minister not agree that this sends out the wrong message? It has put a monetary price on democratic involvement, which is so important for this Island, so important for this Assembly and subsequently it changes the dynamic of what we are doing in this Assembly and I will assure you I will not be put off writing questions to you.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Good. No, the point is - and I am curious at the reaction of Members - it was purely to see how long it takes and, as I said, we have had some information that was given to me, roughly in 2019 we are about 30 per cent up on questions to the average over the previous 3 years and that just gives an indication ... that is not a bad thing, it gives an indication that Members are holding Ministers to account and I think that is good. But you will also find, in the past, Members kept lists of who was, or was not, present; Deputy Maçon used to be very diligent on that front, in terms of their attendance in the Assembly and also you will find that the Greffier will keep a record of the number of questions asked during the year. I believe Deputy Southern probably holds the record for many years. I might be wrong there, but he has never been intimidated by that and long may that last.

4.9.5 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I respond to Written Question 405, where the cost of producing the answer to my question was a total of £7. I think that is all I need to say on this; that the threshold also includes oral questions in other parliamentarians. It was ironic that I noticed this while in Uganda, with other parliamentarians across the Commonwealth and I just feel that the Chief Minister - though I appreciate and I honestly understand where he is coming from - there needs to be a review on his curiosity on this matter.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

We will look at it at Christmas. I would say that on some of the other questions the answer has been negligible and that probably should have been the answer around £7 exactly. Again, it is a trial and that is what we will learn from.