

2019.01.29

1 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding the accessibility of information relating to the responsibilities of Ministers and civil servants: [OQ.27/2019]

What steps will the Chief Minister take, and by when, to ensure that States Members and the public know which Ministers and civil servants are responsible for what, from where they operate and how to contact them when either seeking information or registering complaints in relation to their areas of responsibility?

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

Hopefully, the Deputy is aware that we are in the middle of an office move, with Ministers and staff moving over the next few weeks. Once that move has taken place, I will be ensuring that there will be a clear directory published, including locations of departments of Ministers. Members' contact details are already published, as we know, on the Assembly website, and obviously if you do not have the internet connectivity, for example, I am sure the Parish Halls will be delighted to give you the right contact details if you need them. The other thing that is happening is the walk-in facility, as it were, at La Motte Street. It seems to be proving fairly successful and what they call the welcome hosts there do have all contact details if somebody wants to make a complaint in person or seek out information in person. So, in general at the moment, despite the move, telephone and email contact details remain the same. The States website is in the process of being updated. I had a look last night and there is still quite a long way to go in terms of the organisational structures. That is in hand and is presently being changed. It is taking longer to do than anticipated, I think. In relation to complaints, we have tried to make it easier for a person to make a complaint. Part of that is online - that is about having a single process - but obviously again that can be done through La Motte Street in person or by phone. The issue around the new complaints system, just to put it in - it is not just all change for change's sake - as I understand it that will allow us to give proper monitoring now.

[9:45]

So if we see a pattern of complaints coming in on a department we can identify that and start reacting to that. So there are some good changes coming through, but the Deputy is right, at the moment it is not as clear as it should be.

3.1.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I am pleased that the Chief Minister has gone through this. For the benefit of Members, I had a discussion with the Chief Minister about this question so he is more informed as to where I was coming from. Basically, it took me 2 days to find a director general, a telephone number or an email address, and I think that is totally unacceptable. No matter the fact there is a reorganisation going on, the Communications Department could have put out the information and given us something and the public something.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, this is a supplementary question.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

So does the Chief Minister accept his department could have done better in trying to keep everyone informed about what is going on and can do things in a staged way, even during the reorganisation?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

We can always do things better and again it does depend ... the issue being around how much online presence we look at. I did have a look and what I did track down relatively easily is the structure, and individuals are under States departments as a single page, but that has not been transferred yet to the individual department on the website, if that makes sense. So we are in an interim position. I will make sure - I thought it had taken place - that the structure is circulated to all Members as well because it is just a single page P.D.F. (portable document format) but, as I said, the details are in the process of being put through. It should have been done quicker.

3.1.2 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Would the Chief Minister like to confirm that the Ministers know where all the parts of their departments are? Is putting the Ministers in one office suite not, in effect, setting up a new silo?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I would hope the Ministers know exactly who they all have underneath them in terms of responsibility, so yes. The point about bringing the Ministers together is to try ... there is a balance. It is trying to break down the silos and making sure Ministers themselves talk to each other. By putting us all into the same building as many of the civil servants - do not forget this is an interim move - we are hoping the connectivity and the talking to each other at both officer level and at each other's level will improve. It will be very much down to us to ensure that we do not suddenly start operating in a political bubble, but I rather suspect 2 things. One is that this Assembly will prevent us from doing so, and (2) that the individual Ministers, who have deliberately chosen for the diversity of views, would also make sure that we do not live in that ivory tower that the Senator alluded to.

3.1.3 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier:

May I suggest in the spirit of transparency over responsibility of Ministers and their civil servants that when we receive written answers from Ministers perhaps the names of the civil servants and the officers who were involved in those answers are also included. Because I am growing increasingly concerned about the quality of the answers in addressing the questions that we are setting as Back-Benchers. This is a genuine concern that I think is shared among other Members of this Assembly as well.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I could hear some murmuring from the back, which I am entirely in agreement with. The point about written questions and oral questions and questions without notice is they are the answers of the Ministers. So, although departments do assist in putting them together, the Minister has to be happy with the response. It is the Minister's response.

3.1.4 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:

Following on from a question from a constituent, can the Minister clarify when the new nomenclature for the amalgamated departments will be updated to the Government website? We still have, for example, Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture alongside the Education Department rather than the new ones. Is this in train?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

As I alluded to in my original answer, yes, it is in train. There is a P.D.F. which does give the new structures but that has not translated on to the main departmental details on the websites.

My understanding, because I was quite surprised that it had not progressed as far as I would like to have seen, is there are 2 issues. One is obviously the actual appointments process, which was only relatively recently completed. Secondly, for some reason the old title names are quite deeply embedded in the website so there are some technical reasons which are taking a while to sort out. I was surprised but I am told it is being worked on and will be sorted out fairly shortly.

3.1.5 Connétable M.K. Jackson of St. Brelade:

Getting down to the here and now, the Connétables very often have to deal with live cases. I had a situation last week whereby I had an approach regarding a vulnerable adult. It has taken me until this morning to get the answer as to whom I should be talking to. For the Chief Minister's information, there is a single point of referral or S.P.O.R., which in real language and translated is the point of contact if you have concern or need to make a referral about a vulnerable adult. It has taken far too long to get to that stage and we must do better about this.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Could we have a question now?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I would ask the Chief Minister to bring the communication system certainly to the Parishes as soon as possible.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Absolutely.

3.1.6 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

Is the Chief Minister really suggesting that if we want to follow up a question we will have to chase down the Assistant Minister or the Minister, both of whom are very busy people with a whole group of officers around them who might better be used to follow up and clarify any answers given? Surely that would be a more logical way forward for Back-Benchers to follow up questions.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I do not think that is what I said in my answer at all. The question that was made was could the identities or positions of the officers who do assist Ministers in getting questions put together be added into the question, and the point is that from the view of this Assembly political accountability rests with the Minister when they give the answers.

3.1.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

So what advice has he got for Back-Benchers who wish to follow up and clarify the answers to questions in terms of who to contact? Is it to be only the Minister or is it to be the officers?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

As an Assistant Minister, if the Deputy sends it to either the Minister or the Assistant Minister who has given the response, that individual will make sure it then percolates down to the right level. That is the point. The political accountability rests with the people who have been delegated that responsibility and in this Assembly it is the politicians.

3.1.8 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I think the point has been made, but I will just ask the Chief Minister to go away and get his Communications Department to start getting their act together and get this information out so we can all operate more efficiently.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I take the point. They are doing it. It has taken longer than they would have hoped because of some of the technical difficulties. Part of that has been we are in a time of change, so as that change starts bedding down, then that communication will start beefing up. But yes, I take the point about doing it in phases. To an extent that has started because there is a structure on the website, but it is not as easy to find as the Deputy might like.