

2020.06.30

10 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding the impact on frontline services of the economic recovery plan: (OQ.185/2020)

Will the Chief Minister assure Members that there will be no cuts to front line services resulting from reductions in staff numbers, or otherwise, when devising the economic recovery plan to replace the 2020 Government Plan?

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

As I have said previously, we are very much at the early stages of considering the Government Recovery Plan and this would have to be a comprehensive document to cover all the things we need to deliver including, but not limited to, economic recovery. We know there are significant financial pressures on the public finances, particularly in light of the measures we previously put in place to help individuals as well as businesses, but also as a consequence of the likely direct financial consequences of the crisis itself. Therefore, as I have said previously, everything remains on the table at this stage, nothing is in, nothing is out. But personally I do wish us to retain obviously front line services, their delivery may change as a result of what we have learned, but also as a result of the need to balance the books, but really it is simply too early to say any more than that at this stage.

4.10.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

What I am concerned about is that we see a repeat of the 2010 process, which did ascribe service cuts, for example a saving of 3.8 police posts back in 2010 at a saving of £220,000. Will the Minister assure us that we will not have a repeat of these types of cuts, which are definitely service cuts?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I do not think I can add much more to what I said in my first answer, which is at this stage it is too early to say much more than what I have said. Everything remains on the table; nothing is off it. We do have significant financial pressures, probably unprecedented in the last 70 years; it is of that order of magnitude. There are a variety of measures we have to take to get those books balanced and that is what we are presently working on. But from the perspective of impact on front line services I would hope we were all in the place that we wanted to try to make sure we continue to deliver those services and protect the front line jobs. But I cannot give a guarantee at this stage because we simply do not know. We will know over the next few months what the picture looks like but, as I said, from my personal perspective I do want to support front line services.

4.10.2 Senator K.L. Moore:

Notwithstanding the obvious pressures that the Council of Ministers have and the difficult decisions that face them, could the Chief Minister accept that making statements such as the one he has just given is quite unhelpful for the mental health and well-being of staff who may be concerned about their future roles in the organisation? We must remember at this time that they have been under considerable pressure in relation to the OneGov and the implementation of target operating models for the past 2 years and this will only impact on that situation.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Just to pick up on the last point first; I am very much of the view that the changes in the structure to produce the OneGov structure, which was obviously approved essentially by the previous Council of Ministers in principle, is I am very much of the view that structure has assisted greatly in the ability

of the Government and the Island to respond to the crisis as well as it has done and credit should be given where credit is due, and in particular it is the chief executive. So, from that perspective, I disagree with the inference of the Senator. But also we have to be honest, in these very challenging times one should not give false promises out there and so what I am saying is I cannot guarantee something until we have finalised the work that we need to do. But within all that lot I reiterate my personal view that we should be doing everything we can to protect front line services but equally there will be, I am sure, examples where services have been delivered differently over COVID-19 and that the service continues to be delivered but just in a different fashion. So all those are elements in the mix and, as I said, at this stage we have to make sure that everything remains on the table because of the magnitude of the problem we face. But my personal view is that we should be doing everything we can to support the delivery of the front line services.

4.10.3 Senator K.L. Moore:

If the Chief Minister could set a timeline with which he might delivery a high-level strategy so that at least there is some level of understanding of the direction of travel and the parameters with which the Council of Ministers are approaching this decision-making process to give some level of certainty to those people who may feel affected.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

It will basically be laid out in the Government Plan.

4.10.4 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I am a little bit concerned in one sense about the future direction when we do not even know where we are. I have asked 2 written questions today of the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Home Affairs for details of the organisational structure and other information about the departments so I can understand where we are at the moment so we can judge by the changes that are going to happen. Neither could give me the information that I really required. They have given some but not all. Will the Chief Minister undertake to get that information to me and Members as soon as possible so we can understand what the structure is at the present and what changes have taken place?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I will endeavour to get it to the Deputy as quickly as practical. What I will say is that certainly some of the final elements of the restructuring were meant to have been taking place in the February/March/April period and therefore, along with a variety of other matters, as we will all expect, there have been delays because of the COVID-19 issues and I suspect that may well have been the reason that the Deputy did not get the answer he was looking for. But at the very least I can make sure he is presented with where we intend to get to and provide an update in due course.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I would appreciate if you would get the existing information, which would be very useful, thank you.

4.10.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

When deciding on possible removal of front line services, will the Chief Minister commit to consulting directly with those who provide these services on a day-to-day basis in order to fully understand the impact of possible removal of these front line services for the people of Jersey?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

As I have said, at this stage I cannot guarantee anything; everything remains on the table. If something does have to change then it will go through the normal process, which, as I have always understood it, does include consultation. That is really what we can say. We will have choices to make and it is ultimately going to be in the hands of the Assembly but the magnitude of the challenge should not be underestimated and we are all having to address how we deal with the magnitude of the problems we are going to be facing.

4.10.6 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Is that choice not best informed by those who provide services and see the genuine impact rather than those who sit in offices with spreadsheets and numbers and have no real connect with the day-to-day working of front line services and the genuine importance they have for the people who use those services? Can the Minister commit at least to talking to those staff and the people who receive services before they are removed?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

We have not said we are removing anything at this stage. What I have said is I cannot guarantee that nothing will be removed because it depends on the magnitude of what we are having to deal with. My preference is to deal with some very large strategic issues, which will significantly reduce the challenge that we face, but may not entirely remove it. It is at that point we will then have to address how we square that circle. The other issue of what the Deputy is talking about, and I do take the point he is making around people sitting effectively in darkened rooms with a spreadsheet - I hope that is not just accountants he is talking about - but the other issue on all of this is dealing with the overall strategic balance on the organisation and so it is absolutely true that there will be individuals who could be affected and we will look at things from their perspective and obviously their views will need to be taken into account. But it will mean that we do have to take account of the overall issues within the organisation, and it may not be a service, it may be in a new project and it may be a case that a particular project has to be deferred, for example, rather than cancelled, but by doing that that manages the cashflow issues that we will be facing and protects jobs in the wider sense. So there will be all those kinds of measures we have to take into account and, as I am trying to say at this stage, all I am saying is I cannot guarantee what the Deputy and Deputy Southern are looking for but I have said my preference is to ensure that we protect our front line services.

[10:45]

4.10.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Let us try a different form of words here, and we are not talking about transforming services and still delivering them, we are talking about deferring, reducing or ceasing them. Will the Chief Minister undertake to ensure that children and young people in particular are protected from any plans to reduce Government growth budgets and genuinely put children first instead of use it as a common old garden phrase?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Again, I cannot guarantee. As the Deputy fully knows, his party representative is in charge of those particular areas but it will be very much where we absolutely know we have to invest in Children's Services. I do not see any reason why that investment is not going to continue because we know that, even though we face challenges, we also know that we faced under-resourcing in certain significant areas and Children's Services was one of them. Whether that means, having said all that, a project starts fractionally later within a particular year, for example in 2021 or during 2020, I cannot state that at this point, but I am absolutely convinced that the Minister will be on top of that.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

So no protection to children then.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I did not say that.

The Deputy Bailiff:

You have had the final supplementary, Deputy Southern.