

2020.03.09

10 Deputy I. Gardiner of the Chief Minister regarding the work undertaken by the Council of Ministers in preparing for, and dealing with, COVID-19: (OQ.68/2020)

Will the Chief Minister provide an update on what the Council of Ministers is doing with regard to the current situation with COVID-19 (i.e. Coronavirus)?

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

I thank the Deputy for her very current and appropriate question. The position has been escalating over the last few weeks. Ministers have been actively involved and leading in preparations throughout this time. Ministers have also been liaising with their Departments' officers and informed of all key measures being taken in their respective areas. All States Members had the opportunity to attend a briefing last Tuesday and should be receiving an email update later today. Key business organisations were also updated last Thursday. The Emergencies Council has been on standby to meet when required and is meeting on this Thursday. Six Ministers attend the Council and are responsible for making its decisions. Given the Island's previous preparations for Brexit, as well as the planning team's overall preparedness for events of these types, the Island is in a strong position to respond to this challenge. Today we announced a widespread media campaign promoting basic hygiene practices and reassuring Islanders and reinforcing the messages that the Minister for Health and Social Services and I gave to the media last week. I would also take the opportunity to remind Members – **[background interruption]** on cue, Sir - of the importance of frequently washing hands with soap and of appropriate respiratory hygiene, as demonstrated very ably by the Chairman of P.P.C. (Privileges and Procedures Committee). But I do encourage Members to check gov.je for the latest updates or to phone the hotline, which is 445566, if they have any concerns.

3.10.1 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I do appreciate the media campaign has started and it will work. We are all aware about the hygiene and will continue to spread the message. We do receive the update about the health situation. I would like to ask the Chief Minister if he can advise what plans are in place to help the small businesses and hospitality sector, which might face significant financial difficulties, which could lead to insolvency and job losses?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Quite a wide-ranging answer there. Starting point: we have been preparing for a Brexit day one no deal for the past 4 years and, therefore, although this is a different challenge, it is of the same type of challenge and, therefore, there have been plans being put in place for quite a long time around things like continuity of supplies and those types of areas.

[16:00]

Secondly, particularly if one looks on the gov.je website, there are already things in place for, for example, people who are self-employed; there is some reference to that on the website, or people who might be in difficulties because they have to self-isolate. Thirdly, Senator Farnham is establishing what is being called a Coronavirus Business Liaison Group and that is having its first meeting tomorrow and he met a number of the representative business organisations last Thursday to discuss areas of concern around the Coronavirus challenge. Hopefully, that gives a flavour that we are escalating the preparedness, we are building and refreshing plans that have been around for

quite some time and we believe, as the situation continues to evolve on a daily basis, as of to date we believe we are in a good position.

3.10.2 Deputy K.F. Morel:

While I agree that there are similarities with Brexit preparations, Coronavirus can unfortunately also affect things like ships' crews, or warehouse staff in the U.K. Given the threat to Jersey's very thin supply line, which is one company, would the Minister be able to provide reassurance that he is working with these companies to ensure that, in the event of illness or quarantine, *et cetera*, our supplies will not be affected?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The short answer is yes. That was part of the discussion that was taking place last week around supply lines and about additional warehousing and those types of facilities, so those discussions are taking place under the auspices of Senator Farnham as Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture.

3.10.3 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Would the Minister be able to give us a bit more detail about the results of those discussions? What is being put in place? Because there is no warehousing in Jersey and we do only have one shipping firm supplying in any notable bulk to the Island.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I cannot give specific details today. I can arrange, if the Deputy or perhaps Members, I can make sure that is included or perhaps added in an email that is sent around shortly, but, as I said, my understanding, it was very specifically around our supply lines and just ensuring that the business continuity plans of the organisation affected were being refreshed to cope with potential scenarios. What I will just say, and the Deputy will no doubt remind me, it is not just about us but what we have to remember, as of today, even though it is getting closer as Members probably know, we do not have any positive tests for Coronavirus on this Island. That may well change; it could change imminently, it could change over the next 2 weeks, we do not know, but the business continuity plans, businesses are being encouraged to just refresh their business continuity plans and that should all be part of it. Most people, the advice to date, are likely to be affected relatively mildly from this and so therefore one is dealing with a manageable scenario and that is about reassurance and, in fact, we are pretty well placed to deal with this particular challenge.

3.10.4 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Given the briefing that Members were given on this recently, would the Chief Minister not agree that the Government has responsibility to plan for realistic worst-case scenario, irrespective of the fact that it is likely not to be less extreme than that scenario and could he clarify what support the Government is giving businesses to cope with the kind of scenarios that were outlined to Members in that private briefing?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

One must remember that much of the matter to date has been on a medical basis and therefore it has been running under the Minister for Health and Social Services in his auspices. What I would say on that front is that Members may, or may not, recall that before Christmas there was a desktop exercise for pandemic flu, which was held at the Town Hall, as a day exercise. So the point is there has been contingency planning being carried out and that this is just a variation on that contingency

planning - that was really the point that was being made by the relevant officer at the briefing for States Members about this - is another issue around contingency and continuity planning. In terms of the support for businesses, what we have to say is we must not underplay the risks, but we must not over-exaggerate them either, because sometimes the over-exaggeration, the consequences of that over-exaggeration can sometimes be worse than the incident you are trying to prepare for. But, as of this stage, there is some support identified on the website for small businesses; when I say that, I talk about self-employed and about employees. The reference has been made about making it a notifiable disease that does, depending on the circumstances, mean that it then becomes applicable for certain insurance purposes. So, there are various pieces of advice that are coming out on that. In terms of the exact detail, that is the purpose of the conversations that Senator Farnham was having with business last week and that is the reason he is setting up this Business Liaison Group to just identify where the key issues are going to be coming through and hospitality will, no doubt, be one of those areas. We do have contingencies available for scenarios; we must not jump to those until we know what impact we are going to be having on-Island.

3.10.5 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Is the Chief Minister saying that preparing for the realistic worst-case scenario, like outlined to Members, would be an overreaction?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

No, but what I am saying is I believe that we are well prepared for the contingencies that were outlined in that briefing.

3.10.6 The Deputy of St. Martin:

The Chief Minister talks of messages and reassurances, but does he not agree with me that waiting until Thursday for the Emergencies Council is just too long?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

No. What I have to say - because there have been some comments around this and I am not directing this at the Deputy of St. Martin - this is the time for us to be looking after the Island and Islanders, for us to be coming together and not for any shape or form of political point scoring and I am not directing that at the Deputy. What I was going to say though is we have been planning for this, we have been escalating that planning for a number of weeks and that is why the Minister for Health and Social Services and myself were making various public comments during the course of last week. We have been actively involved as matters have escalated prior to that time. That is why States Members were given their first update last week and there will be an update coming through. So, plans are being refreshed and they are being refreshed in time for the Emergencies Council on Thursday. To date, we have no positive cases and, therefore, there is no need for an earlier Emergencies Council and that is based, not only on a political view, but on the professional advice we are being given. We have also emphasised this is a rapidly changing scenario. If we need to pull the Emergencies Council forward we will do so, but at this stage there is no need to, we carry on with the plans, we allow those plans to be refreshed and we then will be considering them properly and formally at the Emergencies Council. But do not forget, as I said, key Ministers have been actively involved in these plans, in these discussions, in these preparations, for days and weeks.

3.10.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

Given a significant number of the population may be affected, including States Members, has the Chief Minister given any consideration to installing a system of proxy, or remote, voting?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Oddly enough, that is not something that comes under my remit; it comes under the Chairman of P.P.C. I will not say around proxy voting, but there are some continuity discussions either taking place, or about to take place, as to what would happen if it did impact on either States Members, or personnel supporting States Members. But, to this date, that is going to be the very matter for the Chairman of P.P.C., but I will very happily be working and supporting him.

3.10.8 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

Given the news that the U.K. Government has stated that the N.H.S. (National Health Service) will get whatever resources it needs to cope with the current situation, would that be the same situation if our health service needed extra funding at this time, would that money be available quickly?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The short answer to that is yes. It always depends on what the circumstances are and by that I mean that at the moment the health service is preparing itself accordingly; it has measures in place already and, as we were briefed last week, the relevant pieces of kit that are needed that are relevant to a population of this size on the Island are available. As we have also said, within the Government Plan there is flexibility on funding and that is according to what contingency measures come through. But I go back to the point, we are refreshing plans, this is a daily evolving matter; I believe, on the basis of all information we have been given to date, that we are well prepared for this. I re-emphasise the point - and that is a role we all have - it is all about re-emphasising the hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene and putting that message out – absolutely, from Deputy of St. Peter - because that is the best defence against this virus; it is a fragile fatty virus and soap kills it. That was an attempt at the virus and not at the Deputy of St. Peter. [Laughter]

3.10.9 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Minister what advice he would give to those residents of the Island who may not qualify for sick leave, or health care, if the need - and I say “if” because I support the calm that we need - to self-isolate does increase?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I believe that support has already been put in place and it might be worth having a discussion with the Minister for Social Security. There are references on the website to it and I believe measures have already been put in place that will address some of the issues he has identified.

3.10.10 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Again, it is not being alarmist, but the World Health Organization has produced figures, which shows the age profile, the people most at risk and it is people who are above 60. Those who are 70, for example, it is 8.9 per cent mortality rate and higher when you get to 80. Can the Minister assure me that the Health Service has sufficient acute beds to deal with that 20 per cent, probably the elderly people, that we have sufficient resources in that area to deal with them, whereas the vast majority of people in the Island will get a mild form of the Coronavirus.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Yes, in fact I was being updated with the Minister for Health and Social Services by the Head of the Health Department and vulnerable people will be well catered for on this Island in respect to the Coronavirus.

3.10.11 Deputy G.J. Truscott:

It is at times like this we should be grateful that, due to prudent and forward-thinking, we have a Strategic Reserve. It would have been recently affected by the stock market plunge. I was just curious, Chief Minister, how much is currently in the Strategic Reserve?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I am just looking at the figures I did have. The Strategic Reserve was forecast at the end of 2019 to be £848 million. I have not had the updates in the last few weeks as to what the impact has been and there are 2 things that come out of that. One is we did build flexibility into the Government Plan and that is important and that is at various levels and I will not go into all those details, but we have certain reserves if we needed to, because we were talking about Brexit. This is a different challenge, but from a financial and economic challenge we have those measures in place. We also need to break this down between the short to medium term and long term. At the moment, we are in the short-term impact. We have time to prepare if we needed to and we will be in a position of assessing what that impact is later on. We are also waiting for some advice from the F.P.P. (Fiscal Policy Panel), which is due fairly shortly. But again we are financially in a good place. We do have, as he has alluded to, money has been put aside in the past and we did make it very clear in the Government Plan that we do have certain levels of flexibility if we need them.

3.10.12 Deputy I. Gardiner:

As the Chief Minister indicated that the situation is rapidly changing and escalating, I would like to check what measures might the Government implement in the event of World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 as a pandemic?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

At this stage that is a hypothetical scenario and we will just address that as it comes through. It is a discussion that will be taking place. The point again, there is what the external impact is of how it is declared and what the position is on the Island at any point in time. To date, reiterate - and it may change - to date we have no cases, we are making sure we want that campaign still going out about decent hand-washing, cover your coughs, all that type of stuff and that is the best defence. If we can go through that and making sure that, both within Government and also within the private sector, that the business continuity plans are in place and refreshed, then we will continue to be in a good place to deal with the challenges that come through. As I said, we will deal with each of these escalations as we go through, we will do them in a considered way, with professional advice, as they come through. Obviously, the impacts the Deputy refers to could have a wider scenario and that could cover quite a wide spectrum. Let us deal with that if and when they declare that. At this stage we are not in that position.