

21.02.09

13 Deputy I. Gardiner of the Chief Minister regarding the Office Accommodation project (OQ.30/2021)

Will the Chief Minister provide the Assembly with an update on the progress of the office accommodation project?

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

There will be a States Members briefing for all Members, it is scheduled for later this week. In fact Members have now started responding to the meeting request. The Deputy, in her capacity as chair of P.A.C. (Public Accounts Committee), was given a confidential briefing on 3rd February alongside the members of her committee and members of the Corporate Services Scrutiny Panel and the One Gov Review Panel. I believe reference was made to giving Members a briefing during that briefing. As I said, the timing is scheduled for the end of this week.

6.13.1 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I do not think it was an answer. I have received a private briefing and I have submitted this question prior to any other private briefings to the Members were arranged. My question is public and whatever update done in the public domain I would like to ask to do this.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Sorry, I must have misinterpreted the question. The question was: will I be providing the Assembly with an update on the progress of the Office Accommodation Project? The answer is, yes, we will be on Friday.

6.13.2 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Obviously, we do not know what the content of that update will be, but part of the rationale for having an office accommodation project is to make better use of government-owned sites and free up other sites so that they can have a better economic use. Is the Chief Minister in a position of being able to tell whether enough progress has been made on the office accommodation project to start making real moves in allocating sites for affordable housing?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The short answer on that is the crucial point before we can start saying, yes, this site can be released on such-and-such a date, and how it gets released and what it will be used for, is very much making sure we have the location nailed down, signed up from a contractual point of view, and then moving forward. That is what I want to ensure we are giving briefings to Members on, as I said, Friday. But, please, when I say rest assured, there is no one keener than me to see this progressed for the reasons that the Senator has outlined because that is then the medium term of releasing those sites. That is about generating the further supply that we all know we need. But also because of the sheer benefits that come through from the way of the organisation working, but fundamentally for the taxpayer (a) of the roughly £7 million a year it will save and (b) in the costs that it will avoid. Because, if we do nothing, it is around £30 million more than what we are proposing. So there are savings to the taxpayer, benefits for the organisation, and also benefits in achieving supply on brownfield sites to a much-needed housing supply that we need.

6.13.3 Deputy I. Gardiner:

All public and ourselves, we have seen R.4 be lodged without any consultation and update for the States Members. I assume there will be a new Standing Order lodged pretty shortly. My question is: how are you taking in consideration changing working practice due to the COVID into the new office accommodation? If it is right time to press with the One Gov new office accommodation when we do not know how the working practices will be after COVID will go.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I cannot recall if that was in the briefing to P.A.C., et cetera, last week, but I am fairly certain it was. But certainly in the whole office accommodation strategy, it has been reviewed taking account of COVID. The project still remains absolutely valid in the light of the COVID experience. Frankly, if we wished to go down the further delay, I make the point it was delayed 10 years ago. We have made no progress on it up to basically the last 18 months, 2 years. If the decision is to delay it further, then, as I said, 10 years ago the savings were £3 million to £4 million a year, it is now £7 million a year. That is excluding productivity. Obviously 10 years, with productivity, I used to reckon on about £10 million a year savings at least. Therefore, 10 times 10, it has cost us £100 million so far by not doing it. All that will happen is the estate will continue to fall into further disrepair. We will not release the brownfield sites and we will not achieve moving the whole thing forward.

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From that perspective, we have reviewed it for COVID, it is still valid, and we do need to be moving this forward.