

21.03.23

10 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the funding allocated to LibertyBus in the Government Plan 2021–2024 (OQ.79/2021):

Will the Minister advise how much of the funding allotted to LibertyBus in the Government Plan has been allocated to date; and what assessment of any such spend has been undertaken, given the easing of public health restrictions?

Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour (The Minister for Infrastructure):

The Government Plan provides COVID-19 response funding of up to £2 million for additional bus operating contract support payments in 2021. It covers the period during which emergency restrictions are expected to remain in place. The effect of the restrictions has been to reduce bus ridership levels to a level below that where the bus contract is viable. It is likely that expenditure in 2021 will be below this budgeted sum. The usage of the bus service during the first quarter of the year has not yet been fully reviewed and to date no payments have been made. The 2013 bus operating contract places the revenue risk on the operator rather than the Government. For the service to break even, a certain level of passenger demand is required. Ridership, since March 2020, has fallen way below the level of passenger demand necessary for the service to break even and is unlikely to recover to 2019 levels during 2021. The shortfall in fare income is being made up through additional funding as provided for within the Government Plan, allowing services to continue operating and employment to be maintained. Previous COVID-19 response payments covering the period May to December 2020 totalled £1.021 million.

3.10.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank the Minister for that quite long answer. The question was about the plan, what has been allocated to date from what has been put in the Government Plan for 2021. I am not sure that number was there. Can I confirm whether or not the bus company was given money from the furlough scheme for any of their staff who may have been laid off or not working during the pandemic?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

The monies for 2021 have yet to be determined. Nothing has been paid for 2021 as yet. For 2020, as I have mentioned, it was £1.021 million. It was a double win for us. Rather than have them on the furlough scheme with staff being laid off it was decided to keep all staff employed and we would subsidise the bus company up to a certain amount. So that is what we have done and that is why the bus company is still vibrant.

3.10.2 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Will the Minister advise Members, and indeed the public, when the bus company will be reverting to its normal timetable?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Excellent question and I wish I knew. But we do not know where COVID is going. Hopefully, later in the year, is an optimistic view from myself. I would dearly love to see it back up to normal levels but we are still in a COVID situation. People are taking extra precautions, which is only right and proper. But, as soon as possible, I would like the bus service up and running as normal.

3.10.3 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Will the Minister ensure he has discussions with LibertyBus and brings Members up to speed with those discussions because it seems to me that the Island is opening up and we should be providing services sooner than later?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Indeed, my officers are in regular contact with LibertyBus and so, as soon as we get the green light to bring services up to normal, we will do so, or as soon as customer demand is there it will be brought back to normal. Precautions are still being taken, people are still wearing masks on the buses, so precautions are being taken. But I would love to see it up and running as it was in 2019 as soon as possible.

3.10.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Minister to confirm that none of the money being given to LibertyBus to maintain the service is being used to make a return to the parent company in some form of guaranteed return to the parent company from Jersey Bus as part of their contract?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Not to my knowledge. Obviously, they have a lot of their buses on leasehold, which must be paid off. But, as far as I am aware, it is just to keep the company afloat.