

22.03.29

## **10 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Chief Minister regarding an update of the Income Distribution Survey (OQ.61/2022)**

I apologise to Members if this question sounds familiar. It is even familiar to me. Further to previous statements that the results of the updated income distribution survey will be published by the first quarter of 2022, will the Chief Minister advise Members when he understands that the results of the survey will in fact be published?

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

I do not think the Deputy has any need to apologise at all because I have to say I am incredibly disappointed to be answering the question in the way I am going to be because I share his disappointment. The chief statistician apologises for the delay in the publication of the analysis from the 2019/2020 Living Costs and Household Income Survey. The member of staff producing this analysis has been diverted to census processing, which has pushed back this work by a few weeks. I have relayed to Statistics Jersey the firm desire of Ministers and Members to see this data published and my disappointment at the further delay. The chief statistician has given assurance that these results will definitely be published before the election period. In addition, the new survey which, as the Deputy is aware and Members should be aware, the old survey was disrupted as a result of COVID and this has been the real problem. The new survey, which will give the data that we are all looking for, did commence last year. The preliminary results are expected in August of this year and I anticipate that will inform the next C.S.P. (Common Strategic Policy) and Government Plan as well. As has previously been offered, I would be very happy to arrange a meeting between the Deputy and the chief statistician on this matter.

### **3.10.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

I find the response, as the Chief Minister says, quite incredible but I will take up his offer of a meeting with the chief statistician in order to ensure that a publication arrives in time for decent treatment in the election period. The election period could be April, it could be May or it could be into June. If it is into June, then the numbers become irrelevant because you cannot really analyse it. At the end of May, perhaps. At the end of April, definitely. I shall be trying to persuade the officer that they should be able to produce something in a limited way by the end of April and to get on with that.

### **The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):**

Can you frame that as a question, Deputy?

### **Deputy G.P. Southern:**

I would ask the Minister to support me in that endeavour.

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Hopefully, the Deputy does recognise I share his frustration and I am trying not to make an issue of it because I understand the competing issues that Statistics Jersey are facing. I also make the point, which I have to be quite careful in what I say, that the law basically does state that the Chief Minister or the Minister must not influence any decision of the chief statistician in the exercise of his or her

responsibilities and that does include the form, timing and methods of dissemination of statistics compiled by Statistics Jersey. The crucial thing here is about maintaining the independence of Statistics Jersey and that they are free from political influence, which is why I find it somewhat difficult in how we answer these questions. I think I am in the same territory as the Deputy in expressing my disappointment. I recognise the problem. It was one of the things that I was as equally keen on as the Deputy in that we have solid data updated from 2014/2015 - I cannot remember the dates - to then influence the policies that we would have been putting in place over the last 3 to 4 years. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. Hopefully, we do not get another pandemic. We do not get one very often and so I understand absolutely the reasons behind it despite the fact it is very frustrating for all of us.

### **3.10.2 Senator K.L. Moore:**

Given that both the income distribution survey and the census were known and planned for, could the Chief Minister describe whether it is perhaps a resourcing issue within Statistics Jersey that has caused this inability to meet the deadlines on both items of their business?

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

The issue on the Living Costs and Household Income Survey was that the initial survey was happening and happening on time but, as I understand matters, when the pandemic hit and lockdown took place in March, April, et cetera, of 2020, that severely disrupted the gathering of data. When analysis was then able to take place with all the issues, bear in mind, obviously, there had been a lot of moving within all departments. Obviously, Statistics Jersey is independent but there has been a lot of activity which has been diverted to dealing with the pandemic. I assume the case was the same within Statistics Jersey about how they reported things. When the analysis was done, they then discovered there were a lot of issues with the quality of the data and of course having poor quality statistics is almost as bad as having no statistics or potentially even worse. In terms of the census, it is my understanding there have been some relatively recent resource issues, i.e. I believe a vacancy arose and, therefore, that is why a resource has been diverted to trying to get the census data out. My understanding is that a report is going to be made or an announcement will be made in early April as to the timing of the first tranche of census data and when that will come out.

### **3.10.3 Senator T.A. Vallois:**

I would like the Chief Minister to further explain the exact impact that COVID had on the publication of these particularly important pieces of data but also whether the restructuring and the change to professional independence has had any impact in terms of the analysis of such data as well.

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I do not think I can add anything more in terms of the impact of the pandemic. I have, hopefully, elaborated on that with a reasonable level of detail. In terms of the restructuring rules, the Deputy is on the working group that is looking at the statutory position and I look forward to their report because we are all absolutely in earnest agreement on this about the protection of the independence of the chief statistician and his department effectively. That is incredibly important. My understanding is it is not directly to do with the restructuring, and I am very happy to be

corrected, but it is more to say that one or 2 vacancies have arisen and that has caused the prioritisation of the work to be shifted with I think the priority, in this instance, being given to the census. That is my understanding.

#### **3.10.4 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

The data provided by an income distribution survey would help identify which groups are most at risk of living in relative low income. It is something that might inform what a Government may wish to do to respond to inflationary pressures. We can see that there is a statement due to be delivered on this later in this sitting so can I ask the Chief Minister if the Government has had any sort of indication from Statistics Jersey of what the preliminary findings of the income distribution survey may be to help them inform whatever it is they are going to be announcing shortly?

#### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

In relation to Statistics Jersey and the household income survey, the short answer is no as, to my knowledge - and the Minister for Social Security may correct me on this - there has been no direct input. However, there has obviously been, as I understand matters, certainly discussions occurring with, for example, an economic adviser, et cetera. What the Minister will be announcing is obviously the initial and timely response to matters that are facing Islanders and then, obviously, as more information comes to light over the next few weeks, the new Council of Ministers and the new Assembly will then be in a position to make further decisions should they so wish.

#### **3.10.5 Deputy M. Tadier:**

I will be more direct. Is the Minister aware that there are members of the public who I have certainly heard say that they think it is completely unacceptable that there are the 2 big surveys of the census and now the income distribution survey which are effectively ready but the information has not been published while the Government and the Assembly have had to make big strategic decisions? Would he respond to those who say that?

[11:15]

#### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I think the response goes in 2 ways. Number one is the overriding priority and what is always a matter for Members is that politicians do not interfere in the production of quality statistics and that interference is laid down in the law, and that includes the timing of the release of that data. That is what I am bound by and that is what I am upholding. As I have said, it is disappointing but that is the position. That does not mean that we cannot put measures in place that will assist Islanders, particularly those who are struggling, and that is a matter for the statement that will come later.

#### **3.10.6 Deputy M. Tadier:**

I think we may be arguing at cross-purposes. This is not about politicians interfering with the data. This is about deadlines being met which have been set well in the past and when the data is available to be published. So my question is to the Chief Minister: has the Chief Minister seen any of

this data which others have not seen and, if not, what assurances can he give us about who might be privy to that data and how that might be being used to inform policy at the moment?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

The point I am trying to make is that Statistics Jersey is an independent body. Therefore, it is independent and we have had issues in the past where there have been allegations - not under this Council of Ministers - of interference within different bodies and things like that and we have been very clear that we do not do that. That is what the law is and that is about protecting the quality of the data so that is that point. In terms of the census data, I should say that my understanding is that the position of the census has always been that the first tranche of numbers would be released in quarter 1/quarter 2, as I said, so that the timetable is being adhered to, and I believe that is the priority of the Statistics Department. As I said, an announcement will be made in early April as to when that first date of publication will take place. I just keep making the point that that is what the law says. I have been very, very clear that, although, yes, we would all like this information and, frankly, we would all have liked it a lot earlier because it could have informed better decision-making, we do not interfere in that process. As Members will hear later from the statement from the Minister for Social Security, it does not stop us putting measures in place if we believe it will assist Islanders in the period between now and when a new Council of Ministers and new Assembly take up the reins.

**3.10.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Just to express my disappointment and seek agreement once more from the Minister for this shambolic failure to meet his own targets.

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Yes, my targets are not being met but they are not being met by an independent body. The reason is basically the delays that we have been engendered because of the pandemic we have had for the last 2 years. As I said, and as we have offered in the past, I will ensure that we do arrange a meeting between the Deputy and the chief statistician to understand the issues directly.