

20.11.30

12 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding outstanding STAC minutes (OQ.353/2020):

Will the Minister explain why the minutes of the S.T.A.C. (Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell) for the period of July to November 2020 have not yet been published, despite this having been explicitly requested by the States Assembly with its adoption of P.88/2020?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

The Deputy's proposition asks that a dedicated page on gov.je should be established and maintained for the publication of the cell's minutes and this has been established. S.T.A.C. minutes from April until 13th July have been published and I am advised by the Chair of the cell that further batches of minutes are expected to be published and placed on the webpage this week.

3.12.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I do not think the Minister answered the question, I am happy to be put right, but could the Minister explain why those minutes have not been processed on the page? But he is right, that was requested as part of the proposition. We are about to enter the month of December, and we are entering a very critical period of the pandemic, and yet those minutes are not there for the public, for reassurance of State Members and the public alike.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I can say that the value of S.T.A.C. is to provide a safe space for medical, scientific and other technical specialists to discuss and develop their collective advice. As stated in its published terms of reference, minutes can be released once the matters discussed are no longer active policy under development. Even then there is still a need to carefully review and consider each set of minutes, as S.T.A.C. often discusses individual cases or specific groups of cases where upholding patient confidentiality is paramount. I suspect that those are largely the reasons why there has not yet been the publication of some minutes.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Excuse me, Sir, begging your indulgence, Deputy Higgins has a supplementary question.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Have I missed Deputy Higgins? Did you get in before I ...

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Yes, I had.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy Higgins, yes, you must ask your question.

3.12.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

With the Minister giving the various reasons he said for the minutes not being produced from July sounds a little bit lame. Could it be that no minutes were taken and they have not been written up?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

No, I do not believe that is the case. Minutes are taken very carefully but they do have to be returned to S.T.A.C. and approved and that process is behind but, as I am advised by the Chair, many minutes are expected to be published this week.

3.12.3 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

If any of the Members who had seen the recent BBC programme on S.A.G.E. (Science Advisory Group for Emergencies) in the U.K. and the way they made their decision-making and the flaws in it, I think we have done very well since then. So I do not think that the Minister and S.T.A.C. need to be afraid of producing their minutes but the impression that they are giving with the delay is there is something to hide. So, please, will the Minister undertake to get them on the website and to Members as soon as possible?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I can undertake to continue speaking to the Cof S.T.A.C. and try and ensure he has the resources to get this work done and try and ensure he gets whatever additional support he needs. I have to say, as chair and the senior nurse who also provides executive officer support to S.T.A.C., they are doing this work alongside their other important work to control the pandemic, provide proper clinical governance and treat patients. So there is that workforce pressure but I will continue, and I undertake to continue, to raise this matter and try and ensure that minutes are published as soon as can be.

3.12.4 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Given that we are in the crisis situation where the Emergencies Council is sitting and obviously is being advised by S.T.A.C., as well as the competent authorities is being advised by S.T.A.C., Ministers and the fact that Ministers often refer to scientific advice as being the reason for their decision-making, does the Minister agree that the public having an understanding of how that scientific advice is presented and what that scientific advice is plays a key role in providing the public with comfort that the Government are acting in their best interests and absolutely in accordance with scientific advice?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do agree and that is also the view of S.T.A.C. itself as its terms of reference record that its minutes will be made publicly available. That is the view of Ministers and we are endeavouring to get this backlog resolved and minutes published as soon as can be.

3.12.5 Deputy K.F. Morel:

I thank the Minister for his agreement with that which I just stated. But with that agreement in mind, will the Minister assure the Assembly that, while revisions to the minutes may indeed ensure that no patients or no Islanders can be identified and obviously that no privacy is removed, S.T.A.C. minutes will be a faithful representation of the meetings that they refer to and are not being revised in hindsight in order to provide perhaps what some Ministers or members of S.T.A.C. may see as a more palatable record of the meetings?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not sit on S.T.A.C., no Minister sits on S.T.A.C., it is purely the scientific and technical experts who would want a proper record of their decisions made. The actual minute-taking is conducted by a member of the States Greffe who have considerable experience in taking and recording minutes.

The minutes are agreed by the members of S.T.A.C. and I have complete confidence that they would require them always to be a true record of their meeting.

3.12.6 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

Will the Minister just agree that this Assembly and the public are fully supportive of the members of the States of Jersey staff, including those in the S.T.A.C. cell, for their efforts and work but because of this perception of lack of transparency it can, and, as we are seeing at this critical moment, put doubt when there should be no doubt so we can fully get behind the Government and all the work that needs to be carried on? That is what we are talking here, perception of transparency. It has now been a month since we have seen those minutes and we are seeing how those minutes are turned around. Can he just agree with that if he chooses to do so?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I can understand the concerns and it is a question of capacity, I believe, rather than anything more sinister. I will continue to see what additional support can be provided that might assist the speeding up and the review of the minutes so that they can be released as soon as can be. As I have said, the Chair is planning to release a batch of minutes this week.