

Response to PAC letter on Covid-19 response

Thank you for your letter of 16 December 2021, inviting me to answer various questions about how the States Greffe and Legislative Drafting Office responded to Covid-19. I set out your questions and my responses below.

1. How did your responsibilities as the Principal Officer to/Head of your department change during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

What new responsibilities did you take on and what responsibilities did you hand over to other officers?

a. How was this tracked?

b. What new responsibilities did your department take on and what responsibilities did you hand over to other departments? How were these tracked?

c. How did you work with other departments and key stakeholders to identify new areas of work to mitigate the impact of the pandemic?

My responsibilities did not change as a result of Covid-19. Our secretariat officer team took on new responsibilities in respect of minuting meetings of STAC and Competent Authority Ministers. The additional work was absorbed within the team, not entirely without difficulty.

Our principal mitigation measure was to move proceedings of the Assembly online and then to create a hybrid model for proceedings, mixing physical and virtual participation. We worked closely with the Modernisation and Digital directorate and Digital Jersey to achieve this.

2. We know there has been a huge impact of COVID-19 response measures on departmental business as usual activities, including the secondment of staff to other departments to aid the response effort. Do you have a 'back-to-normal' recovery plan for your department?

a. In respect of the secondment of Government staff to other departments to aid the response effort, how did you ensure disruptions to certain workstreams were prioritised in an objective and consistent way?

b. What would you do differently next time?

The initial impact of Covid-19 was very significant. Existing Scrutiny activity was almost completely suspended, as the normal business of the Assembly – and by extension the panels and committees – switched almost entirely to special legislation to deal with the emergency. Our focus was on creating a virtual model for Assembly proceedings. At the same time, a number of new staff who had joined the department to support the scrutiny process and to create new digital and public engagement and Members' research functions were seconded to government. However, after Easter we returned to normal operations, albeit with staff working remotely. Staff on secondment were, with agreement, recalled, as scrutiny work was now increasing again as previously planned work was re-introduced on top on covid related matters.

In terms of doing things differently, the initial secondment of staff was not time limited. If a similar situation arose I would want to be clearer that the secondments would be for an initial period of perhaps two weeks, with a review at that point, in order to provide more clarity for the staff concerned. We also sent staff with laptops and other equipment and it was not an easy process to track that equipment and ensure it was all returned.

3. How have you monitored the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on departmental business as usual activities and the disruptions to it?

a. What tools were developed by your departments to monitor this?

b. How do you minimise the impact on services and key deliveries?

c. What decision making tools/approach did you use to decide on who should be seconded, and to where?

d. How did you compensate for staff seconded to other departments to aid the response effort?

I think the questions on secondments have been answered above: secondments from the Greffe were limited in duration and ended because of the needs of our business.

The main effects of Covid-19 were in changed and increased workloads in running the Assembly and committees and panels, at a time when remote working was the norm. No new tools were developed to monitor this. Line managers monitored impact and operational issues were discussed at our regular SLT meetings and at other ad hoc meetings, as necessary: the priority was always to maintain the business of the Assembly. Probably the most acute problems came as a result of the number of meetings of Council of Ministers, Competent Authority Ministers, STAC and the Emergencies Council. In 2020 there were often meetings of two or three of these bodies on the same day, with meetings each lasting for several hours. On occasions SLT members took minutes of those meetings to relieve the pressure on the secretariat officers. A new flexible working policy was introduced to help staff manage their time effectively, although some staff inevitably worked unpaid hours over the course of 2020 and 2021.

In Q4 2021 the department co-created a wellness strategy for the Greffe, which was inspired by experience during the pandemic. This strategy will be launched in Q1 2022 and will put staff wellness at the heart of future decision-making.

4. Was any departmental authority changed during the Pandemic, including as a result of crisis management efforts, and if so, were they consistent with existing laws and regulations?

There were no such changes.

5. Who is responsible for monitoring the performance of services established in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic within your department?

a. What and how have you documented lessons learnt?

b. How do you intend to incorporate lessons learned from the performance of these services into the wider performance of your department?

No new services were established in response to the pandemic.

6. How were self-assessment frameworks and Key Performance Indicators used to ensure that key services continued to operate?

a. What worked well?

b. What would you do differently?

Probably the key factor in operating services was ensuring that States Members had appropriate IT equipment and the skills necessary to use MS Teams and Forms for meeting and voting. The SLT monitored this very closely, setting up a dedicated Teams channel for Members' support during States meetings and putting in place enhanced IT support from a private contractor and Modernisation and Digital. What worked best was one-to-one interactions with Members to understand and diagnose the issues preventing them from fully accessing Office 365. The arrangement with our external contractor worked well and, looking back, it could have been introduced sooner.

7. What role did your communication with the Council of Ministers and the rest of the States of Jersey play in deciding on resource and staff reallocations? What level of consultation did you have with them?

a. What level of responsibility as the head of your department did you have on how staff should be reallocated and what resources could be taken from your departments and applied to the COVID-19 responses? How was this decision making formalised?

We work very closely with the rest of the States of Jersey. When the need for additional staff to respond to Covid first arose in March/April 2020, I was aware of this through my membership of ELT. I was entirely responsible for whether or not staff were seconded to assist with the Covid response and for their recall. The decision-making was not formalised, as such, but this did not cause any difficulties in my view.

8. Can you update us on how your department has responded to the recommendations made by the C&AG on the response to the COVID-19 Pandemic? Have any recommendations been implemented?

a. Have any changes made to the operations or working practices?

No recommendations were directly relevant to the Greffe.

9. What thought has been given to 'future proofing' services?

One consequence of the pandemic was greater appreciation of using Cloud-based services which facilitate remote working and collaboration. We have a number of systems which are not compatible with Office 365, which has proved problematic, and we are now committed to adapting the systems so they work for us more effectively in future.

10. How did you work with Commercial Services to understand your department's procurement needs during the pandemic?

There were no additional procurement needs except, briefly in March 2020, for AV services in relation to the sittings of the Assembly at Fort Regent.

11. How have you measured, monitored, and reported on your performance, financial management (including value for money and cost benefit analyses) and impact on work programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic? What 3 things could be improved?

No separate arrangements were made for these matters during the pandemic.

12. What would you do to improve how your department communicated with the rest of the States of Jersey and external stakeholders?

We are planning to replace our website with a more modern and adaptable website which will facilitate improved communications with internal and external stakeholders in numerous ways, including better use of video and targeted alerts.

Mark Egan

Greffier of the States

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