

2.14 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Planning and Environment regarding the Island Plan Review: Strategic Options green paper:

Is the Minister satisfied that the Island Plan Review: Strategic Options Green Paper contains open rather than leading questions and will he advise what bodies were involved in drafting the questions?

Senator F.E. Cohen (The Minister for Planning and Environment):

Offering an opinion on the wording of questions in a public consultation exercise is, to an extent, a specialist task. Some time ago at a Ministerial meeting, I expressed my wish to have the questions validated by an independent group to ensure they were fair and balanced. Officers began the process by seeking the opinion of Involve on the proposed questions. Involve are a leading, non-partisan organisation specialising in delivering transparent consultation and they regularly carry out such work for the U.K. Government. They were central to the Imagine Jersey consultation which has been criticised by the Deputy. While Involve were consulted on the early draft, they were not consulted on the very final version of all the questions as officers simply ran out of time as the text was being refined right up to the deadline. One question has already been amended at the Deputy's suggestion. I am very happy to go through the questions with the Deputy together with officers to determine if further questions would benefit from rewording. If the Deputy does not wish to do this, I would be prepared to have the questions independently audited. Moreover, should any current questions be found to be leading, they will be disregarded in the analysis and the consultation responses. I can assure Members that the intention is to ask balanced questions which are not in any way regarded as leading.

2.14.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister withdraw the statement made at the meeting with States Members where it was said that the questions had been passed before the Stats. Department and, when asked, the Stats. Department said they had never seen the questions before in their lives?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I am not sure that I made that statement and I certainly was not aware whether they had been to the Stats. Unit or they had not been to the Stats. Unit. All I can tell you is that the questions were considered by the Corporate Management Board. I can do no more than to make the offer that I have just made to the Deputy. I am very happy to sit down with him, go through the questions with officers. I am not qualified for particular reasons to offer an opinion on it and if we find that the questions need rewording, they will be reworded. I do not see you can ask for anything more than that.

2.14.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister not contend that the real issue is not necessarily whether question A or B is utterly impartial but that these exercises are seen as futile by a lot of people because of the increasingly bland conclusions to which they lead people and which alienate an awful lot of people from what they see as a totally meaningless exercise?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I do not really have the answer to this and it is a very difficult area. If you consult, you are accused of not been firm and if you do not consult you are accused of being too prescriptive. I can tell Members that, from my perspective, I would want nothing other than an open, transparent process and conclusions that represent the view of the community. Whether the current mechanism will deliver that... I certainly hope it will. Whether it can be improved, I am sure any mechanism can be improved. If the Deputy has any particular suggestions, I am more than happy to accommodate those suggestions.

2.14.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

A supplementary. While I am prepared to put ideas forward, would the Minister for Planning and Environment therefore confirm that the current method lacks excitement and it lacks involvement?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I am not sure that I can say it lacks excitement and it lacks involvement. I cannot say that looking at a Strategic Options Paper is something that will excite every member of the community and we need to really see what level of responses we receive. It is quite a lengthy document and expecting someone, unless they have a special interest, to go through every question may be asking too much. But I am afraid I do not think there is any other answer. What we have done is we have put in place a mechanism where you cut through all the questions and simply write in a box: "I do not like any of the questions and I think you should do the following." Whether this will excite the community, I do not know. There is an awful lot of consultation out there at the moment and to some extent, the community is over-consulted.

2.14.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Given that this is a major consultation exercise that will dictate the future of the Island, and certainly the Island Plan for the next 10 years, does the Minister not accept that the rejection of already one question and doubts raised about several of the others mean that the exercise has been shoddily performed?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I would not accept that it has been shoddily performed. It is a well put together document. The Deputy has raised an issue in relation to one question and another issue in relation to another question. The first question was amended on the basis of further examination. The second question was not. You can always improve anything and I know that this particular Deputy - Deputy Southern - comes to this with a particular perspective. He does not like Involve. I have looked into ...

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I have doubts about the work of Involve. It is not a question of liking or disliking.

Senator F.E. Cohen:

He has doubts about Involve. I have examined as much as I possibly can whether Involve are a competent organisation to carry out this work. They are non-partisan. They have no particular interest in driving Jersey in any particular direction and I think that the evidence is that they are a competent organisation. I can say no more. I have offered to sit down with the Deputy, go through the questions, and if any further questions need amending, officers will amend them. What more can he ask? Thank you.