

23.06.13

3 The Connétable of St. Brelade of the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture regarding the service provided by Jersey Airport ground staff contractors (OQ.109/2023)

In the light of what has been described as “spectacularly poor service” by Jersey Airport ground staff contractors, will the Minister advise whether the board and management of Ports of Jersey retain his confidence, and will he explain what action he proposes to take to rectify the problem?

Deputy K.F. Morel of St. John, St. Lawrence and Trinity (The Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture):

I thank the Connétable for his question. I do retain full confidence in the Ports of Jersey. I have met with both Swissport and Ports of Jersey to convey my extremely serious concerns over the unacceptable disruption caused by Swissport’s ground handling operation at Jersey Airport on Saturday, 3rd June. It is important to note that while Swissport are contracted directly by the airlines, Ports of Jersey has been working closely with Swissport and the airline operators to help them resolve the situation. I have been briefed by Swissport’s chief operating officer on their actions to address the situation and their plans to ensure they provide the required service levels. The board of Swissport and Ports of Jersey are monitoring the implementation of the remediation plan daily and are supplementing the service with their own staff, while Swissport strive to improve the resilience of their operation which, at the end of the day, was caused by a lack of staff turning up. I am pleased to report that ground handling operations at Jersey Airport were back to normal at the weekend although this was due to the supplementation of Swissport staff by Ports of Jersey staff. That is how they managed to do it. But over the past weekend we did see an improvement. I have been assured by Swissport that the events of Saturday, 3rd June, will not be repeated.

3.3.1 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Given these ongoing service issues, can the Minister assure the public that a salary package for the C.E.O. (chief executive officer) in excess of £430,000 including a bonus of over £130,000 represents value for money for the public of Jersey?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I fail to see how that has much to do with the ground handling operations.

3.3.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Is the Minister aware that one of the changes post-COVID was a move from the pay of ground handling staff from ... I understand it could be a difference from £15 an hour down to a minimum wage of £10.50. If he is aware of that and that is the case, is that not one of the concerns he has that simply people are not being paid what they were and therefore will not work in those jobs?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

The salaries of staff and the welfare of staff were 2 of the subjects that I discussed with the C.O.O. (chief operating officer) of Swissport. I am pleased to say that those are areas that the gentleman is absolutely taking to his own board with a view to understanding that pay structures in Jersey need to represent life in Jersey.

3.3.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I am pleased to see that the Minister is taking an interest in the salaries of staff. I just wonder whether he would take a similar interest in the high salary of the C.E.O. of Jersey Ports. I would like to ask him again whether he believes that is value for money.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I am not the shareholder representative so I am not particularly in a very good place to offer a view on the salary of the C.E.O. of Ports of Jersey.

3.3.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

When push comes to shove, is it not the case that the service in harbour, in airports is understaffed, is underpaid and, in some cases, on zero-hours contracts, which is no motivation to come in for work should they not wish to?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I know the Deputy likes to attack a zero-hours contracts but I will remind the Deputy that while zero-hours contracts should never be abused they do play a very useful role for people who do not wish to work 5 days a week, 7 hours a day, and wish to work on a different basis. I do not believe writing off zero-hours contracts in that way is helpful.

3.3.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Surely a contract which gives fixed hours is better than a zero-hours contract where from one week to the next you do not know what you are earning?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

As the Deputy perhaps understands, different people, individuals, have different needs. So for some people having a set contract of 35, 40 hours a week is appropriate, for other people a contract which provides greater flexibility, particularly when there are family circumstances which they wish to work around, is really helpful. This one-size-fits-all approach which I do not believe suit the individuals that make up the 100,000 people on this Island.

3.3.6 Deputy S.G. Luce:

It is my view that across all parts of life at the moment the Island faces more risk than it has done for very many decades. In many cases, the Island is reliant on private companies to keep the Island supplied or, in this case, reputation is potentially at risk. Does the Minister not think that it is time the Island looked to some of these companies and take over the responsibility for running them themselves?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I think the questions that the Deputy raises are absolutely valid and they are questions that I have raised and will continue to raise. I will not give a definitive response here but they are questions that I think need to be looked at; there is no question.

The Bailiff:

Can I just mention that we seem to be straying a little bit outside the parameters of the question at this point. The premise of the question is the "spectacularly poor service" and I quote the terms of course of the question, and the management of Ports of Jersey and the confidence of the Minister, and we should not really extend very much, if at all, beyond that.

3.3.7 Deputy S.G. Luce:

Does the Minister agree that in some cases “spectacularly poor service” is outside of Government control and in the future maybe it should be more inside Government control.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

And yet the same Deputies will then point to areas where Government is not in control. I think again, similarly to the answer that I gave to Deputy Southern, each circumstance is different and each circumstance requires different responses. I will work with Ports of Jersey to make sure that we have the best solution going forward into the long term. Right now, we need to make sure that week in, week out, day after day, the ground-handling services at the airport are sufficient and give the right impression of the Island.

[10:00]

On 3rd June they were not sufficient. I expressed my incredible disappointment to Ports of Jersey and to Swissport. They are working in the short term to solve that problem. As for longer term solutions, as always, I am open to all ideas and all concepts.

3.3.8 Deputy M.R. Scott of St. Brelade:

Will the Minister be looking at the way in which service standards versus profitability are reflected in the salaries of C.E.O.s of arm’s-length organisations, and I believe the answer is yes? If so, does he not feel that this should also be the case for States-owned enterprises, such as Ports of Jersey, and there should be more of a collaboration and unified approach towards both States-owned entities and arm’s length organisations insofar as they both are funded by the public?

The Bailiff:

Feel free to restrict your answer to Ports of Jersey, if you wish, Minister. It is up to you.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Thank you, Sir. In terms of ground-handling services at the airport, the standards were not good enough on 3rd June and I prevailed upon Ports of Jersey to improve them.

3.3.9 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Minister extols the virtues of zero-hours contracts in a previous answer and you have to wonder why it is then that Swissport cannot seem to get enough people to work for them if they are so wonderful. Would the Minister therefore be willing to talk to Ports of Jersey and their leadership to look into the working terms and conditions of people who provide this essential service at the airport to make sure that it is suitable, and that they can recruit people and give us a functioning service because we were not getting it recently?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I did not extol the virtues of zero-hours contracts, I extolled the virtues of treating people as individuals not as one socialist blob. I do believe that there is a place for zero-hours contracts in life, in general. But what I do not believe is that it is right for me to tell a business how to run itself. What it is right is for me to tell a business that the service they are delivering is not good enough. As part of their remediation plans, the package that they provide to their workers is going to be looked at or is currently being looked at. I am grateful that that is the case. I prevail upon all companies in Jersey to treat their employees with utmost respect and to give them the right conditions so that they can thrive in their workplaces.

3.3.10 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Are Ports of Jersey, in collaboration with Swissport, providing workers at the airport with that dignity that the Minister has just referred to, and does he have confidence that they are currently doing that right now?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I spoke directly to the chief operating officer about the welfare of their staff and, yes, I do believe that they are providing that right now. I am not convinced that they did on the day of Saturday, 3rd June, and I made that quite clear.

3.3.11 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Minister said that zero-hours contracts suit some workers but what evidence does he have specifically for those workers at the airport that those who were on maybe fixed-hour contracts previously and are now working on zero-hour contracts, that those zero-hour contracts suits them?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Sir, does fit within the realms of the question that was raised?

Deputy M. Tadier:

I am happy to explain why, Sir. I thought I did not need to.

The Bailiff:

We cannot really get into an exchange, it is for me to make a ruling. It is whether I think you were satisfied about the Ports of Jersey, and I think that is essentially where the question is focused with regard ... you may have already answered it, Minister.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

That is really why I ask the question because I do believe I have answered that.

Deputy M. Tadier:

He has not answered ... can I explain? It is obviously intrinsically linked, if there has been "spectacularly poor service", working conditions at the airport will perhaps be a factor in those poor conditions. The question about zero-hours contracts is a supplementary because the Minister stated he thinks they work for some workers, do they work for the people who work at the airport? It is a simple question. It has not been answered yet.

The Bailiff:

That seems to me to be sufficiently within the parameters of the original question.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

Unfortunately I have not done a survey of all individuals at the airport. The question I would say or the point that I was trying to make was that individuals have different needs. For some zero-hours contracts will work, for others they will not work. What is important is that the employee has the right type of contract for themselves.

3.3.12 Deputy M. Tadier:

I know the Minister likes to answer questions that he has not been asked, and we are talking specifically about airport staff here, so would he seek to go away and talk to the actual workers on the ground who seem to be reporting issues at the airport, because we do not want an airport that is run badly if not for locals then certainly for tourists and business people coming to the Island, to see if there can be improvements that are made to those working conditions that he can then report back to us in the Assembly? Would he be willing to do that?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I do believe that improvements will be made to the conditions of workers at the airport.

3.3.13 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Would the Minister not agree that the chief executive officer is the accountable person in charge of the Jersey Airport operation and that any bonus payments ought to be based on performance in which "spectacular poor service" must play a part?

Deputy K.F. Morel:

I do believe that in any role in life if you are to receive bonus payments they should be related to the performance that you have delivered.