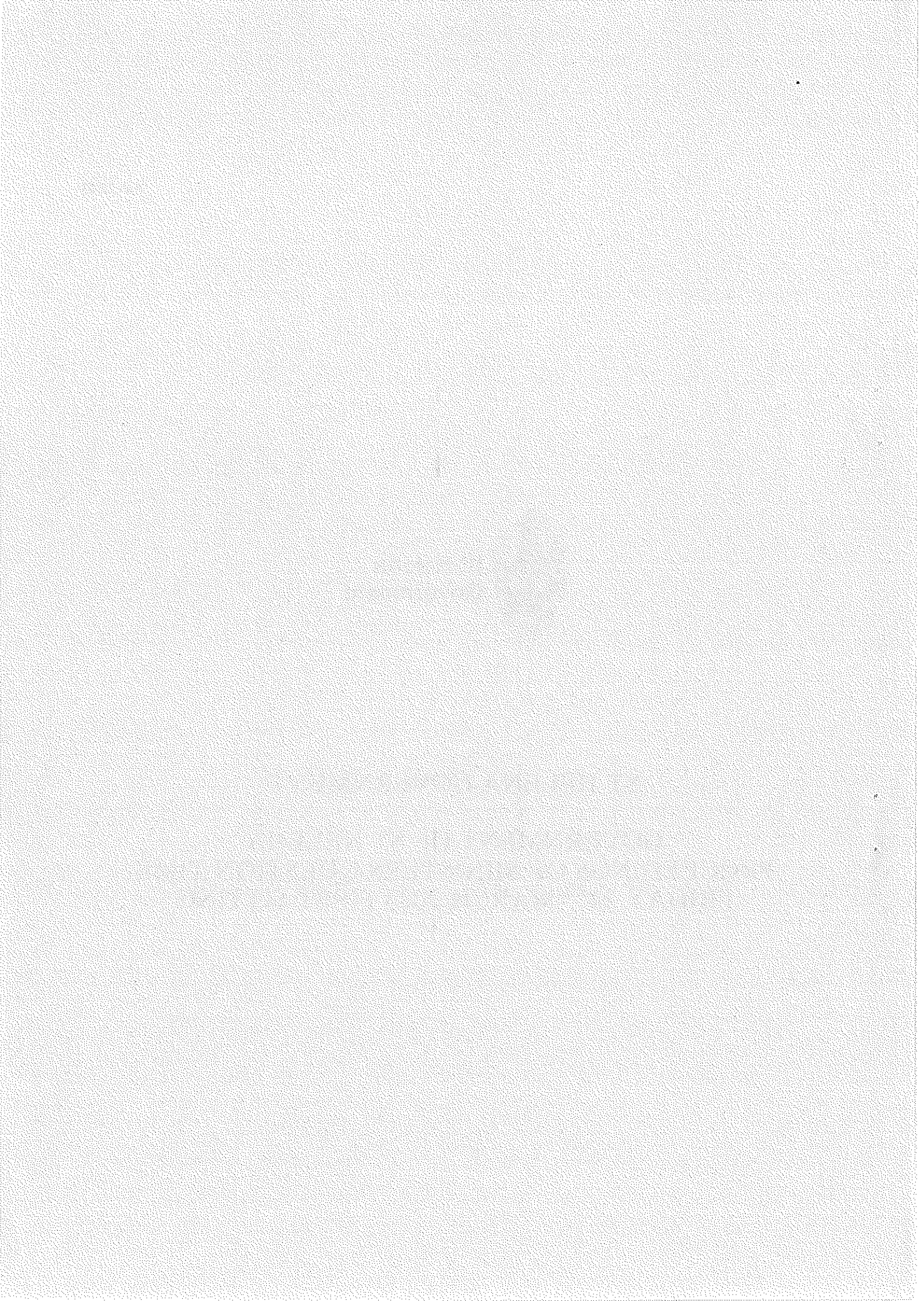




St Helena
Government

ST HELENA GOVERNMENT

GOVERNMENT OF ST HELENA
PROCEEDINGS OF MINISTERS QUESTION TIME
FRIDAY 24TH MARCH 2023 FIRST SITTING



ST. HELENA
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

THE SPEAKER

The Honourable Cyril Keith Gunnell

EX-OFFICIO MEMBER

The Honourable Attorney General, Mr David Ferguson Ballantyne – Apologies

ELECTED MEMBERS

The Honourable Rosemary June Bargo
The Honourable Gillian Ann Brooks
The Honourable Mark Alan Brooks
The Honourable Ronald Arthur Coleman
The Honourable Corinda Sebastiana Stuart Essex
The Honourable Martin Dave Henry
The Honourable Robert Charles Midwinter
The Honourable Christine Lilian Scipio
The Honourable Julie Dorne Thomas
The Honourable Karl Gavin Thrower
The Honourable Andrew James Turner

The Honourable Jeffrey Robert Ellick - Overseas

Clerk of Councils

Mrs Connie Johnson

PROCEEDINGS OF MINISTERS QUESTION TIME

Friday, 24th March, 2023

The Council met at 10.00 am
In the Council Chamber, Jamestown

(The Honourable Speaker in the Chair)

ORDER OF THE DAY

1. FORMAL ENTRY OF THE SPEAKER

2. ADDRESS BY THE SPEAKER

Good morning, Honourable Members, all others present, welcome and a very warm welcome to those listening to this live broadcast of this first question time, First Minister's Question Time held in the Council Chamber in the Castle, Jamestown. Thank you Honourable Members for your enthusiasm for this new activity starting and I am aware the public also is looking forward to regular Ministers Question Time. Minister's Question Time is regulated by Standing Orders and a number of rules, perhaps it is fair to say that some teething difficulties can be expected in early Meetings. When a practice Minister's question time was held applying Order 9 in its entirety Elected Members felt that the limitation imposed by rule 6 which only allows one supplementary question for each substantive question prevented thorough exploration of the issue raised and initial response given. I understand that Elected Members intend to propose formal amendments to standing orders with regard to Minister's Question Time, but not before their provisions have been trialled further, as other issues may be identified, that require review and change. What would be appreciated is interaction and therefore Elected Members would welcome feedback from the public however, at the Formal Legislative Council Meeting held 24th March, the resolution determined that rule 5 and rule 6 of Order 9 of Standing Orders be suspended for the duration of the Minister's Question Time scheduled for today. In accordance with Order 9 rule 3 of Standing Orders, the Chief Minister was notified of topic of business to be transacted, that topic is "Progress made in achieving the St Helena Government's vision and strategy dated April 2022 to March 2025". The Chief Minister acknowledged receipt of the topic and Non-Ministers have framed their questions. All of the questions prepared by Non-Ministers for today are addressed to the Chief Minister. However, because the topic chosen is very broad, and because parts of it may be cross cutting will relate directly to activities undertaken within a particular portfolio that other ministers are in charge of another Minister may decide they would like to answer the question and can indicate their intention by switching on their red light. Because rule 5 and rule 6 of Order 9 of Standing Orders have been suspended for this Meeting it is likely that additional supplementary questions will be asked. The duration of Ministers Question Time starting from the first question is one hour, may we have the first question please.

3.

QUESTIONS

Question No. 1 - The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex to ask the Chief Minister.

The Speaker –

What I should have said was sorry you have an Order Paper in front of you and probably would have seen it on there, the questions have been listed in alphabetical order but will be selected randomly for response at the meeting. So I think Dr Essex was pulled.

The Speaker –

The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex?

The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you Mr Speaker. Will the Honourable Chief Minister tell this Council, what policy changes and/or new policies have been introduced since the last General Election that are aimed at retaining the local workforce and encouraging St Helenians currently working overseas to return?

The Speaker –

Honourable Chief Minister?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker and good morning everyone, and thank the Honourable Dr Essex for her question. Obviously, there's a lot of work going on and I think it's necessary to also point out here that the minister's vision along with the SHG strategy was our vision for our four years; and as number of people will remember, our priority for year one was to focus a lot of our time and resources on health. But that said, there's lots of other work that has been going on in the different portfolios, and in respect of retaining of the local workforce, we have looked at this to continue the trajectory of trying to improve our minimum wage. We've had tax working groups set up that are looking at the actual tax regime, because I know there's quite a lot of people who are concerned that the 7000, that set isn't adequate and I know the tax working group is working on that. In respect of the biggest one, I think that we're working on that has been out for its first round of consultation, but it's due to go out again soon after consultation with the wider Council and Ministers have had a chance to look at it, is our immigration policy that will hopefully be the catalyst for a lot of the other things that we wish to bring out in respect of making land available, obviously, looking at the disposal assets, etc. Thank you.

The Speaker –

Thank you, Honourable Chief Minister, Honourable Dr Corinda Essex?

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Honourable Chief Minister for her response. Will the Honourable Chief Minister state whether or not the likely impact upon the issue of retaining saints, or attracting them back to the Island is routinely taken into consideration when making policy decisions.

The Speaker -
Honourable Chief Minister?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you Mr Speaker, I think it's part of the Vision, our priorities for the four years was always to talk about our people and the importance of our human resource. So yes, every policy decision that's taken does consider retaining the people on Island and indeed trying to attract others back. As much as we'd like to do this, at times, it's very, very difficult when we think about the resources we have. I know that Minister Brooks would also like to make a comment here as well.

The Speaker –
Honourable Minister Brooks?

The Hon. Mark Brooks (Minister for Treasury, Infrastructure & Sustainable Development) –

Thank you Mr Speaker, and like to thank my Honourable friend for the question. And just to follow on from Julie, what we're doing within our portfolio, with developing policies is looking at the stamp duty policy. And that is encourage people, who doesn't own properties to have an extended discount on the current policy. That is all here they're trying to attract returning saints to live on St. Helena, as members know, one of the important things for Saint Helenians is to own your own house. And this policy is trying to make that more achievable for those things Saints living abroad and on Island. We're also developing the land, or the property patches and disposable policy. Again, this will help streamline the process of adequate land on the Island being sort of on the market so that people who are interested in buying land to develop housing, and as well as start a family and stuff like that, would have a better access of doing it in a more clear process of doing. So those are two policies that will help with encouraging things to be better Mr Speaker.

The Speaker –
Honourable Robert Midwinter, sorry before that Honourable Martin Henry?

The Hon. Martin Henry (Minister for Health and Social Care) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker and just to a more sort of holistic comment on the back of Mark's comment. I've spoken about this before, but all policies that we are trying to push through, especially in line with that, it's about creating opportunities. So sometimes we go straight to the source, but to attract people back to St Helena, we need to create an opportunity. One of the best examples of this is when Basil Read was building the airport, we saw increasing capital, we saw increasing wages, and we saw just a general increase in opportunity, which then spilled over to a general increase in disposable income. I use that as a benchmark, in some cases to see what can happen if we do stimulate the economy to something like that. We won't probably won't have a major project of that sort. But we need to stimulate the economy in all different areas. So we lift and create opportunity. I think that's the attraction back to St Helena and so sometimes going straight to source is not always the best aspect. We need to look at all of the policies around that. That creates opportunity. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Speaker –
Thank you Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care, Honourable Robert Midwinter?

The Hon. Robert Midwinter –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. In terms of encouraging Saint Helenians currently working overseas to return is she able to confirm that her government is intending to extend the first time buyer discounts for Crown land for Saints living and working overseas?

The Speaker –

Thank you Honourable Member, Honourable Brooks?

The Hon. Mark Brooks (Minister for Treasury, Infrastructure & Sustainable Development) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Honourable Member for his question. As I said before this policy is still in draft form, but I'll be pleased to say that in the draft form, we are looking at extending the first time buyer criteria to those living overseas, not just on Ascension or the Falklands, but also in the UK.

The Speaker –

Thank you Honourable Minister for Treasury, Infrastructure and Sustainable Development. Any further questions on that one? If not can we go to the next question please?

Question No. 2 - The Honourable Gillian Brooks to ask the Chief Minister.

The Speaker –

The Honourable Gillian Brooks?

The Hon. Gillian Brooks –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Honourable Chief Minister tell this Council, what policies have been developed to encourage local food production, in view of sustaining the Island with fresh produce and addressing food security?

The Speaker –

Honourable Chief Minister?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker and thank the Honourable Gillian Brooks for the question. I will obviously turn to the Minister for ENRP to go into detail here, but obviously food security is key and is one of the priorities in our vision. This is something that we've been working towards over the last year and as many will know, there was some EDIP funding to the tune of £380,000 that was approved to address food security, and how we can make more land available for farming to take place. I will allow the Minister for ENRP to elaborate.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much, Honourable Christine Scipio Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning.

The Hon. Christine Scipio (Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker and I do you feel like repeating myself Mr Speaker because I only gave an update in Formal LegCo last week about the agriculture sector. So I do apologise to our listeners if they are hearing something that was mentioned last week. So Mr Speaker work is in progress within the agriculture

sector, analysing and trying to inform options for developing a five year agriculture strategy. And as I said in last week's meeting, that a Member of our Council Honourable Robert Midwinter sits on this strategy working group as well as a representation from the Chamber of Commerce so that we are working together for the Island to continue to farm the Islands contribution to St Helena's economy and also food requirements as food security, as mentioned, as the Chief Minister mentioned, yes, that we managed to obtain some funding through the EDIP program in trying to address the government's estate with fencing, land, clearance and of course, we have to recognize it £380,000 does sound like a lot of money but when you try to put it across the sector with various elements of the agriculture, it isn't a lot of you only can do certain parts, I must say they're the targets that was set for this one and we are on target for that and as in our constituency meetings, just recently, I mentioned to the public that for the next round, for the next financial year we'll be looking at the poultry unit. So like I said earlier Mr Speaker, I feel like repeating myself, because I only gave an update last week.

The Speaker –

Not a bad idea to repeat yourself sometimes, any questions from anybody? Honourable Gillian Brooks?

The Hon. Gillian Brooks –

Thank you, Mr Speaker Thank you Minister Scipio. You spoke about the Agriculture Strategy Group. Can you just, I may have missed it but is there a sort of timeframe as to when you're looking to have a sort of strategy in place? A timeframe?

The Speaker –

Honourable Christine Scipio?

The Hon. Christine Scipio (Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning) –

At the moment Mr Speaker I'm unable to give a timeframe, I'm not sure if the Honourable Rob Midwinter as part of the group will be able to help out our friend here and say what their targets are because I haven't had any update from this working group as yet.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much, Honourable Dr Corinda Essex?

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Honourable Chief Minister and I'm addressing the question to her but she is welcome to delegate if she wishes to do so, state what progress has been made regarding review of the labour subsidy policy for farmers.

The Speaker –

Thank you. Honourable Chief Minister?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Obviously, that is quite a detailed policy that hasn't come to us as Cabinet nor Executive Council, because this is something that would be addressed in the Advisory Board of ENRP. So I'll hand it over to Minister Scipio.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much, Honourable Christine Scipio?

The Hon. Christine Scipio (Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker and just to recollect about in a Formal Legislative Council Meeting a while ago, that question was raised by my Honourable friend, and a draft policy has been drafted and I had had conversations with my Honourable friend about the details of that policy, as well, at the moment, we're looking at, what are the financial implications and because it going to have an impact on our finances, if we're going to go and try to assist individuals in helping when I say assist individuals, I talk about individuals who are unemployed, because in that policy was looking at unemployment. We had discussions with CASH, Careers Access St Helena, because we've looked at what people were on their list being unemployed in the criteria or the calibre of the people. So we looked at that, and we noticed that if we're going to move forward with the labour subsidy policy, it will have financial implications on our budget and because we don't have a budget at the moment, discussions are, we do have a budget, I should say in total, so let's stand to be corrected, but we haven't gone into the detail. The discussions are still to be made known because as Honourable Mark Brooks made the announcement last week that we now have the funding, discussions need to be held as to say how are we going to divide the pie up, and then if this can be accommodated, like I mentioned, there's financial implications, I can't say it going to be implemented because of the financial constraints.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much Honourable Minister. Honourable Robert Midwinter?

The Hon. Robert Midwinter –

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and before I go into my supplementary question, just to confirm that, yes, I am on that particular working group. It's only been established very recently, we've only had two meetings so far. So it's very early days, but I will endeavour to give colleagues regular updates as to how that strategic working group is progressing. Mr Speaker, can the Chief Minister confirm that the existing subsidies and tax reliefs that are currently provided to the farming community, such as water subsidy, and lower rate of import duty animal feed will remain in place for the incoming tax year?

The Speaker –

Honourable Christine Scipio?

The Hon. Christine Scipio (Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker and sorry Chief Minister, I jumped the gun and put my light on to answer. So at the moment, there is no intention to remove that.

The Speaker –

Honourable Karl Midwinter, I think I may have jumped the gun a bit there and if you don't mind Honourable Coleman I will allow Honourable Karl Thrower to ask his question.

The Hon. Karl Thrower –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Since we started talking about subsidies, are there any plans, or is it still being looked at too may be look at fuel subsidy for farmers, and better financial offerings for farmers for affordable finance, as previously provided by ESH?