



St Helena
Government

ST HELENA GOVERNMENT
PROCEEDINGS OF MINISTERS QUESTION TIME
TUESDAY, 31 OCTOBER 2023
SEVENTH SITTING

LAI0 DN TABLE 5TH DEC 2024.

ST. HELENA
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

THE SPEAKER

The Honourable Cyril Keith Gunnell

EX-OFFICIO MEMBER

The Honourable Attorney General, Mr David Ferguson Ballantyne

ELECTED MEMBERS

The Honourable Rosemary June Bargo
The Honourable Mark Alan Brooks
The Honourable Ronald Arthur Coleman
The Honourable Jeffrey Robert Ellick
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

OVERSEAS

The Honourable Gillian Ann Brooks

Legislative Council Office Assistant

Miss Shanice Phillips

PROCEEDINGS OF MINISTERS QUESTION TIME

Tuesday, 31st October, 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

First of all, please be seated Honourable Members. What a gorgeous day. Good morning to you all and all others present in the Council Chamber at the Castle in Jamestown. Good morning also to all those listening to these proceedings of Ministers Question Time being broadcast live via SAMS Radio one. We focus today on the Seventh Minister's Question Time. The topic chosen by Councillors for this meeting is Health Care Provision. In accordance with Standing Orders, the Chief Minister was made aware of the topic ahead of this meeting and this morning, an hour before the start of Minister's Question Time, the questions submitted by Councillors was forwarded to Ministers and if all goes well according to plan, the Order Paper would be published on the SHG website this morning, also before 10 a.m. There are six questions on the Order Paper. They have been listed in alphabetical order, but will be selected randomly for response. Up to one hour has been allocated for this. Ordinarily there would be seven questions presented, but one of the Councillors, Councillor G Brooks, who is also a Member of the St. Helena Public Accounts Committee, departed the island last Saturday along with two PAC colleagues, the Chairperson, Mr Mark Yon, and the Clerk, Miss Anita Legg, to participate in PAC business in Zambia. Mr Yon and Miss Legg will return to the island next Saturday. Councillor Brooks, however, will fly on to Iceland to participate in the Reykjavik Global Forum 2023. We welcome back Minister Martin Henry, who represented St Helena at the 66th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference held in Ghana from 30th September to 6th October. Also welcomed back last Saturday was Councillor Bargo, and our Secretary for this meeting, Miss Shanice Phillips. Councillor Bargo undertook an Academy course in Scotland and Miss Phillips attended a Leadership Workshop in London. Honourable Members, if we're starting, I would like to pause and to reflect briefly on the spirit of Minister's Question Time. It was intended that questions for Ministers to respond to, would be punchy and relate to current concerns within Minister's portfolios which Ministers would answer to the best of their ability, and if need be provide a later response if the answer was not fully known. Also answers to any description of question would be provided without assistance from outside the Chamber, whether by a laptop or other electronic device. As such, this would be against the spirit in which Minister's Question time is meant to be conducted and should be discouraged. The duration of Minister's Question time starting from the first question, is up to one hour. All of the questions are directed to the Minister Martin Henry, the Minister for Health and Social Care.

Shanice Phillips is our Clerk and time keeper. Miss Phillips, may we have the first question, please?

The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex –
Mr Speaker, may I rise on a point of information.

The Speaker –
You may, Honourable Member.

The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex –
Mr Speaker, this is necessary to request once again that the relevant parts of Standing Orders are suspended for the duration of the sitting, to enable more than one supplementary question to be asked following each substantive question. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish to move.

The Speaker –
Councillor Dr Corinda Essex. Please go ahead with your motion.

The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex –
Thank you Mr Speaker. Mr Speaker, I beg to move that the relevant sections, which have been enunciated on many previous occasions in this House, I think on seven previous occasions, do once again be stood aside to enable the asking of more than one supplementary question. And also that the relevant section be suspended to enable the normal rules for discussion of questions to apply. The references refer to clause 8 and clause 9.

The Speaker –
Thank you. Thank you very much. Is there a seconder? Councillor Robert Midwinter.

The Honourable Robert Midwinter –
Thank you Mr Speaker, I beg to second.

The Speaker –
Thank you very much. Thank you. Does anyone else wish to speak? So Councillor, I beg your pardon, Minister Martin Henry.

The Hon. Martin Henry (Minister for Health and Social Care) –
Mr Speaker, can I just rise on a point as well?

The Speaker –
You may, Honourable Member.

The Hon. Martin Henry (Minister for Health and Social Care) –
Mr Speaker, I would just like to, before I start answering these questions, because I am unsure where supplementary questions may lead, just to reassure the listening public that some of the answers may include statistics and numbers, and I know Members, because we are a small community, it may be that members of the public or particular members are suffering from those particular illnesses, and I just like to rise on the point to say, that while the discussion today will be about getting the point across, that we do firmly as a Council, take that into consideration.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much for that, Minister. So I put the question that Rule 5 and Rule 6 of Standing Order 9 is suspended for the duration of Minister's Question Time.

Question put and agreed to.

The Speaker –

For the listening public because Rule 5 and 6 of Order 9 in Standing Orders have been suspended, it is possible for additional supplementary questions to be asked, unlike if the Orders were not suspended and a member putting a question, would be limited to asking only one supplementary question. Clerk, the first question, please.

3.

QUESTIONS

Question No. 1 - The Honourable Robert Midwinter to ask the Minister for Health and Social Care

The Speaker –

Honourable Robert Midwinter.

The Honourable Robert Midwinter –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Speaker, can the Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care tell this Council, how the review and the reorganisation of the pharmacy services is progressing, and when he expects pharmacy services to return to normal operating hours, bearing in mind that reduced operating hours were supposed to be for a limited time period only?

The Speaker –

Thank you. The Minister for Health and Social Care.

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

Thank you Mr Speaker, and I'd like to thank the Honourable Member for his question. So there are a number of answers to that question. But first of all, I will start with the current pharmacy opening hours, which is currently Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Wednesdays, a.m. So the reduction that was planned was on largely focused on Wednesday afternoons. So while we are undertaking this review, we have found that there is a number of elements that has come about that we may have to continue for a short time period. Keep the Wednesday afternoons closed, and that's a longer discussion I will have with my team during our Advisory Board. The reasons for this, however, is because of the accumulating numbers for one-off medical prescriptions that we are now prescribing. So if I just give you an example about, you know, about five years ago, the cases of diabetes on St. Helena was only about 6 to 700. Now we are now 1000 plus. That's medication every single day for those people. And that medication has to be prepared. We've also found that doing prescriptions for long-term prescriptions, so people don't have to come every month for their medication has helped a lot across the board. But in order to do that, we required time to prepare those medications. On the other side, I would just like to say that right now we are experiencing quite a bit of difficulty with procurement, and that's largely because of the issues we're having with the current service provider, and sending chilled medication to St. Helena is currently

unavailable for some of the medications, and we now have to use a very expensive route, which is air freighting, which also gets bumped from time to time. So we're experiencing quite a bit of difficulty, but it's outside of our current, of what we are currently doing, but we are actively trying to get a better logistics service in play.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Robert Midwinter.

The Hon. Robert Midwinter–

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Speaker, at numerous constituency meetings, it has been said to the public that even though there is shortened hours, particularly on a Wednesday, that people attending medical appointments on those days can still access prescriptions that are given to them on those days. Can the Minister confirm that, that is still the case?

The Speaker –

Thank you. Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care.

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

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Yes, I can confirm that is still the case. There have been, dare I say, random times when this has not happened, and it's just a miscommunication, possibly between a new locum doctor and the procedure we have in place. The last time I had a report come in from a Councillor which indicated this to me was about 3 to 4 months ago, possibly that there were three members of the public who couldn't access their medication after attending a medical appointment on a Wednesday afternoon and I would just encourage, if there are still current issues, I would just encourage members to say so and we can address them. But I know it did happen on 1 or 2 occasions.

The Speaker –

Thank you. Councillor Midwinter.

The Hon. Robert Midwinter –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. And again I thank the Honourable Minister for his response. That's a good thing to know, again, because this has come up recently at constituency meetings. Could the notice that's on the door of the Pharmacy be updated, and some wording to that effect be put on there, so that people are aware that they can pick up prescriptions when the Pharmacy appears to be closed?

The Speaker –

Thank you. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you, Honourable Member, and the obvious answer is yes. And thank you very much for the suggestion as well.

The Speaker –

Okay. Thank you very much. Councillor Dr Corinda Essex

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Would the Honourable Minister also consider providing some publicity on this point, so that those that have appointments on a Wednesday afternoon are aware of what is the provision provided for them, before they go around and see a closed door to the Pharmacy. And can you also undertake that locum doctors in particular are provided with that information in their induction packs?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care.

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

I'd like to thank the Honourable Member for her question and valid points there. And yes, of course we will. And we do provide the information in the induction packs, but they are occasions when it does slip, so we are trying to reinforce that is the case. But definitely the publicity from both Honourable Members will be actioned.

The Speaker –

Thank you. Thank you very much. Councillor Karl Thrower.

The Hon. Karl Thrower –

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Would my Honourable Friend be able to say whether the problems with the chilled goods should be sorted with the new shipping contract, which starts in February?

The Speaker –

Are you able to respond Honourable Minister?

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

Thank you, Honourable Member and thank you, Mr Speaker. The question is way off where we are at the moment, but we are talking about health provisions. So I understand where my Honourable Friend is coming from, but I cannot respond at this time. But I mean, I'm openly saying that in public, and you know, being able to bring cold medication, chilled service to St. Helena, especially in terms of medication, is an extremely important element, and I would expect that a new shipping service provider, that the negotiation takes place, that is definitely happening.

The Speaker –

Thank you for responding. Next question please.

Question No. 2 - The Honourable Ronald Coleman to ask the Minister for Health and Social Care.

The Speaker –

The Honourable Ronald Coleman.

The Hon. Ronald Coleman –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care tell this Council, why it is still difficult for some people to get appointments to see a doctor in reasonable time, following the rearrangement of the appointments procedure which should have improved this?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care.

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

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I'd like to thank the Honourable Member for his question. However, just before I make an answer to that question, can I just ask the Honourable Member what is his tolerance or his understanding of a reasonable time frame in terms of appointments?

The Speaker –

Thank you Honourable Member. Honourable Ronald Coleman.

The Hon. Ronald Coleman –

Thank you, Mr Speaker, within a week I would think so.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I can now proceed and answer the question. But before doing so, I would like and I would encourage people to have a research on any, any public funded health service and just to see if they could find, if they could get a GP's appointment within one week. I would very much, and I think my team would very much would like to hear about it. So in saying so, the last I've got, because every week I get an update of our appointment times because it is a hot topic in the community, so I get an update from my medical staff on the appointments. The last one that was given to me was on the 22nd of October, and it says as follows. Jamestown Weekly days there were 5 free slots, and, but we also do a long term at that particular point in time, a number of free slots for the next four weeks, which is 20 working days, was 92. So that was as of last week. Likewise, there's one for Half Tree Hollow where at, where it was just 1 free slot. But however the, and there was 25 available within the next 20 working days. The Longwood and Levelwood clinics are similar, so free slots and working days are quite similar data, so there are appointments available at the moment. However, I would just like to add to the back of this, because this happens seasonally across every health service around the world, that seasonal flu's show up and or seasonal elements show up, and the health service is inundated with a demand for hospital appointments, etc. So we can't just make an assumption based on a particular time in the year, we have to look at the average time that it takes throughout the year. So sometimes it can possibly take 25 to 30 days. It will also depend on whether we have a full medical complement, because that's also a really, really, really difficult thing to have on St. Helena, which I hope to answer in a question following. So we have to take all of these things into consideration, and given that at the moment that you should be able to get a medical appointment within two weeks, because that's the tolerance that we are trying to work towards as a benchmark for our own team. And like I said, given that most other public health services around the world work well outside of those tolerances.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Ronald Coleman.

The Hon. Ronald Coleman –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. The other thing I would like to raise with the appointments is that people are having problems, so the public need to know. That's why we brought the question today, is that if you

went to get an appointment to see a doctor and they want a blood test or other tests done, then the patients still have to wait a further week, two weeks sometimes to get that test done, it can't be done the same day.

The Speaker –

Is a question following that statement?

The Hon. Ronald Coleman –

Yes. Is he aware that they have?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am absolutely aware of this simply because some of the tests actually take quite a few days to achieve. Also, given the health situation on St. Helena, medical appointments and hospital attendances are very, very high and most of them require follow up medical work, which means there's a long list of these too for our lab to contend with. So a two week waiting time on a blood test back, from my perspective isn't actually such a bad thing given what we have. I like to say on top of that though, some of the new medical equipment we have that should be able to analyse some of these, some of the things we're testing a lot quicker might help to speed up that, but until we put it in practice, until we actually trial it, we won't be able to know this. But depending on, you know, on what we are testing. So this is a very broad and across the board answer. My answer would be that 1 to 2 weeks would be what it would take to achieve this.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Ronald Coleman.

The Hon. Ronald Coleman –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Just one final thing. When there is heavy flu's going about, I wonder if they would consider having flu clinics apart from those clinics that people genuinely need to see the doctor for other reasons?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you. Thank you, Honourable Member, just to say that there's a delicate boundary with having flu clinics, obviously if there's young children, very ill, etc. But we also try to keep the bugs away from our own medical team who have to attend other emergencies. So the normal advice is actually to stay at home, take some painkillers and to rest. But there are some occasions, especially with our elderly community, that flu actually can do far more and be far more critical, so I don't want to say to everyone that you need to stay away when you got the flu, but it is a delicate boundary where we need to also protect the staff that we need every day to deal with other medical incidences.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Councillor Dr Corinda Essex.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. In order to reduce the demand for appointments, is there any mechanism in place whereby patients who are awaiting routine results from scans and blood tests and so on, can be informed that they don't need follow up if indeed all the tests are satisfactory?

The Speaker –

Thank you. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you, Honourable Member. And it's a very good question because it is something that we are currently working on as a team. At the moment, remembering that all of the results have to be reviewed by usually, by the doctor that person is seeing, it still takes quite a bit of time to do that review. So sometimes it's actually up for the team. It is just easier to revisit and re-see that patient. But I totally take the point that you are making because it is important. Once we can free up some of that space then we actually can take on more appointments. But we are as a team working on that very element as we speak, because we understand how it could help with the efficiency of the organisation.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Councillor Andrew Turner.

The Hon. Andrew Turner –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can the Honourable Minister say if there are any plans to expand the district clinic provision to enable better access to appointments and reduce pressures at the main hospital?

The Speaker –

Thank you. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you Honourable Member for your question. Currently because we did increase quite a few of the appointment slots that we had given, that we, I think it was Levelwood, that we shut for a while I think. I can't think if we did every other week, we didn't shut it and we have tried to increase that to do exactly that. However, it again comes down to sometimes as long as we've got five GP's available, which is the number that seems to keep our operation ticking relatively fluently, these can be achieved. But there are times when we, for unforeseen circumstances go a doctor down, and that's when we have to consolidate and probably bring back some of those times. Currently though, to answer your question Honourable Member, there isn't a current plan to increase the times at the moment, but understandably, there's still some issues with one of the current districts that you represent, and that's something that that we hope to do better at.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Councillor Rosemary Bargo.

The Hon. Rosemary Bargo –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Minister Martin. Sorry. Can you tell me, I know we were talking about test results and it would take about two weeks or so, but do you have any fast track mechanisms in place with results if like a serious illness has been like, determined, identified?

The Speaker –

Fast tracked. Thank you very much. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you. Honourable Member. So this is one of these questions where I would actually need support from my medical team to say what they do operationally on a daily basis. However, if there is a medical emergency in place, then I'm sure that the results are fast tracked under a different manner. I mean, there are teams that come in during the evening if there's an emergency to sort this out.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Councillor Karl Thrower.

The Hon. Karl Thrower –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Honourable Minister, previously it's been indicated that improvements to the health computer system should help manage appointments more efficiently. How is that work progressing?

The Speaker –

Response. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you, Honourable Member. May I say that this is probably a question for the Financial Secretary no less. The work is progressing really well to be quite honest, and I speak of the point that stands before us right now. There is a sum of money which we have submitted, the business case, to FAM for the next round of consultation that will bring our current system, our patient source system, totally up to date, and also with the potential of using the cloud based facilities, which would bring it up in line with how it's operated in the NHS. There's also a secondary piece of very important work being undertaken. We want to bid to get, and to have an epidemiologist out here to consolidate our data, and to look at, because we're trying to build a disease register for the island. We're small that we actually can build a 100% disease register, and so we'll be doing both elements line to line. We're consolidating the data, bringing it in, bringing it up to speed with all of the, with data protection, etc. And then putting all of that data onto a new updated patient source system, if obviously my business case is submitted. So here's my promotion.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Next question please.

Question No. 3 - The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex to ask the Minister for Health and Social Care.

The Speaker –

The Honourable Dr Corinda Essex.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care state what policy is in place for the treatment of dental emergencies?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care.

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

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I'd like to thank the Honourable Member for her question. This was one of those questions that I had to rush and have a look at this morning just because of the detail. So I've, so the dental services emergency operation is from 8:30 to 9:30 in the morning. But currently there is no policy, specific policy, in place. But it is a protective time slot that has been in place for the last 20 years, and it is strictly for that. And, you know, I just had back couple of statistics, for instance, there's about six patients daily who attend this emergency. The other side to this obviously is what is considered an emergency, so there's a dental emergency, what we may consider a dental emergency, which is obviously the relief of pain, which can be done there by just relieving the pain. And then if there's further work to be done, an appointment can be made so that work can be done. But then, there is a medical emergency where potentially swelling is being caused, for instance, that is blocking the airways etc. and then that becomes a medical problem as well. So the policy that underpins what could be seen as a dental emergency is actually the medical emergencies policy, which covers both elements.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Councillor Dr Corinda Essex.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank my Honourable Friend for his response. In the case of dentists not being available, how would a dental/medical emergency which could be potentially serious, be handled?

The Speaker –

Thank you. Honourable Minister.

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

So if I just refer back to my previous answer, which is that if it is deemed a medical emergency, then medical staff will be brought in to support that. However, I trying to think about her title now, our well, Charmaine then, who is currently our Hygienist, thank you, our Hygienist. She is currently equipped and can do very basic relief, and she's qualified to do so. So we can again most importantly relieve pain, and then we can bring in medical staff if it actually is a medical emergency that comes through the dental.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Councillor Dr Corinda Essex.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you. Just to clarify, can the Honourable Minister say whether the Hygienist would be able to determine if a case needed to be referred for medical input?

The Speaker –

Thank you, Honourable Minister.

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

I can't say straight up right here Honourable Member, but I am sure if she is or has the qualifications to be able to look at some of these, then the training should have been provided. However, I can go and check for my Honourable Member if that is the case. I would assume that in any, which is across the board with health, if there is an unknown or an unfamiliar, then the first thing we do is actually go for the next step, which is to have at least someone with the right experience and qualifications to come and determine whether it's a medical emergency.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Next question, please.

Question No 4 - The Honourable Karl Thrower to ask the Minister for Health and Social Care.

The Speaker –

The Honourable Karl Thrower?

The Hon. Karl Thrower –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Would the Honourable Minister, I would like to inquire about the progress and strategies in place for recruiting doctors and critical medical staff. When will the Honourable Minister for Health and Social Care, given our unique geographical location healthcare needs, please provide an update on the current efforts to attract and retain medical professionals of a suitable caliber to ensure the continued well-being of our community?

The Speaker –

Thank you. Honourable Minister.

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

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I'd like to thank the Honourable Member. I think I'll try to help and look at the boundaries within the second part of your question first, which is our isolation etc. because it's important that we have this discussion within that context. So let's be straight up and honest about what it is. It is difficult to recruit and retain good doctors here. We are simply asking people to relocate to a very remote island with lots of personal and professional challenges. The health resources are limited. It means that doctors work with fewer facilities and much less support than they're used to in other areas and other systems. There's also an issue with the discrepancy that remuneration is a potential disruptor. We are competing with other small islands who actually pay far more for our medical team, for their medical staff. So in the context of just these elements outside of medicine, there's also another important point, which is the fact that potentially the years served on St. Helena doesn't count to their CPD as well, which also limits them in their professional development when they leave St. Helena so there is a lot. It takes a lot for a doctor to come here and want to stay for three years. I am pleased to say that we now have what I consider to be some very good doctors on St. Helena. So let's just go back to the beginning of your question, which is from a normal perspective in terms of the recruitment process, qualifications check and registration etc. that is done through the normal recruiting process. So it's done through our HR process and there will be input from the CMO if necessary. But some of those checks, and I also would like to point out here, going back to what I said earlier that even with the current medical litigation that has just been in play, that's also actually can throw a huge spanner in the works for trying to recruit doctors to St.