

2018.11.06

6 Senator K.L. Moore of the Minister for Children and Housing regarding funding to provide support services for families at risk: [OQ.171/2018]

Given that funding has not been forthcoming in the past to provide vital support services offering long-term improvements in outcomes for families at risk, and that this has resulted in a support programme being cut back by a community and voluntary sector provider, will the Minister assure the Assembly that a bid to expand such provision will be made as a matter of priority in the forthcoming Government plan?

Senator S.Y. Mézec (The Minister for Children and Housing):

The Common Strategic Policy identified putting children first as a key priority of this political term. The policy describes a commitment to learning from the Care Inquiry by improving services to children. A key principle included within this policy is early help, which commits services to working better together so that problems experienced by children and families do not escalate to crisis. The policy statement will inform the priorities that will feature in the forthcoming 2019 Transition Plan and Government Plan of 2020 to 2023 and its attendant business planning cycles. Any subsequent commissioning for services for children from the community voluntary sector will continue to be consistent with the procurement process, which is consistent with the Public Finances Law.

4.6.1 Senator K.L. Moore:

That was rather difficult to understand with so much jargon in one answer, however it was pleasing to hear the Minister talk about early health because of course these programmes are offered to tier 3 families and, if offered at an earlier stage to tier 2 families also, are about preventing a situation becoming worse and that family potentially becoming a tier 4 family, which is children being put into care. So my question to the Minister is that, for commissioning bodies, and that goes for any charitable commissioning body, when will the timelines be set in order for them to be able to plan and prioritise their bids to the Government?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I can completely align myself with the comments made by the Senator at the start of her remarks and I think that we have to commit to accepting that where an agency is best placed to deliver a particular service then it absolutely should have our support and we should be involved in discussions with those bodies to ensure that they are best placed and able to do that with the certainty that is required from that. What I cannot say to the Senator at this point is exactly what the process is going to be because we are moving towards the next Government Plan and so there is still uncertainty as to what the contents of that plan is going to be. But what I can give her my personal guarantee on is that the community and voluntary sector organisations out there that are doing fantastic work supporting our children will certainly have my support. I will be one voice around the table consistently arguing to make sure that we work best with them to provide for those young people, children and families in Jersey, so that they do not escalate in the way that the Senator described before.

4.6.2 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

As part of this work, would the Minister agree to discuss with his fellow Ministers the question of whether rents should be charged to these charities and, if rents do have to be charged, could he perhaps pursue with his fellow Ministers that the rents should purely be for covering costs and not any further?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I do not think it is necessarily right to have a blanket rule because different organisations will have different needs and different capabilities of contributing. But what I do know is that the Minister for Education has requested a comprehensive review of the Education property portfolio by Jersey Property Holdings, and particularly with the case that has been referred to here, and we may see some good discussions take place there about what are the best arrangements for those organisations in future.

4.6.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister ensure that, where service level agreements are made with charitable organisations in order to deliver particular services for children, that such service level agreements are made to last for at least 3, and preferably 5, years so that certainty of funding may be maintained?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I personally think that is an excellent idea. It does provide those organisations with the certainty that they require so that they know that they can deliver these services for these people. That is something that I agree with absolutely and I will raise that and, if we attempt to look at short-term arrangements, then I will challenge those and make sure we get the best arrangements that are possible.

4.6.4 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Would the Minister confirm whether his policy of putting children first does in fact include support for families and does he agree with the idea that the only way to put children first is to support families and to help them at all levels, even when they are adults, or is he looking after their children?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Absolutely and this is referred to in the Strategic Plan. I certainly agree with that in principle but, as well as agreeing with that in principle, I do think that it is right that we bear in mind that there are unfortunately sometimes very sad circumstances where families, for whatever reason, are not capable of providing the best support to those children and young people and in those instances the state must intervene to make sure those young people are safe and can thrive.

[10:30]

4.6.5 Senator K.L. Moore:

With significant funds being transferred from contingencies that were unspent into the Stabilisation Fund, would the Minister consider making a bid to the Treasury Department to use some of those funds to ensure that these services are continued this year and until the time of the Government Plan?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I have to say that we are in a very uncomfortable and inflexible situation right now with regards to public finances as a result of the previous Medium Term Financial Plan, which I would just remind the Senator that I voted against as I did not support it. I am not particularly comfortable with the situation we are in and the restrictions there are on how we can allocate funding, where there are underspends here or where there is a greater need here, it is a far from ideal situation, and I look forward to this Government changing those rules so we do not find ourselves in this position in future.