

21.11.02

14 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Children and Education regarding Putting Children First (OQ.216/2021)

Following comments made by Haute Vallée's chair of governors at a recent Scrutiny Panel Hearing, will the Minister advise what action he intends to take to reassure students and staff at the school that he is committed to putting children and young people first?

Deputy S.M. Wickenden (The Minister for Children and Education):

I am committed to putting children first. I am ensuring the extensive work of my officers in carrying out a consultation with schools to continue to deliver improvements to the funding and provision within them. Following the independent school funding review, £11.2 million of additional money will be going into the education system next year, £2.3 million increased funding to Jersey Premium, students with low prior attainment, special educational needs in English and additional language, £5.5 million to fund the deficits within schools, £300,000 in additional funding for education, psychology, mental health and well-being and over £1 million for teacher training. The new school funding formula will distribute much of this funding to where it is needed. It is still undeveloped and my officers are continuing to work with the schools representatives to finish the task. When time allows between diaries, I will be going to speak to the head of Haute Vallée and hopefully the chair of the board of governors and I can tell you that, at a Children's Day where we attended Haute Vallée School this year. A BBC reporter went up to children at the school and asked them the very question: "Do you think this Government is putting children first?" and they said: "Yes." They said: "Yes, I do believe they are. If they were not, we would not have a Children's Day" is the answer. So, I will be speaking to the school and trying to work out where this breakdown in communications came from and ask what I can do more.

4.14.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

It is my understanding that when the pledge to support young people and children was first made, the Minister did not sign it. Can the Minister inform Members what his objection to the signing of the pledge was and what has changed in the intervening time?

Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

I made that quite clear in media statements why I was not signing the pledge at the initial outset due to the fact of not being a Minister, not being an Assistant Minister and being a Back-Bencher, the wording of the pledge set out to make me sign something that said I would achieve something that was not within my power. As soon as I became Assistant Chief Minister and Assistant Minister for Social Security and had the power to enact on the words of the pledge, I signed the pledge.

4.14.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Just on that last answer, is the Minister therefore implying that if you are not in Government then you cannot act to put children first?

Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

No, it is not what I am saying at all. I was saying the wording of the pledge itself made promises to do certain acts that were not within the power of me in the position I held.

4.14.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Minister how he suggests that, if you are not in Government, you do act to put children first if you have signed the pledge?

Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

I do not think that I could answer the question on other people's behalf.

4.14.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I wish the Minister would answer on his own behalf. The Minister says that his remarks about digging up the roads were misquoted. If that is the case, what did he say?

Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

Anyone can listen back to the Scrutiny hearing yesterday where I did say the words the pot is the pot, what do you want us to do, to stop digging up the roads never left my mouth to anyone unless I was reiterating what was said by the chair of the board of governors. What I did was explain to the former chair of the board of governors while at a meeting how the Government Plan works with funding allocations, saying that if we were to put more money in one area, it has to come from another area. A discussion would have to take place with the Minister responsible for that area to ask if they have less money in their budgets, what would that look like and what services would that change within their department? It was merely an information to the former chair of the board of governors on how funding and allocations of funds works within the Government Plan.

The Deputy Bailiff:

We have had the final supplementary but I have just seen, Deputy Tadier, I think you have asked a question in the chat which I overlooked. You can ask it but I was anxious that Deputy Ward's question is reached and perhaps Deputy Gardiner's.

4.14.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

I was going to ask, the Minister said that he has now signed the children's pledge because he can now do something about it, but does he acknowledge that earlier he said that if he wanted more money for education he could not do that himself, he would have to go to the Minister for Treasury and Resources and it would have to be decided by the Council of Ministers? Does he still accept that he has not really got any power to put children first because it is subject to the Minister for Treasury and Resources and the Council of Ministers agreeing with him?

Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

I have the power to go to my officers to ask for a report to be written to give the evidence so I can go to the Council of Ministers to ask for the funding to be changed or for extra funding. That is within my power as the Minister, to go to the Council of Ministers, to go to the Treasury Department, to have officers work on evidence that I can bring forward for that. So I do not agree that I do not have the power to put children first; the power is in my remit to go through the process as set out in the laws of this Island.

Deputy M. Tadier:

I suppose a supplementary ... I do not know if I can.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I do not think there is time otherwise we will never get to Deputy Ward's question.