

23.07.17

14 Deputy S.G. Luce of the Minister for Children and Education regarding nursery provision (OQ.149/2023)

With regard to nursery provision on the Island, will the Minister advise what meetings, if any, she has held since the last States sitting with Acrewood Nursery and more generally with other Ministers on this subject?

The Connétable of St. Peter (Assistant Minister for Children and Education - rapporteur):

Deputy Doublet would have had delegated responsibility for early years, but as she is malade I will answer the question on her behalf. The first thing that I need to point out is that I would not normally answer questions in this area, but I appear to be the last man standing this time. Because we have a preschool operated by the Parish in St. Peter in which I have some responsibilities, so therefore it can be a difficult area and I will absent myself normally from any discussions regarding grants or increases to States funding. So, that said, Deputy Doublet met with the owners of Acrewood Nursery on Thursday, 6th July, the day after the last States sitting. She tells me it was a positive and informative meeting and she was able to fully understand their current position and the actions taken. Since the last Assembly, Deputy Doublet has also held discussions with myself as the Assistant Minister for Children and Education, and those were more general, more on the basis of J.E.Y.A. (Jersey Early Years Association), and also with the Chief Minister again regarding early years. Looking at the meetings that did take place in addition, she met with J.E.Y.A., the Jersey Early Years Association, on 10th July and she also met with the Jersey child carers on 13th July.

4.14.1 Deputy S.G. Luce:

I just want to wish both the Assistant Minister and the Minister well from being malade. We have seen a massive decline in numbers of people providing childcare nurseries and, in fact, in the day care association we are down now to about 50 people from 200. It is my view that this is down to bureaucracy. The amount of forms and courses that had to be undertaken is quite overwhelming. Does the Minister accept that bureaucracy is a major factor in the inability for childcare provision on the Island?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

Thank you for that question. I was not particularly aware of the bureaucracy element but I am certainly willing to add that to any discussions with the Early Years Association. Also, I can easily have discussions with our own staff in the Parish. If that is an issue, then we need to seriously look at that and I will take that forward.

4.14.2 Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Assistant Minister Deputy Doublet has stated that: "Making quality childcare more affordable is my highest priority because it is one of the biggest cost of living pressures for families." There were 7 Council of Ministers priorities in the Common Strategic Policy. One was cost of living, another was children and families. Is the Assistant Minister not receiving adequate support on these priorities from the Council of Ministers?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

As the Assistant Minister is not available to answer that question directly, I can only comment. Certainly, in this latest on the issue of Acrewood she certainly did seem to be receiving support, so I would have to ask her directly whether she feels that she has not received the required support.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Final supplementary, Deputy Luce.

4.14.3 Deputy S.G. Luce:

Sorry, Sir, I was expecting a few more questions, especially given that this is such a massive issue for the Island. Getting parents back to work is vital to the productivity gains that our economic Minister speaks about when he says his solutions are for returning us to a much better economy. Does the Minister agree with me that, given the challenges, it is time that the States provided these facilities?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

Of course, the States have commenced providing these facilities in primary schools. Most primary schools do have a nursery attached. However, I think certainly their hours do not extend beyond the school hours and I think that is an issue. But the private sector has always been very important and I think they provide a service that many parents like. I can speak from experience, and I go back to our own experience as a Parish, that we can never satisfy the number of requests we have for places. I cannot speak for all nurseries, but we have constant requests to take up places which we do not have. We have 24 places, they are fully occupied, and yet there was one point last year where we had requests from 10 parents in one week. So it is something that we are looking at. I know that looking further into the provision of nurseries in the primary schools is something that the Assistant Minister is looking at. They are already there but I think it is early years in that. We need to look at exactly what parents require, but also there is that important part, which is the privately owned nurseries that have served the Island very well. Sorry, I have forgotten the thread of your question.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I think the Minister was agreeing with me that the States need to provide these facilities.

The Connétable of St. Peter:

Yes, we have started on that journey, that is what I can say, and we are looking to improve that. Thank you very much.