

2024.04.16.

4.15 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning regarding the proposed timetable and funding mechanism to move towards a universal offer for 2- to 3-year-olds (OQ.61/2024)

Further to the recently lodged Common Strategic Policy 2024-2026, and the priority to extend nursery and childcare provision, will the Minister advise Members of the proposed timetable and funding mechanism to move towards a universal offer for 2 to 3 year-olds?

Deputy R.J. Ward (The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning):

As the Deputy will know, the current Government Plan says that: “We will review feasibility options for expanding early years nursery provision and childcare support to benefit all children in Jersey from 9 months to 3 years-old, with a report detailing any action plan from the Government to be presented to the States Assembly before 1st September 2024, and any financial implications forming part of the Government Plan 2025-2028.” That is on page 10. So the action of the intended Government Plan was unlikely to appear until September 2024; I hope that we can speed this up. I have already engaged officers to explore definitive options to extend nursery provisions via pilot schemes. If there is any way to have this in place by September rather than only the plan to do so, it will be acted upon, so my timetable is as soon as possible. Nearly 2 years has been spent in consultation and round tables with stakeholders that produced a very valuable Isos report; I know the Deputy observed one of these sessions. To extend further we will need to secure funding through future Government Plans which is driven by the commitments made in the draft C.S.P. and the C.S.P. that has been agreed by the Council of Ministers. We will need a cross-sector approach to extend provision to give a universal offer, and I will work as hard as I possibly can to try and extend that offer as quickly as possible. We have 2 years remaining in this Assembly. I want to see significant changes to the provision in this time and to be able to announce a universal provision of some form in this time span is my target.

4.15.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I thank the Minister for the answer, and I am pleased to see that the priority is being maintained in this area. It was my intention to secure funding and indeed had the informal backing of the previous Council of Ministers for a universal offer for at least 15 hours of nursery care for 2 to 3 year-olds. Obviously, this is not something that is within my control now but can the new Minister confirm that he will be able to secure at least 15 hours of nursery care on a universal basis for 2 to 3 year-olds?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes, that would be the intention - 15 hours - but I do not, and I will not, offer 15 hours of universal care when the provision is simply not there. That makes false promises to parents. This is what has happened in the U.K. and there is now a real disillusionment among parents in the U.K. So instead we will be working incredibly hard to try and make sure that provision is available and then we can offer that universal provision of 15 hours, and I hope that can be successful. At the beginning, if we target well, we show the value of it, we will have a lot of work to do at cross-sector. I want to say - and I wrote a few things down and I highlighted this one - I want to underline to this Assembly that I value all of the sectors and want to see us work together to deliver what we want which is, in the end, the best start for children we can possibly give them.

4.15.2 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

Are there any plans to consider changing the staff-to-child ratios in an attempt to create more capacity in the system, and does the Minister believe this is a safe and sensible approach to take?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I have heard people frequently say: “I thank the Deputy for the question”, I genuinely mean I thank you for this question, the Deputy, because, no, we do not want to do that. We need to provide a provision across this Island which is safe and the best possible vision it can be. It was one of the fallouts of making a universal offer elsewhere that could not be reached, which meant the only solution for nurseries was to increase the numbers of children per member of staff, which I think is the wrong thing to do. It takes away from the quality of the care that is needed for our children and it takes away and can - and I am not saying this is the case - but it can reduce safety for those children and that is the last thing that we want to do.

4.15.3 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

I am very glad to hear that; thank you, Minister. In which case, how else does the Minister propose to increase provision?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I have put down my notes because I have been working on this so much I can just answer. We have to be very creative in the way that we offer increased provision. The first thing we need to do is increase the understanding and the value of the early years sector in terms of care and the people who train to do that. There are, I believe, 67 young people - I think most of them are young people - coming through the training at Highlands this year, and it will take time for them to be into the system. We also need to be creative because there is a section of our community out there who may not want to work full time but may be - I will use the word “older” advisedly being perhaps an older person myself - but may want to return to the workforce and have skills bringing up their own children. With a focused training, intelligent approach to that sort of training, we can extend that provision in many, many ways; so that is one of the things I want to do. We need to look creatively at the way in which we can extend the numbers of people working in this very, very important sector for this Island.

4.15.4 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I am sure the Minister is aware that we have almost 150 free spaces at school nurseries. At the end of 2023, several schools expressed interest to take part in the pilot which will offer wraparound care after school, which will allow hopefully to have more capacity in the private nurseries, that more people will sign into the school nurseries where we do have capacity. Can the Minister confirm that this pilot will go forward in primary schools? We are talking about the between 3 to 5 primary schools that have expressed interest.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes, there are 188 places in primary schools. The pilot that was talked about was, I do not think, ever really enacted upon but, yes, that is exactly the type of interaction that we have to do. I know that we have had a conversation with headteachers who are very willing to enter into those sorts of arrangements to extend the hours of their nurseries, but to do so in the best way they possibly can. What I see is we need to work across our providers, both the state sector, the private sector, the charity sector, the third sector, if you like, and others who provide nursery care to be creative on this Island. We are a small Island but we need to have this provision in place for people and their children and the sooner we can do that and get people

working together the better. Indeed, if we can get a project up and running for September, it is very likely to be exactly that type of model.

4.15.5 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

In the C.S.P., although the nursery and childcare provision was at the top of the agenda in that document, which I was pleased to see, I was disappointed to see that the word “quality” was not in that section. The Minister has spoken about quality today, could he confirm that any universal offer that is extended to families that he will maintain that principle of quality and, if necessary, inject additional funding, not just for the spaces but also for raising the quality of care that is delivered to our children?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I just check, did the Deputy say “quality” or “equality”? Quality. The reason the word is not there is because for me it goes without saying. There is no way that I would put my name to anything that reduces the quality of care for our young people. My children went to nurseries and we had that horrendously difficult balance between work, getting the children to nursery, getting them home, and we were, as most parents, absolutely obsessed with the quality of the delivery of care that they had. We are corporate parents and I take that role very seriously. As a corporate parent, I do not think we should even be considering that we have to put the word “quality” in there because as a corporate parent that is all that we would do for our own children and therefore we would do for the children across this Island.