

3. Questions without notice - The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture

3.1 Deputy S. Power:

My question is a follow-on question to the reply to my written question. If, for whatever reason, the Serco pool - which we call the AquaSplash pool - had to close or was closed for public health, safety or financial reasons, does the Education, Sport and Culture Department or the Minister have the ability to re-commission the Fort Regent pool, and are there any structural problems related to the pool?

Senator M.E. Vibert (Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

If the AquaSplash pool was closed obviously we would have to look - if it was going to be any length of closure - how we could alleviate people's requirements for swimming. Re-commissioning Fort Regent: the reason the States - one of the reasons - decided to build a competition pool alongside the leisure pool at the AquaSplash was the fact that the Fort Regent pool has reached the end of its useful life. It has structural problems, and it would be a rebuild, not a re-commission, which would be a very extensive, expensive and quite long-lasting; I should imagine 2 or 3 years from the concept, to bring it back as a swimming pool, because it would need a rebuild, because the body of the pool itself is past its usable date.

3.2 Deputy S. Power:

The first part of my question was does the States, the Education Department, have a contingency in the event that the AquaSplash pool closes?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am not sure - contingency for what, Sir? If the AquaSplash pool, as with any of our pools, had to be closed, we would take steps: (1) to try to make sure it could be reopened as soon as possible; and (2) to put in place what alternatives we could. On occasions we have to close pools, for example, the Les Quennevais pool, when we changed the filtration system, and no doubt there are occasions when this has to happen, and we put in appropriate safeguards to ensure that both pools are not closed at the same time and so on. If the AquaSplash pool, for some reason - I cannot imagine what - had to be closed on a permanent basis, one would hope we would have a lead-in time to consider the needs of the Island for pools in the future, but I have no indication that there is any reason why the AquaSplash pool should close.

3.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Now the unused part of the d'Hautrée site has been, I should say, well tidied up, is it the intention of the Education Department to now embark on development plans, or will it be putting the unused remainder of the site into the central property pool?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The d'Hautrée site, I am pleased, has been tidied up. It needed tidying up. It is remaining at present under the auspices of my department because, as we were talking about earlier, with the skills development, and if the States approve the business plan today, then there will be some funds available for skills development. Working closely with the Economic Development Department, we are going to be looking at what we can do, and I think because of the strategic importance of the d'Hautrée site, next to HautliE.U. School, next to Highlands College, at the moment, we want to ensure that it is still available in case we find we have a need, a demand, to meet in that area.

3.4 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

We have heard earlier the Social Security Minister advise us that the unemployment figures have, of course, increased due to the school leavers over the summer months, and I would like the Minister to advise us, Sir, of the co-operation that exists between both departments to give careers advice to those school leavers who do attend at the Social Security Department, notwithstanding the fact that the Education Minister has responsibility for their education only to the age of 16.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have responsibility past the age of 16, because we have a responsibility to offer suitable courses up to the age of 19 and beyond, but yes, we do work very closely together with the Social Security Department. My Career Service Department works very hard trying to ensure that anyone who is not going on to further or higher education has a job lined up for when they leave school, and a career path. At the moment we are going through a position where we have a bulge, a demographic bulge, going through our 16 to 18 year-olds, and so, unfortunately, we do have the situation where we have higher numbers - not a higher percentage - of people who are looking for work and have not been successfully placed. It is an issue that we take very seriously and are working on, and I am working very closely with the Economic Development Department. It is not only providing the skills, but trying to match up what skills have been provided with the jobs that are available. We discussed it, as was said, to the Council of Ministers; we had a substantial paper on it. We laid out the very many things we are doing; what more we should be doing and how we are going to work much more closely with businesses in future, so as we get a much better idea of what is required in the future. I think that, unfortunately, we went through a period with what has to be regarded as ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

I think, Senator, really, that is quite a long answer, and we need to make sure there is enough time.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I was only trying to help the Deputy.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, do you want a follow-up question?

3.5 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I would like to, Sir, please. I did ask what co-operation there is between both departments, and bearing in mind that school leavers will presumably be going to the Social Security Department to look for work and to register perhaps as being unemployed, will the Minister advise what they will access when they get there? Will he advise whether there is perhaps someone from the Careers Office who is there and available to point them in the right direction?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We work very closely, as I said, with Social Security, and what we try and do is if the difficulty is a lack of skills, we try to advise - where possible - that the young person may find a suitable course at Highlands to improve their skills, to make them more marketable on the job scene. So we work with Social Security. It is not just about the jobs, it is about what is on offer to improve the marketability of a young person so that they can then acquire a job. Was that short enough, Sir?

Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

Sir...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Sorry. No, you have had your 2 questions now, Deputy, I am afraid. Deputy Martin?

3.6 Deputy J.A. Martin:

When the Minister was interviewed by the Social Affairs Panel on 2nd August, he said that he anticipated receiving a draft copy of the youth strategy by September 2006 and that he would have no problem passing it on to the panel when he received it. Could I ask the Minister, Sir, if the strategy is ready, and is it fully costed in the business plan that we are about to discuss? Thank you, Sir.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have not seen the strategy yet, but it is not the end of September, but I have been pushing for it as soon as possible. There have been problems with some illnesses and people off work in the Youth Service, but the strategy will have to be costed once it is approved, and the costings will be there. We have a budget for the Youth Service, which is obviously in the reports we are looking at today, and I am pleased to say that of course under my previous committee - and under myself as Minister - we have managed to increase the budget of the Youth Service over a number of years quite substantially, but we have to balance against it all the other services we have to provide.

3.7 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

How does the Minister foresee his department working with Home Affairs to improve the education in provision and after provision education?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Very closely, Sir. We have already indicated to Home Affairs that we will make available a senior teaching post to co-ordinate future education policy at present. As in the U.K., the situation is that the prison authorities buy in the services from the local education authorities. Highlands College is already closely involved, and the Council of Ministers is committed to improving the education facilities at the prison, and my department of course will co-operate wholeheartedly in ensuring this is done as well as possible.

3.8 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Further to that, would the Minister tell the Assembly or inform the Assembly as to which department does he deem to be responsible for the educational and vocational training of prisoners at H.M. Prison La Moye?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Up to present, the responsibility for the funding of educational provision has been the Home Affairs Department, which runs the prison, as it is responsible for every other aspect of the prison as well. We have acted as the provider of that through agreement with generally Highlands College, the main provider, but I think it is an issue - as I say, it involved the Council of Ministers - we should not be siloed on this. We all need to work together to ensure that we are providing a proper education provision at the prison, and I think we have nothing to be proud of in the past, because there has not been good enough educational provision, and I want to work with Home Affairs to ensure that we have much better provision in future.

3.9 Senator J.L. Perchard:

I am sure all Members - I certainly will - echo those words, but I would like to ask the question again: which department, Sir, is responsible, in the Minister's opinion, for the educational and vocational training of business at La Moye?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I thought I answered that, Sir. I said that Home Affairs have the funding responsibility for all aspects of the prison, including educational provision, and that we act as a provider for the education that we are asked to provide.

3.10 Deputy A.D. Lewis of St. John:

I wonder if I could ask the Minister, what, if any, progress has been made for the setting up of a student loan scheme in preparation for the proposed changes in university funding?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The whole of our education funding is still under review. We went out to consultation and we have recently completed that consultation and are now considering the responses. As part of the preparation for any possible changes, we have worked very closely with the Treasury on any aspects of a type of loan scheme, and we have also worked closely with the local clearing banks to see what help they could give. We originally had a meeting with the people concerned, we have asked them some more questions, and they will be coming back to us very shortly.

3.11 Deputy G.P. Southern:

What measures, and more importantly, what additional resources does the Minister have in place to reduce teacher workloads to U.K. equivalents in order to ensure recruitment and retention levels over the coming 3 years?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am not sure about declaration of interest. My wife is a teacher, as I understand Deputy Southern's is as well, so I will declare that interest, and I am sure she would be pleased if I could reduce her workload. We have regular meetings with the teachers' unions and so on. The situation is that in the U.K. things have developed differently and that certain duties done by teachers in Jersey are not done by teachers in the U.K.. These include certain lunch duties and other duties, but to balance that, of course local teachers were given pay rises at the time to continue with doing these duties. Having said that, we are very concerned that all teachers have a reasonable amount of non-contact and preparation time, so as they can deliver the best possible education to our children, and we are working with head teachers, and we have, if you like, asked head teachers to come up with schemes for their schools so that at least the minimum non-contact time is available to all teachers in future.

3.12 The Deputy of St. John:

Just regarding HautliE.U. and Highlands, has the Minister any plans to improve the access roads to these educational establishments, as I have received many complaints - and I know my colleague, Deputy Breckon has also - regarding the access roads, namely Bon Air Lane, being completely overloaded with traffic.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We have recently finished - or just about - completely the redevelopment of the area around HautliE.U. with the new sports centre. We are constrained, as every other department is, by what we are allowed to do with roads with planning. If there are particular concerns, and I have not been inundated with complaints, and let me assure you, the public are not backward at coming forward to complain to me about anything to do with the education service in other areas, but if there are particular concerns, obviously we will look at them and try to alleviate them where we can, but we do have schools and Highlands in that area, and they have to be approached somehow.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am afraid the time for questioning of the Minister has now expired. Connétable of St. Helier, would you like to take this opportunity now that Deputy Huet is back in the Chamber?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

As I stated, during the answer to a question put by me, I believe it was clearly stated that there was no need to consult the Parish of St. Helier about the use of sewage sludge, because it was not happening with the Parish. I understand from a copy of a briefing note that the sewage sludge is being transported down to La Collette composting site, is being mixed there, being stored there - for I do not know how long - before it is being transported to the other parishes, and it seems to me that this is incomplete with her earlier answer. I would like her to clarify the situation, please.

Deputy J.J. Huet:

I am afraid, Sir, I cannot clarify. I give my apologies, and I will make enquiries and come back at a later time. That is all I can say, Sir.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I think, Deputy, you should come back today on a matter like this.

Deputy J.J. Huet:

Yes, of course, Sir. Thank you.

The Deputy Bailiff:

So perhaps you would look into it and revert at the appropriate time. Very well. So we come next to questions of the Chief Minister.