

2.9 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding responsibility for allocating free nursery places at primary schools:

Would the Minister advise who is responsible for allocating the free nursery places provided at some of the Island's primary schools and what criteria, if any, are used for this allocation?

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

Nursery places at provided primary schools are allocated essentially by my department of Education, Sport and Culture. In allocating places the department tries to take account of the needs of individual children. Particular consideration is given to children with significant social or education needs, from families with particular needs (for example, low income, long-term parental illness, siblings with special needs suspected of being at risk or with siblings at the school involved). In applying these criteria, the department takes account of the date of application and also tries to ensure that in each class there is a gender balance; the social and educational needs of the group are balanced and manageable; and that no more than 20 per cent of the children come from outside the schools involved catchments area.

2.9.1 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Does the Minister not think it would have been preferable to have sorted out the inequity that exists in the provision of such subsidised nursery places before continuing his increased provision of them around the Island?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

In reply to that, can I say we have a policy agreed by the States that as primary schools are developed a nursery class is added and that provision is made in the funding to staff that nursery class. The previous Education, Sport and Culture Committee under my presidency issued a consultation document(R.C. 54 of 2005) about early years education and care which looked at that policy and put forward a number of options and suggestions. We are considering the responses. Can I say I am very disappointed that the responses only included one response from a States Member who has currently left the States and no response from the Constable of St. Helier?

2.9.2 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Can I respond to that last charge by saying that my department has been in contact with his department and I refute it. The actual question I asked as a supplementary was the inequity that currently exists. Could the Minister say whether he agrees with me that the current system of giving some people a free nursery place and other parents having to pay for it is inequitable?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

If the Constable had paid the attention that he says he did to R.C. 54 of 2005 he would have seen that is the reason why we are reviewing early years' education and care because of the previous Committee's concern about that very inequity which had not been addressed previously.

2.9.3 Senator B.E. Shenton:

Would the Minister explain whether there is an actual policy concerning nursery care? This government spends about £3 million on providing free nursery care. Guernsey does not spend anything and leaves it all to the private sector and I have been speaking to a lot of private nurseries who say that there has been hardly any or no consultation with the Education Department and that they tend to just go off and do whatever they wish. Will the Minister confirm that there is an actual policy to do with nursery care and the private and public mishmash that is there at the moment?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, there is a policy. I will provide it for the Senator and I would urge the Senator to read our consultation document, R.C. 54, and I would be quite prepared to accept a late submission from the Senator or any other States Member who wishes to comment on it.

2.9.4 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Could the Minister indicate when he will be bringing to the States the document and when he will be seeking to have this inequity addressed.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have raised the issue with the Council of Ministers and I hope to be bringing the options that we have been looking at, and the costings and so on, to the Council of Ministers in the first half of this year and then subsequently - depending on what the Council of Ministers decide - to bring it to the States.

2.9.5 Senator B.E. Shenton:

The Minister mentioned that they look at the social backgrounds of people when they are allocating nursery places. Could he tell me where he gets this information from, bearing in mind that we do have quite strict data protection laws regarding the transfer of information?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We gather that from the application forms made out by the parents themselves and also from other agencies that we work very closely with in our integrated children's centre, which is now based at the old St. Mark's School and has been called The Bridge.

2.9.6 The Connétable of St. Helier:

In his answer to my first question, the Minister said that the places are allocated centrally by his department. Is he in a position to tell us how many staff are involved in that allocation and in the regulation of nurseries around the Island?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

They are 2 separate things. The regulation of nurseries comes under a law which we administer and there is one person in particular, who is helped sometimes by another person, who does that; and for the allocation of nursery places one person in particular is allocated to do that. It takes up a considerable amount of their time at certain parts of the year but not at the rest of the year, but of course other officers will help as and when needed.

2.9.7 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Just a point of clarification, my understanding is that there are 2 members of staff at the department who inspect nurseries: one does the private sector, one does the public sector. Is it not the case that there are in fact 2 persons involved in the regulation plus however many are required in the allocation of places?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I did mention 2 people. I said one primarily. As the Constable said, there is one primarily with responsibilities for the private sector nurseries and one for own provision but one of the officers involved also has other duties.