

3. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture:

3.1 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

I would like to thank the Minister for his response this morning to my written question regarding capacity in Island schools and I note from his response that Les Quennevais appears to be showing a current over capacity of 70 pupils. From the response it shows that the built capacity was for 750. The staff there are working with 820 pupils. I know, Sir, also, that many of the current facilities do not conform to U.K. national standards for a school of the size of Les Quennevais. My question to the Minister is will he confirm that he is satisfied that the over crowding in a school where facilities are below national standard does not mean that there is a detrimental impact upon educational provision? Would he also advise the House when the intended refurbishment for Les Quennevais is due to begin?

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

If I get my papers together, because I gave a very - I hope - useful and detailed response to the questions to do with the pupil capacity. Les Quennevais, perhaps I can explain, Les Quennevais is only oversubscribed in 2 year groups, which is year 7, by one pupil and year 8, by 19 and that was a particularly large year group and it was agreed with the head teacher that we would expand it by an extra class for one year only. The overall numbers that look high in the other schools are because Les Quennevais has a particularly large staying on rate for year 10, where pupils stay on rather than transfer to Hautlieu from that school, and that is how the figures get expanded in that way but is not in excess of capacity because there is capacity in year 10, 11, 12, onwards, to provide that. Les Quennevais, we wish to redevelop as and when we can. It is going to be put into the future capital programme. One of the difficulties we have with Les Quennevais is the constricted site. We did some work, some substantial work on it some years ago and we are aware of that. I am very aware that we must not at any time compromise the educational provision of pupils at any of our secondary schools and I can assure the Deputy that the education provision at Les Quennevais is not compromised in any way and is excellent.

3.1.1 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I am a little confused because when I look at the answers given, it clearly states that the planned maximum pupil capacity for Les Quennevais school is 750 pupils and yet we know, from the answer to another question, that the total pupils at Les Quennevais are 820, so we are looking at a difference between 750 and 820 and it seems straight forward to me that Les Quennevais school is functioning at the moment with too many pupils for the design and size of the school. Will the Minister confirm that is correct or not, please?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The design of the school and the planned maximum pupil capacity was designed on year groups going up through the school with an expected number of pupils to transfer at year 10. At Les Quennevais, as I said, they stay on. A large number stay on in year 10. There is capacity, yes, Les Quennevais is over capacity but it is over capacity within, for example, the U.K. guidelines for an efficient school and, when you look through the year groups, you can see how the year groups change and sometimes you get more and sometimes you get less and we try to cater and try to help parents where we can in the catchment area. The head teacher of Les Quennevais is fully informed and fully involved in all discussions and decisions about can the school manage with the number of pupils concerned and I repeat, and it shows in its popularity, Les Quennevais offers excellent education. It is not working inefficiently, it is not over crowded to the extent that there would be great concern over it and it is a very popular school.

3.2 Deputy J. Gallichan of St. Mary:

The Minister has largely, I think, answered the question. I was going to ask for the discrepancy that is apparent. There have already been 20 people over subscribed at Les Quennevais, so the

70 over subscription in the general figures, in other words, where are the missing 50 pupils? Sir, I am a product of the education system in this Island. I am reasonably fluent in 4 languages. Double Dutch is not one of them, I am afraid and so I think that possibly the Minister has answered my question but in a way that I am not quite sure I still understand, Sir.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

One of the difficulties, you see, I am quite happy to answer, but the Deputy did ask some quite detailed, long questions covering many things which is why we produced tables and I think that is part of the problem. We tried to be as comprehensive as possible in our answers and of course as the 2 Deputies questioning me on the Scrutiny Panel for my department, I am quite happy to come along and bring officers, so we can explain it in more detail. It is complicated but, let me assure you that our concern is always the education and wellbeing of the children and I am very confident that Les Quennevais is operating near capacity but is offering an excellent service and is not operating over capacity to the extent that it affects the education of the children.

3.3 Deputy J.J. Huet:

Back to nursery places, I know the Minister said that he did not wish to discriminate against children. Does he not feel that the kiddies or the children in St. Helier, of the poorer families, are being discriminated because they do not get a nursery place? If there are nursery places in the country, should he not be a lot fairer to these children by arranging transport for these kiddies to go to those places, rather than giving them to well heeled, (j) category, just arrived immigrants?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Deputy Huet feels very strong in this issue. I repeat again, the criteria for the allocation of all nursery places, regardless of where they are, are based, firstly, on social educational needs, so that the children the Deputy is so concerned about would be offered a place. It is children from families with particular needs, it is children suspected of being at risk and so on. We do, if necessary, try to make arrangements so that, you know, the places are offered where they are accessible and we make arrangements of accessibility. The problem is we have far too few free nursery places for the number of people who want to take them up and, unfortunately, this House decided it would not provide the funds for my department to offer free nursery places for all.

3.3.1 Deputy J.J. Huet:

I am still back again. I am sorry, obviously I do not know if it is that the Minister does not want to answer the question but can he not arrange, or does he not believe that the children that live in crowded accommodation in St. Helier, with mothers that wish to work but cannot work because they cannot afford a private nursery, surely those children are the ones that are mostly discriminated against and why can he not be honest and say they can afford, they should be able to? It is no good offering those children places out in St. Mary's and St. John's. They cannot get there unless Education is willing to transport them there. If he is so seriously concerned with the ones that are being discriminated against, those are the ones that are being discriminated against. Those are the ones that need the children's nursery education.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I was not quite certain what the question was but I repeat that our criteria for allocating nursery places is based on children's need to start with. We do offer places and sometimes the parents do not want to take up those places, for one reason or the other, but we do offer places based on need. There are other criteria and at least 20 per cent of children can be taken from out of catchment area in all our schools, including our country schools. So, Sir, we have a system whereby we allocate according to criteria, primarily based on need but also based on ensuring that the class has a mix and that there are some people in the class from the catchment area. What the problem is is too few places to offer for too many people who wish to take advantage of the excellent nursery service we offer.

3.4 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

I would like to ask the Minister a question about the construction faculty at Highlands College. Previously I have asked a question about the number of places available to those young people who wish to pursue a career in construction. I would like to know what progress the Minister has made in increasing the number of places available to those students wishing to take up a career in the building trade. Thank you.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

What we are trying to do is to ascertain and ensure that what we offer is more closely aligned to the needs, both of the young people of the Island but also of businesses and for the future which is why the Council of Ministers agreed to set up a Skills Executive. We have been an active partner in that development and we are involving the private sector so that we can look ahead, ascertain need, ascertain what jobs are going to be available and try to marry the 2 and offer the courses. It is very difficult at short notice to change courses. You need people to teach them, you need the space to teach them in and so we need much better information on what employers want, what employees want, employees in the future, so we can marry the 2 up. The Skills Executive is specifically designed to achieve that so I am hoping we will get a better marriage in future, between what is on offer at Highlands and other places where they offer training, including construction, and what is required both by the Island and those students wanting to go into those areas.

3.4.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

When I asked the original question, about 18 months ago, my understanding was that there were about 80-odd applicants for 28 places. That was in the autumn of 2006 and the Skills Executive aside, everybody is very aware that we have a booming building trade in the Island and we are importing immigrant workers to fill that need, so I am just really looking for the Minister's assurance that instead of possibly putting finance first and foremost, that he also gives due consideration to the construction trade and those opportunities available to young people who really do not want to go into the finance industry.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The Skills Executive is designed to achieve exactly that and I give the Deputy that assurance.

3.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

With reference to the Skills Executive, the much heralded Skills Executive, will the Minister inform Members when it has or when it will meet and what will be on its early agenda, its early targets?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

It has met and one of the things that we are hoping will be coming forward very quickly is a new integrated career service and employment service, which we are planning to open in a central location offering information, advice and guidance on educational and employment matters to all ages, bringing together elements from my department, from Social Security and from Economic Development. We are in the process of seeking to try to find the employer representatives that will work with the Skills Executive so that we can really get to grips with what the Island's needs are and what the people who want to be retrained or trained in the first place, what their needs are.

3.6 Deputy P.J.D. Ryan of St. Helier:

Could the Minister remind us of where he is with university tuition fees, with the U.K. and remind us why he feels we are being treated unfairly, what he is doing about it and whether he is currently in negotiation with the U.K. to try and redress the situation? Thank you, Sir.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Certainly. Yes, as Members may know, I met with the Ministers of Education of Guernsey and the Isle of Man in London yesterday prior to meeting with representatives of the newly-formed U.K. Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, of the department concerned, to discuss the future of higher education and to develop a mutual understanding of the challenges facing the Island on this matter. At the meeting, the 3 Ministers agreed the need for a common approach in their dealings with the U.K. Government on our education matters, and we maintained our commitment to remain in dialogue with the U.K. authorities to ensure that students from the Island are not disadvantaged by possible fee increases in the future. We stressed the need for that oft-quoted “level playing field” with the U.K. representatives we met. We want to be treated fairly. We do not want a subsidy as such, but we want to be treated fairly, and we want to ensure we have a fair settlement for all Island students. We are going to be preparing to take this further with the U.K., because at the moment we do not think we are being treated fairly. We feel that we are being discriminated against in a way, in relation to students from the British Overseas Territories, and we also want to make sure that when we work out our contribution, which is based on paying the same amount as a U.K. university gets per U.K. student from the U.K. Government, that we are not including in that figure for calculation, items that local students do not benefit from.

3.6.1 Deputy P.J.D. Ryan:

Can I ask a quick supplementary on that, Sir? Thank you. I know this is a slightly different subject, but on the basis that we have recently signed tax information exchange agreements with the Netherlands, and bearing in mind, particularly, as the Netherlands has lots of overseas territories who presumably send students to the Netherlands for university training and courses, does the Minister think it is appropriate maybe to even look at some alternatives, particularly with the Netherlands which has, you know, something like 50 per cent of its population being fluent in English anyway? I wonder if that is an idea to bring ...

Senator M.E. Vibert:

One of the things I did in a review of higher education some time ago was change the rules so we will support students at any recognised higher education institute if they are studying for a recognised qualification, whether it be in Netherlands, whether it be in Australia, New Zealand, which are very interested in developing arrangements with us; whether it be in Iceland where most of the courses are taught in English at the University of Reykjavik, or anywhere else. I would encourage our students - and some are - to raise their eyes and also look further afield than the U.K. on occasion, because they might find a course better suited to themselves further afield. But at present, the vast majority of our students do go to the U.K. for higher education, and we want to make sure that ourselves, Guernsey and the Isle of Man are getting a fair deal in relation to what we pay for those courses.

3.7 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

When considering the youth facility on the Waterfront, how does the Minister foresee how the facility will be staffed, given that the youth service is already short staffed, Sir? Could he not ramble on with his answer, and give an answer succinctly?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

If the Deputy does not ramble on with the question, I will not ramble on with the answer. We will be reviewing the staffing of the Move On Café. I am very pleased to say its future has now been secured, and I would like to thank the Parish of St. Helier for their generous contribution to not only securing it, but ensuring we can staff it future. We will obviously arrange the staffing for the opening hours and so on, and one thing I want to ensure and to encourage people, is to take up youth service training so that we have got more people to call upon in future.

Deputy S. Pitman:

Will he be staffing it within current human resources, or will he be looking to employ further youth workers?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The question is not quite framed correctly, perhaps. I do not know whether the Deputy is referring to our current human resources, the head count that we are currently allowed, but we are allowed to employ a number of people on a part-time basis, and many of the youth facilities rely on part-time people to offer the excellent service they do. I do not see the Move On Café as being any different.

The Deputy Bailiff:

By my calculations, that is time. I have not been alerted by the Greffier. Is it time yet? So, I am sorry to those who have still got questions to ask.