

2.13 Deputy J.A. Martin of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the future closure of Parish primary schools due to reduced pupil numbers:

Is the Minister considering closing any Parish primary schools in the next few years due to reduced pupil numbers? If so, is he able to indicate which schools are most at risk? Thank you, Sir.

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

There are no plans to close any Parish primary schools in the next few years. My Education, Sport and Culture Department closely monitors demographic movement and demand on a continuing basis and a range of measures are open to the service in order to manage variations in pupil numbers including reductions in the number of forms of entry in individual primary schools. So, Sir, just to allay any concerns that may have been raised by this question being asked, may I say unequivocally no, there are no plans whatsoever to close any primary schools in the Island in the next few years.

2.13.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I thank the Minister for his answer. In the strategic plan the primary education says that the class size should be no greater than 26 pupils in provided schools. Could he tell us when a class becomes non-viable, and how many primary schools are working with classes well below the 26, please?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Perhaps the best way I can answer this is by referring to the overall way we judge primary schools and a few examples. In the U.K. the benchmark which we look at for efficient utilisation of school places is 75 per cent of their maximum capacity. Those with a capacity of greater than 25 per cent of their planned maximum are considered inefficient and looked at. The overall spare capacity in Jersey's primary sector at present is just 10.2 per cent. Only 2 primary schools, d'Auvergne and Samares record capacity figures above that benchmark figure. d'Auvergne's roll was designed to accommodate approved housing developments in the vicinity and is increasing as planned. Due to demographic movement and to a diminishing roll the number of classes in Samares has been reduced from 14 classes to 10 classes. The school capacity may be increased in future providing further classes as the Le Squez estate area is repopulated following the housing refurbishment currently underway in the area.

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

I am not sure what Deputy Martin's definition of the term in the next few years is, but I would like to ask the Minister what his definition of that term is? My understanding is that it is likely that the closure of a primary school will be necessary by 2035 if the population does not increase.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

My definition of the next few years is not 27 years to 2035, and I do not think anybody could presumably expect that. That is the work we did and that is a serious consideration for States Members and the Island to take into account when considering the future and how the Island develops. Because there are a number of factors there; one is the reduction overall in the number of young children and the other one is where they are all situated and, in my view, it will not do the Island any good if all young families are situated in the urban area. We must ensure that there is a spread throughout the Island and in the Parishes. But to give the Deputy some sort of thought and confidence, in the primary sector - looking ahead to 2017 - we indicate that there will be 113 less pupils in our 22 non-fee paying primary schools by the year 2017. That is a reduction of about 5 children per school and we believe that can be managed. But looking ahead to 2035, 27 years; if the numbers continue to drop at a considerable rate, we would have to consider in the children's best interests, whether all primary schools could be maintained if that happened with no change in 2035.

2.13.3 Connétable K.A. Le Brun of St. Mary:

Coming from one of the smaller rural Parishes... there are 3 Parishes with small schools who are at the present time I know feeling under pressure because of low numbers mainly because they are not having any nursery schools. Would the Minister reassure that either it will be taken into account or would the Minister possibly confirm or not that there will be added nursery classes to these schools? Because at the present time it is feeling very unfair in the sense that some within these Parishes are finding that some of the people there are having to pay for a nursery. Yet on the other hand, there are people in many of the other Parishes who can well afford but are getting free nursery classes. It is these smaller schools that are feeling under pressure because they do not have the advantage of having free nursery education at the primary schools.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The question of nursery education has been well rehearsed in this House and the States in their wisdom decided not to add money to my budget so that we could adopt a system providing free nursery education for a certain amount of time to all pupils at 3 to 4 years of age. When we look at schools, the planned capacity takes into account whether they have got a nursery class or not and so does not have any indication on the size of the school. In St. Mary - the Constable's Parish for example - the planned capacity is for a normal school without a nursery, which is 175 pupils. The last figures I had were that St. Mary had 149 pupils, well within the benchmark figure and really the figure we would like to see in most of our schools around because it leaves some slack - if I can put it like that - or capacity for when people move in and out of Parishes, and for when people arrive. It is more difficult to accommodate pupils in those schools that are operating at capacity if they have people who want to move into them. As I said, none of our primary schools, apart from the 2 I mentioned for very good reasons, are over the benchmark figure and there are no plans whatsoever to close any primary school in the Island.

2.13.4 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, Sir, could I just have the last question? It does concern me that the Constable of St. Mary has stood up and has mentioned 3 Parish schools that are quite under-subscribed, if that is the word. I do know of... and St. Helier, when I talk about Parish schools I do include St. Helier schools because we are in the Parish. Maybe it is the largest: I was inquiring about all schools. But I would say there are some schools, and the Minister has mentioned, Sir, in St. Helier that are over the 26 per primary school. If we had 3 Parish schools that do not reach or could do with a few more pupils is there any way that these could be used if it is suitable to the parents? How will the children be getting to these Parish schools? Is the Minister willing to talk or discuss things with T.T.S.?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The Minister is always willing to discuss things with the T.T.S. But parents like to go to the primary school which they wish to go to usually because it suits them best; either because they are in the catchment area, which is the normal position; or where possible, if there is capacity, if it suits their work or for other reasons they may wish their children to go there. The few schools that are slightly over capacity are within our guidelines and that is - if there is a demand - we sometimes allow one or 2 more children in a class and we make the appropriate provision for it. We always try where possible but some schools are over-subscribed and we cannot allow them in. We do look to see if anybody wants to go to other primary schools and we do the best we can to ensure that everybody is placed where they would like to go. But we have a finite number of schools; some are full, some have a small capacity. I repeat again, all primary schools - and I took the question to mean St. Helier as well, which is why I said all primary schools - we have no plans whatsoever to close any primary school in the Island.

