

## **2.9 Deputy K.C. Lewis of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the provision of nursery care for working mothers:**

Would the Minister inform Members what progress, if any, has been made for the provision of nursery care for working mothers?

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

I presume the Deputy's question relates to all parents and will answer accordingly. It has been States policy since the mid 1980s to increase provision of nursery education and care for children in their early years by developing nursery classes within our provided primary schools. In 2007 an additional 30 places were provided when St. Clement's School Nursery opened and a further 30 places will be added to our capacity when St. Peter's Nursery opens later this year. Both these new provisions have been planned for several years before opening. No further new nursery classes at provided primary schools are planned, pending the adoption by the States of a new policy relating to nursery education and care. It is clear that the provision of places in school nurseries does not meet the policy goal of securing high quality, affordable, sustainable and equitable childcare provision for all our 3 and 4 year-olds. To this end, last year I gained the in-principle support of the Council of Ministers for a partnership scheme with the private sector which would provide for 20 hours free term time nursery education for every 3 and 4 year-old. Unfortunately, the funding required to introduce this scheme from this September was not approved by this Assembly when my amendment to the budget was rejected. My proposal for 20 hours free nursery education and care for all was considered by the Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel recently and gained the panel's support. In light of Scrutiny comments, I will be publishing a consultation document in the coming weeks and announcing the consultation progress to guide the fine-tuning of the proposal which I will bring back to the States for consideration this year. I will be seeking to secure the necessary funding for the proposal in the 2009 budget.

### **2.9.1 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:**

Why does the Minister not work within his budget and using the monies which the current free service costs and spread this cost as a subsidy across the sector and charge for the so-called free service? This is both equitable and budget-neutral. Why does the Minister not do that?

### **Senator M.E. Vibert:**

If the questioner cares to go back over the many reports I have issued over the past 2 years she would find the arguments against that proposal in great detail, educationally and socially. But it is one of the areas we will be looking at in the new consultation and in the consultation process it will be re-examined again. I do not believe it is the way ahead but it will be re-examined again and looked at and scrutinised again.

### **2.9.2 Deputy K.C. Lewis:**

I thank the Minister for his reply. The Minister is quite right; I am referring to all couples. The point I was making is that due to cost it is simply economically unviable for many mothers to return to work in early years. I would also add, is the Minister aware that nursery fees often exceed mortgage payments for some couples?

### **Senator M.E. Vibert:**

I am very well aware of the high cost of nursery which is why, for a whole host of reasons but primarily, for me, educational development reasons, that I wish to extend free nursery care and education provision to all 3 to 4 year-olds. Yes, it is very hard for some couples to make ends meet but having said that, we do have a very high proportion of working mothers and I think it would be wrong to say that by providing this extra provision that we are likely to see a massive increase in the percentage because we have such a high percentage already. I think it is a matter of equity and

if we really believe in the future of the Island and providing a better future we should take our responsibilities in Early Years education seriously.

### **2.9.3 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:**

Notwithstanding the fact that funding has not been found to deliver provision for all 3 and 4 year-olds, the Minister has alluded to the fact that he intends to undertake consultation with the private sector. During the Scrutiny review of the Early Years' facilities over here we reached the conclusion that the private sector does not have the capacity to deliver the spaces that the Minister would need in order to deliver his vision. I wonder whether he will comment to the House on that; when he thinks there will be enough capacity to deliver.

### **Senator M.E. Vibert:**

Yes, we will be speaking again with the private sector, as the Deputy said. We were setting-up an ongoing body for consultation with the private sector and to me it was one of the surprising conclusions of the report because previously, from our figures which we checked with the private sector, there appeared to be enough spaces. We will be talking with the private sector about whether, if there are more spaces required, the proposal for giving this provision to all people would enable them to develop those spaces in time for them to be activated for when the scheme would come in.

### **2.9.4 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:**

Yes, but how long is this going to take? Does the Minister not realise that my particular method, which is common sense, would cover the gap while he finishes the consultations. How long is he going to take?

### **Senator M.E. Vibert:**

If the Deputy was listening earlier, I will be coming back later this year with plans for the provision of a nursery provision for all children of the recommended time - and all the research shows 20 hours a week - for the optimum benefit from such provision. I urge the Deputy, who believes that this is common sense, to attend a meeting that is being arranged shortly this month with one of the leading experts in the early years education field who will be explaining to the public, and to States Members who are invited, as to how other European countries are addressing this issue by expanding the provision of free nursery education.

### **2.9.5 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:**

But there is no such thing as free nursery education. Does the Minister not realise that there is no such thing as a free lunch and this will have to be paid for in increased taxes?

### **Senator M.E. Vibert:**

Thank you for that lesson in basic economics. Yes, I fully appreciate that everything that the States provides has to be paid for, be that income support; be that the prison; be that police officers; teachers; schools - of course. But it is something I believe we should be providing for the benefit of everyone in the Island and all Islanders.

### **2.9.6 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:**

Given the Minister's logic that we should move to a free system which is, indeed, commendable, does he, therefore, see the demise of the private sector and the State providing all the places.

### **Senator M.E. Vibert:**

Anyone who read the reports, who has any knowledge of the proposal I have put forward would know that is arrant and utter nonsense. The proposal is for a partnership with the private sector, which they are enthusiastically in favour of, instead of carrying on with the previous States policy of building a nursery class on every primary school and funding it all ourselves for the staff and so

on. We would be working in partnership with the private sector because it is through a combination of the public and private sector that we will be able to offer a service that is suitable and welcomed and suits the needs of all our families. Some people want longer childcare provisions so they could wrap that round the education part of it; some people are quite happy to have just the term time school hours. So it is very much a partnership with the private sector and that is what we have been working on and that is what the private sector enthusiastically embraces as well.