

2016.04.12

4.13 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Education regarding consultation with stakeholders regarding the provision of nursery education:

Will the Minister explain to Members why he considers that it is: "Neither necessary nor appropriate", his words, to bring his proposals on the provision of nursery education to the States for approval, and why there has been no consultation with stakeholders?

[11:15]

Deputy R.G. Bryans (The Minister for Education):

Thank you to the Deputy. First, the answer is quite simple: that this will be debated as part of the M.T.F.P. debate, so I felt it unnecessary to bring it to the Assembly until we had ironed out the detail, which leads me to the next part of his question. The first people we spoke to prior to the news release going out to the public, were the private nursery owners, and the Director provided, at that point in time, a full briefing.

4.13.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In the Minister's own words, again, I believe that was not consultation, it was a briefing meeting in which the Minister and his officers explained what they intended to do. Is that not the case?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, to some extent the Deputy is quite right. There was a document forwarded to me by a member of the public, which I had not seen before, which is quite interesting. It is a U.K. Government set of principles on consultations for 2016. I read it with some interest, and I would suggest if any Member wants to read it, I can send it on to them, but these principles move from A to K and principle B: "The consultation should have a purpose" and it says in the last sentence of that particular paragraph: "Do not ask questions about issues on which you already have a final view." So in that context we have the issue that we are to make this cut, but what we have to do, and what we have said we will do, and I reiterate from what I was asked from the earlier question with Deputy Lewis, is still talk to those people who this affects most. So we will be talking to the private sector, we will be talking to those parents who are affected by this. I am attending the Scrutiny meeting on Wednesday and we will hold further meetings, which are already in the diary to some extent, and a further public consultation or meeting, within the next 6 months.

4.13.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Minister talked about not needing to bring this to the States for approval because, in fact, it would feature at some point in the M.T.F.P. and then that would be our chance to have a debate on it. Does he not agree that is not quite the same thing, because by the time it gets to the M.T.F.P. it would have to have been put in there by the Minister and his colleagues? Is the point not that many States Members, possibly a majority of States Members, do not even want this to go into the M.T.F.P. at all and so having a debate on it would be a chance for the States to impart their opinion to the Minister and give him a direction one way or the other, perhaps to implement a different cut or no cuts at all?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Thank you to the Deputy. I have said quite often in various answers to different questions relating to education, any States Member that has a consideration or a concern with anything that we are doing has the open opportunity to attend the department and speak to myself and my officers about this, and I would reiterate the same situation as I said before: I will be attending the Scrutiny meeting and

I will be attending the other meeting, and any States Member who wishes to do so, as happened with the higher education funding consultation, can do so and speak to us in that way.

4.13.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister accept that there is a difference between us or the public coming to talk to the Minister about a decision that he has already made and having a proper debate with States Members to take their views on board, and the public for that matter, before he decides which policy to implement? Is there not a fundamental difference there?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

There is a difference to some extent, but I think the important fact here is that those who this affects most are the people that we want to get to, to make sure we alleviate. I apologised before at the very beginning, I think there was a notion that there was a callous indifference by myself regarding this particular situation and, in fact, that was quite the reverse. I was wrong-footed, as I said before, by a series of miscommunications. So I was away from the Island at a point in time I should have been here and should have had the opportunity to speak to the public and speak to those people it concerns most. The important thing is that we sit down with the relevant people ... and I agree with the Deputy; I think there is an opportunity to talk to Assembly Members, but this will be there for the debate in the M.T.F.P.

4.13.4 The Deputy of Grouville:

Does the Minister not appreciate that this decision runs contrary to the Strategic Plan set out by the Council of Ministers in that it will discourage economic growth because parents, a parent, will decide to give up work because it is no longer financially viable, it will deplete tax returns and employers will be complaining that they can no longer get staff? Does he not appreciate it works contrary to their own strategic plan, his strategic aims?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I do not agree that it works contrary. It is one of those difficult decisions, as I have already said. The problem we have at the moment is the current scheme is not sustainable. More nurseries are joining in fee-paying schools, and we simply do not have the money to fund it in its current form. So this is one of the other drivers: that we have to address the needs of the more vulnerable members of our society, which again the money is being redirected to special educational needs and to Pupil Premium. So I agree that it is one of those difficulties; these are hard decisions that parents have to make, but we have made the decision.

4.13.5 Deputy J.A. Martin:

The Minister says this is difficult; I have heard it so many times, he is making difficult decisions. We are elected to make difficult decisions in this House, each and every one of us, and I am very, very annoyed that the Minister says we can discuss this under the M.T.F.P. It was rejected as an amendment when it was brought in and now he thinks an M.D. (Ministerial Decision) can carry this very, very unfair, very controversial vote that will disadvantage children into the future. Please reconsider; bring this for a debate to the House.

The Deputy Bailiff:

The question is, Deputy?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Will he reconsider and bring this as a debate to the House? Sorry, Sir.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

At this point in time, no; the consideration is as we made it in the first place. Our role as Ministers, and I understand where the Deputy is coming from with regard to each Member making difficult decisions, but Ministers make decisions and then Scrutiny scrutinise those decisions, and that is what has come out of this matter at this point in time. So, as I said, we have set course, we are going to meet with all of those people that this concerns and see if we can resolve some of the issues that have been brought about.

4.13.6 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Going back to the beginning of today when the Minister apologises, taking a Deputy Le Hérissier moment, what lessons have been learnt and what will be done differently in the future when delivering bad news?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

The apology relates to the fact I was away at a time when I should have been here, not in relation to delivering bad news. There are lessons to be learnt. One of the things I am really fortunate about having such a great department is we sit down and we learn from these experiences. We have a meeting tabled for tomorrow to go through what was happening, what we did right and what we did wrong, and there are great learning points to be taken from this. This is, as I said before, and I know Deputy Martin accepts that we reiterate this mantra that this is a difficult decision, but it is a difficult decision. Why? Because it is very emotional and it seems to focus on people who are making decisions, as Deputy Labey says, about their children, about the economic careers that they have set course on. We are aware of that; we are trying to alleviate that problem as much as we can.

4.13.7 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Therefore, does the Minister not agree that one of the key messages, not only for him but for any Minister, is that consulting with the public and getting the information out there should be something to be done as soon as possible, rather than wait for Scrutiny to come along and call a public meeting?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

That is precisely why we put the information out as we did. This is 18 months in advance of this decision being made; this is not going in in 2016, it is going in in 2017 and we still have 6 months to consider it.

4.13.8 Deputy J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The Minister has made reference to means testing of the individuals, and this is obviously part of the whole issue, but the wider context is about cost to education and the individuals receiving free education on the Island. Could the Minister clarify whether the subsidy that is received will continue to be available to non-qualified individuals who bring children to this Island when seeking work? Or, for example, would the Minister be open to having discussions with the Minister for Treasury and Resources to see whether there is any way of recharging such costs to the employers of such individuals?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

That is a consideration I have not thought about before, so I am quite happy to talk to the Minister for Treasury and Resources about that. Thank you.

4.13.9 Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

As the Council of Ministers discussed this and they are linking up together, as we heard before, how does this decision affect the affordable housing figure, which is at the same £75,000 household income? How is it linked up?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I am not sure that it is; I am not sure of the context of the question the Deputy is asking me.

Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

If affordable housing is charged at £75,000 and you are now taking away the subsidising of people that are on £75,000, has the Minister talked about if that changes the figure for affordable housing?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Thank you to the Deputy. Just to clarify some of the issues that have related to this that have come out through the media. The notion of this particular cut and the savings that have been made from it, was discussed over a year ago, that was the first time we placed it on the agenda, and subsequently it has changed somewhat since we first did that, as has been widely reported. In regard to that consideration with regard to housing, the Minister for Housing will be fully aware of the figures that we have done. I could not answer on the Minister's behalf what her feelings are about that particular situation.

4.13.10 Deputy S.M. Brée of St. Clement:

Will the Minister clarify that the intended means testing within his proposal is only aimed at those parents who have their children within private nurseries and not any other parents who have children in nursery care?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

That is a consideration and, in fact, I think I said earlier, what we will do, part of the discussions I will be having with the department, is looking back at what we have created with regards to our own States nursery provision. I think Deputy Maçon was talking about what he considers the inequity between the 2, so that again will be another part of our discussion.

4.13.11 Deputy S.M. Brée:

I am hard-pressed to understand why the Minister will not extend means testing, if he insists on doing it, to all parents who have children in nursery care, irrespective of whether it be private nurseries or States nurseries. I am sorry, but I cannot understand why the Minister is not willing to do that and my question is: will the Minister do that as part of his proposal so as not to discriminate against private nurseries?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Sorry, that is what I was attempting to say; I need to make it more explicit. That will be part of the considerations as we move forward, so we will be looking at both of those areas. Thank you.

4.13.12 Deputy G.P. Southern:

It is hard to know what to ask to produce some clarity on this, we have gone all round the houses. Perhaps I would accept the document from the Minister, I believe I have seen it in the past, but just to refresh my mind and just to check whether he is doing any of the A to K on the list of good consultation. But the Minister refers to: "This has been launched 18 months ahead of anything happening." No, it has not; we will be debating the second half of the M.T.F.P. before the end of this year, so it is going to happen this year and we still have not got clarity there. To rely on acceptance

of the M.T.F.P. which, by and large, is sets of figures in general applying to particular departments, if that, we will not be accepting the principle, on which he says he has already made his mind up. He has made his mind up on the principle ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, are you able to focus this?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I am getting there, Sir. Does the Minister not consider that a debate within the M.T.F.P. would be totally superficial and shroud-waving: "If not this, then this"?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, I do not think it is shroud-waving and no, I do not think it is what he said.