

2016.04.26

3.5 Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour of the Minister for Education regarding savings from the resourcing and support provided to users of nursery care and private education:

Will the Minister state what plans he has to make savings from the resourcing and support provided to users of nursery care and private education?

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

It is already well known that we are aiming to make a saving of £250,000 a year through the introduction of means testing from the Nursery Education Fund. We are undertaking additional work that looks at the proposed threshold of £75,000 and the impacts of various adjustments to the scheme. We have looked at all areas of the Education budget to make the £8.2 million savings required from us. As was recently reported in the media, a small adjustment to the formula for calculating the States grant to the fee-paying schools is under consideration. All savings will be published when the M.T.F.P. (Medium Term Financial Plan) is lodged at the end of June.

3.5.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I think there was a hint that the last year of nursery care could also be cut. Would the Minister say if this was true or false?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I am not sure what the Deputy is referring to. I do not believe that is true.

3.5.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Minister remind us what the revenue figure would be if G.S.T. (Goods and Services Tax) were charged on private tuition at the secondary schools, indeed all the schools in Jersey?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I am sorry, I do not have that figure for the Deputy but I am sure I can provide it for him.

3.5.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

From memory I think it was in the region of about £1.2 million, I might be wrong, but it certainly far exceeds the relatively small figure we are talking about here. I guess the point is, and the question I am asking the Minister, are we not fiddling round the edges with an already established benefit which was agreed by his predecessors and there are much fairer ways to raise revenue and make sure that higher earners pay more tax, if that is the desire of the Council of Ministers, than doing these very strange and very blunt ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, could you come to a question please?

Deputy M. Tadier:

... than doing these very strange and very blunt arbitrary cuts?

The Deputy Bailiff:

And your question was, Deputy?

Deputy M. Tadier:

I think the interruption disturbed my flow. But I think the question was: is there not a better way of making the savings than to do these arbitrary and blunt cuts?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I wish there was. We have looked at this in considerable detail. Just yesterday we had a meeting with the E.Y.C.P. (Early Years Childcare Partnership) and prior to that I had an informal meeting with the Scrutiny chairman. Again this is just about really focusing on the detail of what we are trying to do. We are trying to align ourselves so we make this as fair as possible. But we have had a look through our budget. When you understand the majority of our budget is made up of income that goes to teachers and those in the educational system, then you will understand that it is really difficult for us to find any extra cash in that particular way.

3.5.4 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier:

Just following on from what the Minister is saying. Can he remind Members exactly the sum that he is expected to save in Education and then look at that in terms of his success so far in identifying areas where he can reduce it?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think I stated just a second ago that the savings we are expected to make are £8.2 million and we are on target for having reduced as much as that as we possibly can.

3.5.5 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

We are on target to achieve as much of that as we can. Can the Minister be more explicit? That is a rather vague statement saying: "We are going to save £8.2 million and we are on the road" but he does not give any suggestion on how far he is on the road.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, that is not correct. We have stated already categorically what we are attempting to do. What I am referring to is that we need to apportion the detail, particularly to do with the Nursery Education Fund. It is just the detail that needs attention.

3.5.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister refers blithely to: "It is just the detail that needs some attention." Why then did he not have this consultation process with the Early Years Partnership at the very beginning rather than coming to them with a decision half made or almost made and putting them on the back foot? Surely it is consult first then come up with a policy.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I did answer this question at the last Assembly when the Deputy raised it last time. There was a mistake made, which I did apologise for to both the Assembly and the public. If given the opportunity I would do things differently. The point was that we have made the decision in principle to adopt means testing. What we said was that after that point we would then discuss the detail, which is what we are doing.

3.5.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

I am sure the Minister, as probably every other Member of this Assembly, would rather not make cuts from Education and affect children where we do not have to. Can the Minister see any other areas, perhaps from different departments, where the same amount could possibly be saved and have less of a negative impact on children and families in the Island?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

We meet as a Council of Ministers quite regularly, and this has been under discussion, as I said previously, for over a year now. The balance of where these cuts have to be made was considered in great detail. We have got to this point ... the Deputy is quite right, I do not like having to make cuts of this kind that affects anything to do with children. The situation is, as we found with particular regard to our budget, this is where we found the opportunity and this is where we are paying our attention.

3.5.8 Connétable C.H. Taylor of St. John:

I heard the Minister say that he would explain his cuts in the M.T.F.P. I hope that he is not looking to the M.T.F.P. to try and push unwelcome cuts by disguising it in a very large document, and I hope that individual debate on each cut is taken in this Assembly and not as a whole.

The Deputy Bailiff:

And your question is?

The Connétable of St. John:

That he will not be pushing it through with the M.T.F.P. without separate debate.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

We are not intending to push it through in the M.T.F.P. What we are trying to do is be as clear as we possibly can about where our cuts are going to be made.

3.5.9 Deputy R. Labey of St. Helier:

Has the Minister for Education learned any lessons here? Because it seems to me absolutely politically daft for this furore and this unfair upset of so many people for a saving of £250,000. Has he looked at his own administration of his own department to see whether that is as lean, as economical, as fit as it should be? Are there not cuts there?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, and we have made those cuts. We have lost 3 senior full-time members of staff that we have not replaced. He is quite right. We have looked right across the board on this and I think we have been extremely efficient. If anybody were to look at the way we have gone about this they would see that we have paid attention to every small area that we possibly can.

3.5.10 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

It was described behind me as a blunt action. Would the Minister accept that it is? In some situations if this were to occur members of the public can be saddled with extra costs of up to £12,000. Very different to a change, for example, in the subsidy to the fee-paying schools where significant savings can be made but less impact on individual families. Is this a priority in his mind or should he be looking at the bigger picture in terms of subsidies across the board rather than going forward just one small subsidy of £250,000 of saving. It seems very blunt in the circumstances. Would the Minister agree with that?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I am sure from the Deputy's position it does seem blunt but, like I say, we have paid so much attention to this over the last year looking at all the areas that we could possibly do to make these cuts, and like I said, yesterday we had a very good cordial meeting with the E.Y.C.P. which identified to some extent that we are aligned in most of our thoughts, there are areas of detail that we need to work on. We have another meeting with them to get to that point. But we are where we are.

3.5.11 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Many parents choose to send their children to private schools or because they wish their children to have a faith-based education, which is their right.

[10:15]

Not all wealthy by any means. I have spoken to many people who are shop workers, secretaries; will the Minister clearly state what increases in private school fees are planned?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about this. I am very mindful of the concern caused when a previous Minister attempted to change the subsidies for fee-paying education. Because of this we are proceeding very carefully and slowly, and I have said this before. I would like to reassure parents and can confirm that any change will be relatively minor and certainly not on the scale proposed in the C.S.R. (Comprehensive Spending Review) 4 or 5 years ago when the subsidy was going to be reduced by 50 per cent.