

4.4 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour of the Chief Minister regarding the publication of his response to ‘Tertiary education: Student Finance’ (S.R.2/2017) and the work of the ministerial sub-committee tasked with finding a solution to the problems of financing students: [1(332)]

In the absence of a published response to the Scrutiny Panel’s report, S.R.2/2017, will the Chief Minister advise the Assembly what the terms of reference will be for the ministerial subcommittee tasked with finding a solution to the problems of financing students and provide an update on any progress made to date?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

There had been a delay in responding to the panel’s work. This of course is not a reflection of the importance of the work and a response has now been published. The ministerial sub-committee is investigating ways to support more of our young people to go into higher education and to reduce the burden on parents. The terms of reference for that sub-group will be published this week. They include looking at student loans, bursaries, more local degree courses, easier access to European universities and student saving schemes.

4.4.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Supplementary. How can the Chief Minister expect the Assembly to believe that he does place any kind of importance on the Scrutiny process when he cannot meet established deadlines for responding to Scrutiny reports? Furthermore, regarding the subject of the report, how can he expect Islanders to believe that he places any importance on the young people who are being denied a university education because his Council of Ministers have failed so far to make any kind of progress towards a solution?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not think it is fair to say that no progress has been made. I think that the Scrutiny Panel have produced a very good report, which is feeding into that process. I set up the ministerial sub-group in order to take these issues forward and to make progress. One of the findings of the Scrutiny review was that perhaps there had not been sufficient progress made when it was left to individual departments. I think I accepted and acknowledged that during the course of the Scrutiny hearing process. That is why we have set up the sub-group. Chief Officers will be meeting in the next 2 weeks to discuss further costings for various models and therefore progress is being made, but I accept that in an ideal world greater progress would have been made. But now progress is being made.

4.4.2 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

The sub-group was established in December, we are now June, can the Chief Minister please tell us how many meetings the sub-group has had since then?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The sub-group determined that it wished to have the benefit of the Scrutiny report. We have met twice during ... Ministers have met twice in that period. Officers, I think, have met more than that. We have now asked officers to go away and, as I have said, cost-up some of the options that builds on some of the recommendations that the Scrutiny Panel asked us to look at. So that is tax breaks, looking at the interaction with Income Support importantly, looking at what is possible with a loan system, looking at if we are going to do that what would be the best way of doing it. Would it be funding, fees and living or part of that? So trying to make those figures balance, looking at the increased investment that we believe we are going to make in that area will take time.

4.4.3 The Deputy of St. John:

In a previous answer by the Chief Minister he advised that the terms of reference will be published next week, but in the response to the Scrutiny report it has been advised: "Terms of reference will be published together with a timeline for the work. Target date of action or completion quarter 3 2017." Could he just clarify exactly when the terms of reference will be published for the benefit of the public and States Members to hold them to account?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I confirmed with my officer this morning prior to coming to the Assembly that it would be published this week.

4.4.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Chief Minister not consider that the response to this issue has been woefully slow on the part of the Minister for Education and himself in that we are already seeing numbers of our young people going to higher education fall by, I believe, over 10 per cent in the last couple of years? Does he not think it is time for swift action to correct this?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That is why I set up the ministerial sub-group, to bring the department and Ministers together in order to take action. I think Scrutiny know that some of the proposals on the table are complex and will have implications at various income levels and they have got to be properly costed. That takes some time.

4.4.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Chief Minister satisfied with the performance of the Minister for Education?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I work with Ministers. The Minister for Education is transforming his department in many areas. We are seeing standards improve. We are seeing extra money put into the Pupil Premium. We are seeing schools given more autonomy. We are seeing a change to the curriculum, so he is doing great work. This is an area that needed extra support and needed the creation of the Council of Ministers' sub-committee in order to move it forward.

4.4.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The ministerial sub-group has existed since December last year and the Scrutiny report's recommendation that its terms of reference should be published has been in the public domain for quite some time now, yet we will not get the terms of reference until later this week apparently. Could the Chief Minister explain why the terms of reference could not have been published much sooner given that this very simple recommendation has been in the public domain for some time and could he also explain with hopefully something close to an exact date of when the terms of reference were finally fully approved?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I think I have outlined that they will be published this week and I confirmed that with officers this morning. I do not have the exact time of when they were approved. I think that was at our first meeting but I do not have the timeline of that first meeting with me.

4.4.7 Deputy A.D. Lewis of St. Helier:

I just wondered if the Chief Minister could explain how much attention has been given to the academic calendar with regards to these discussions as parents are now planning for next year and for the academic process they are going through now, exams are happening now, people

have selected universities. How can parents of families plan with all this uncertainty? Can he give some indication of a timetable as to when he thinks this panel and others may come up with some kind of solution? This is essential for families to plan their financial future and the future of the education of their children. What timetable can he give to finding a solution?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy knows that the Treasury Department, when making changes to tax rates or allowances, does that through the budget process and I think quite clearly that that was the stipulation of the timetable that they were going to be bringing forward, and that they could not work outside of that budget timetable. But that is not the only thing that this review is looking at. That is just one of them, importantly as I have already referred to. It is looking at the interaction with Income Support but it is also looking at access to European universities. It is looking at a broader programme locally at the university college up at Highlands, which is seeing more people attend for better quality degree courses, and that is continuing as well. So it is not just the one-off item. Albeit I absolutely accept that this item is perhaps publicly seen as the most important item, and it is important.

4.4.8 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Can I take from that then the Chief Minister is acknowledging the fact that there is a different timetable here called the “academic calendar” rather than the budget calendar, and he is attempting to do something about that so that we can get to grips with the academic calendar, not necessarily the budget year, which of course is challenging, I understand that.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Yes, but there is sometimes an expectation that I can override the law as Chief Minister and tell Ministers and departments how they should operate their own law outside of that law. I do not have that ability. What I do, and can do, is work with Ministers to help them understand some of the wider issues and how they need to work in a timely manner, and that is one of those timely manners.

4.4.9 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Given that the Chief Minister has committed to swift action in this area, will he provide monthly updates to the Scrutiny Panel on the progress of this sub-committee?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I can ask officials to undertake that, yes.

Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Was that a yes?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

It was, yes.