

2017.11.27

3.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of the Minister for Education regarding the Early Years' Childhood Partnership report: [1(622)]

Further to oral question 1(572), tabled on Tuesday, 31st October 2017, will the Minister confirm the reason for the delay in the presentation of the Early Years' Childhood Partnership report?"

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

I have met with Dr. Cathy Hamer, and as Members will be aware, this report is being produced independently by the Early Years' Childhood Partnership and it is their decision when publication will take place. I understand from the chair that she is holding a meeting this week with the members of her working group who have prepared the report. They will be discussing the publication date, which I hope is imminent, and I want to be able to give parents an update as soon as possible. I have seen a draft of the report and had an initial discussion with Dr. Hamer. The main message from the report, and it is an extremely strong one, is that all evidence shows early years' education is vitally important. The E.Y.C.P. (Early Years' Childhood Partnership) wants us to recognise this as a government and to put more effort into supporting early years.

3.3.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

In the previous oral question on 31st October, the Minister acknowledged that he was aware that parents are desperate for this information so they can plan for the care of their children. He also committed to bringing a proposition before Christmas. Is that still the case? Will the Minister be informing parents as to what is happening with the Nursery Education Fund before Christmas? If not, when will he be bringing that proposition?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, I will. One point that the report makes is that the benefits of high quality early education is that children start school 3 months' ahead in their literacy and language skills and the benefits carry on throughout a child's life. They are 20 per cent more likely to get 5 good G.C.S.E.s (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and they earn more as adults. This is hugely significant for our community and for our economy. The report also recommends that we withdraw the proposal to means test nursery places with 3 to 4 year-olds. I support this. I am very aware of parent's concerns about planning their children's nursery place and have decided that nursery places will not be means tested in September 2018. I will bring a proposition to the States as soon as possible to explain this.

3.3.2 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:

Could the Minister just clarify: is that just delaying the policy or an abandonment of the policy? If it is an abandonment of the policy, where will the savings from the department come from?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

What we are doing is, and as I say, the proposition will explain this in particular detail when I bring it back, we are looking for a solution that puts children first. This is in line with other initiatives across the States which are prioritising early help and generally placing more emphasis on helping families. As soon as I have gone through the detail with Dr. Hamer and spoken to the department and to Treasury I will have more detail.

3.3.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister seemingly avoided answering the essential question there, which was: where will the funding for this change come from? Will it come from ordinary schools? Will it come from teachers' pay? Where will it come from?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

It will not come from teachers' pay, that is a completely separate matter. But, as I say, I will be talking to Treasury about the matter because we have made a commitment and so as soon as I have that detail and once I have the proposition I will be coming back to the States.

3.3.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

During the debate when the Minister was trying to convince us that this was a great idea, not just a good idea - a great idea - and that he was shroud-waving to say that other areas of Education would have to be cut - not could but would have to be cut - if we did not go down this route. Would the Minister explain now to us the list that he gave us then, could he re-read that list and tell us which are the areas that will have to be cut because of this ministerial U-turn?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I do not have a list. I would not be able to read that list out. What I will be doing, as I have already stated, is talking to Dr. Hamer, talking to the department, talking to Treasury, and I will be coming back with a proposition to the States that will detail all these matters.

3.3.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

During his recent answer, the Minister says that they are now looking for a solution which puts children first. Does he now admit that his former proposition did not put children first and that he was mistaken to bring it?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, I do not think in the circumstances we were mistaken to bring it. If nothing else, it aired this whole discussion with regard to nursery education funding in the first place. We will push ahead with the proposal very clearly set out in our business plan in 2015. As Dr. Hamer's report says, it is vitally important for our children if they are to reach their potential. So we need to look at the whole range, from birth to school, not just an isolated year. We are not yet there when it comes to Jersey early years' provision and it is a work in progress. Three of the findings really are to listen to parents more, to revisit the N.E.F. (Nursery Education Fund), and work more closely with nurseries to find a broader solution for the benefit of children.

3.3.6 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

In the last sitting the Minister made reference to the number of nursery places inside the States' schools, the primary schools. Could he indicate how many extra places will be created with the programme he has in mind at the moment over the next 5 years within the primary schools of Jersey as to how many extra nursery places will be created?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

In terms of working with the schools, I think we have already on the agenda to look at St. Mary, we are looking at ... I think we have 2 left after that, which is Les Landes and St. Luke's. At this moment in time there is not a consideration that we would go forward with those ones. It is all down to the budget and what capital resources are available to us.

3.3.7 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Does he understand or is aware as to what impact this may have on the private sector provision of such places?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, I do. The reason I make reference to it, because this is quite firmly embedded in Dr. Hamer's report as well. So once again you will see, when I bring the proposal back to the States, information relating to that, you will also see Dr. Hamer's report, which makes reference to it.

[15:15]

3.3.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister have an estimate of the revenue expenditure that his move may well make on his budget?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I am not sure I understand the Deputy's question "revenue".

Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister talked about capital spending of this place and this school but the abandoning of means testing will mean, will it not, a resource demand from the revenue budget of his department. So does he have an estimate for that expense?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think the original amount was £250,000. Like I say, the detail will be in the proposal when we bring it back and after we have had discussion with Treasury.

3.3.9 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Given what the Minister has just said, the recommendation from the Scrutiny Panel back when we produced the report, that the Minister for Education should withdraw his proposal completely was in fact the right point to make. **[Approbation]**

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. There is not any Minister that would not like to go back and resurrect a position that would not have entailed the kind of fire that I received during that period of time. But I think we have done the right thing. We went out for an independent report. Dr. Hamer and her team have done a marvellous job providing that. Now we have got the information, we will come back with a proposal to the House.

3.3.10 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I thank the Minister for his answers. I am pleased with the answers today and it seems to me that the Minister has retrospectively accepted the panel's main recommendation within that report. **[Approbation]** The Minister will understand that the panel has been dealing in the past and presently with work in this area. Will he agree to either sending a copy of the draft report on a confidential basis to the panel before the end of the week or arranging a viewing under any conditions that he might see fit to impose before the end of this week, please?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes. As I say, Dr. Hamer is meeting with the team and I expect that finished report shortly.

Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

The Minister did not answer my question. Could the panel view the report before the end of this week, please?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes.