

3.6 Deputy A.D. Lewis of the Minister for Education regarding the prospect of ensuring that private and public nursery education providers operate on identical supervision ratios: [1(130)]

Given that States-run and private sector nursery education providers operate on different supervision ratios, and the relative impact on costs to private sector providers that this situation entails, what will the Minister do, if anything, to place all provision on an equal footing in respect of such ratios and thereby mitigate the risk of a reduction in local nursery places caused by private nurseries ceasing to operate?

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

Again, thank you to the Deputy for allowing me to clarify the issue once again here in this Assembly. Staff-to-child ratios are primarily in place to ensure children are safe and their individual needs can be met. The ratio is different in school nurseries because they are staffed by qualified teachers who have access to a large support network of staff and facilities in the school around them if needed. We know there are many inconsistencies across early education and we have asked the Early Years and Childhood Partnership to review the whole area. The Childhood Partnership is an independent body and I think I am aware that the Deputy knows that this is a considerable amount of work that we have already begun to do. If we make any changes they must have the needs of the children and families at the centre.

3.6.1 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

I would be curious to know as to what consultation his department has had thus far with the private sector providers with regards to the risks they currently face with regards to the long-term sustainability of their businesses?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think the Deputy is also aware that we have had a considerable number of opportunities to talk to the private sector and we encourage that. In fact, we want to get to a position where we welcome in the private sector's opportunity to work alongside of us. We recognise that there are differences between the way we offer things. We do not offer the same length of care in terms of timing that the private nurseries do. We are subject to the term times and we are subject to school hours. So one of the considerations that is on the table that we are talking to the private sector about is for them to help support and provide holistic resources for the children and the parents.

3.6.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I am grateful the Minister confirms there is going to be a complete study on nursery provision from the Early Years and Childhood Partnership. But while this is going on, and it does seem to be a large piece of work, is the Minister and his department pushing forward to open 3 more public nurseries in Parish schools across the Island? Because this, to me, conflicts with looking at what we need and pushing for what he thinks we need. Can the Minister answer?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Thank you to the Deputy. Yes, indeed, we have recently opened up a new nursery at Springfield School, we are looking at a new nursery in Trinity, a new nursery in St. Mary's, and then subsequently in St. Luke's. There is a high demand for these and it is parents that have come to us and asked us to look at these resources. It is within the scope of myself as a Minister to make sure that the schools have that necessary continuity and understanding of their community, so it is with that in mind that we continue on our course. Thank you.

3.6.3 Deputy J.A. Martin:

A supplementary? From memory, when we had the debate on the payment, or the private sector versus public sector, did the Minister not tell the Assembly that the public nurseries, there was not demand, they had many spaces? They had many spaces either in the morning or the afternoon, so which is true? They are either over-full and there is more demand or they are not full. Which is true? Thank you.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

It is a complex answer to the Deputy's question. There is a demand but it changes. There is a demand for the morning more than the afternoon, that is the differential. But the demand still exists within the community and communities feel that the nurseries attached to the school have a different offering, so it is about choice at the end of the day. Thank you.

3.6.4 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

States nurseries, or early-learning areas through these, cater for early-years learning and they tend to operate term time only and offer often shorter hours than most private sector providers. So without the critical mass provided in the private sector, they may not be able to continue providing the much-needed services that families really want, working families, that is. There is a high proportion of working families in Jersey where both parents are working. So is the Minister not concerned that if there was a reduction in the numbers of places available in the private sector because of legislative issues that this would have a direct impact on our economy and has he ever discussed this with the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

To answer the first part last: no, I have not had a discussion with the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture but we have had a round discussion through the Council of Ministers with regard to this. I could just add that the added pressure on nursery businesses is likely to come, strangely enough, from increased competition in its own sector. The number of private nurseries has grown from 22 to 29 since the start of the Nursery Education Fund, so there are about 30 per cent extra nurseries. So it is not the pressure from ourselves and the schools who are just currently on track to open 3 new nurseries, it is from the private sector itself. But we have opened that dialogue and we are doing that review, so we are listening. Thank you.