

2018.10.23

9 Deputy K.F. Morel of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the suspension of the project to build three care homes for children with autism: [OQ.156/2018]

Further to the presentation of R.132/2018, will the Minister advise the Assembly as to the findings of the review into service provision that led to the suspension of the £1.25 million project to build 3 care homes for children with autism at the Greenfield site?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

Again, this is an issue which goes back some time. So, in 2013, £2 million was allocated to develop homes for children who required residential care. £750,000 of that sum was allocated to an upgrade of the Oakwell respite care home and that project was completed in 2014, so there remained £1.25 million, which was allocated for the construction of 3 new care homes for people with autism on the Greenfield site. That project was taken to the point of tendering before it was decided to put the project on hold pending a review of service provision by the Health and Social Services' Corporate Management Board. But, since that time, significant work has been undertaken to develop better support for children with autism and their families. Since April 2013, no children with autism have come into care as a result of their families being unable to continue to care for them. The Children's Service work to the principle now of meeting children's needs at home and enabling them to access education on-Island wherever possible.

5.9.1 Deputy K.F. Morel:

I thank the Minister for his answer, but I have to ask: the question asked for the findings of the review into the service provision. What the Minister just suggested was not so much a findings of a review as just a look at changing circumstances. Could the Minister confirm whether what he has stated is the findings of a formal review?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It is quite amazing to me that there have been such changes within the Health and Community Services, that it is now very difficult to find anybody with any responsibility for what went on in 2013, or really get to the bottom of what was happening here; there have been such changes in personnel, is what I meant by that. I do not believe there was a formal review in the sense that there might have been anything published. It was probably something that remains under discussion within the Corporate Management Board and new ways, or a refocus, on delivering assistance to these families by supporting them in their homes was developed, rather than proceed with residential care away from their families. But, it does not appear to me that there is any formal document I can find that is a published review, or any formal consultation process, though, no doubt, families and voluntary sector were engaged in the work the department was trying to do.

5.9.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I must say I am surprised at the Minister saying there was no requirement from 2013 and that, basically, he is saying he has no evidence to support what he is saying. We recently have been getting evidence regarding Greenfields in another aspect of where children, who have been convicted of crimes, are still being placed there and they are being placed with other children who are at Greenfields. But, going back to the autistic thing, I do know of children from autistic families who could have benefited from having some care away from their families to deal with a very, very difficult problem and I think that the answer, to be honest, is quite unsatisfactory. I wish the Minister will go away, first of all produce whatever evidence he has got and any report he has got, and then come back to the States with a new policy.

The Bailiff:

Will you come back with a new policy? That is the question, I think.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

When the Deputy refers to care away from families, is he referring to permanent care, placing these vulnerable children in an institution when their families are willing, with the proper support, to be able to care for them? What has been developed over the last number of years is substantial investment in short-break respite services. This has resulted in a doubling of the number of children - including those with autism - accessing short-break respite support from 40 children, before investment was put into that service, to 85 children at the end of September 2018. Funding available for short-break provision has increased by 29 per cent since 2012 and the budget for 2018 was £1,688,000. Further work is underway to develop those short-break offers and increase the inclusion of children with autism in services open to all children, so there are no immediate proposals to reverse that progress. We continue to work with families and work for the best interests of those children.

5.9.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

As the Minister knows full well, because I have sat in meeting after meeting with him on this topic, he knows that respite services, despite the investment taking place, are woefully inadequate for the demand on the Island from all sorts of sectors.

[11:00]

But what I cannot believe, and I think I would like him to address, is he says there is no published record of this decision. Surely there must be a written record somewhere, minutes from a meeting at which this decision was made, or the preamble to that. There must be a paper somewhere in his documentation. Does he not agree to publish those documents?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

In the time available since the oral question was lodged and discussions with officers, that published decision has not come forward. I do not know, at this time, whether it is covered by minutes of the Corporate Management Board, but those are not usually published.

5.9.4 Deputy K.F. Morel:

I am very concerned that £1.25 million - that was earmarked for caring for children with special needs - has just not been spent as suggested. But I wonder, following his answer about the lack of historic knowledge within the department, whether the Minister would agree that this episode, in itself, shows how important it is, especially for someone like Health and Social Services, to have continuity of employment and so to have a corporate history and a corporate knowledge within the department itself.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would certainly agree that it is always desirable, but the situation that the department is in at the moment is that there has been a substantial change of personnel and I believe that is working for the good of service delivery. We have good people now in post and working hard to bring forward new plans in a transparent and open way. I will be very anxious for the future to make sure that there is good governance of our spending and our decision making.