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2 Deputy S.M. Ahier of the Minister for Children and Housing regarding the decision to introduce payments of £40,000 a year to foster parents of children with complex needs: (OQ.62/2020)

Will the Minister advise the Assembly whether, in light of the payment of £40,000 a year to foster parents of children with complex needs, he has considered providing similar payment to their parents instead?

Senator S.Y. Mézec (The Minister for Children and Housing):

No, we have not done so and, with respect, I think the question slightly misses the point of what the fostering service is for. It is obviously always the first preference that families be supported in whatever way necessary and often that will not necessarily be support through financing to enable them to provide a supportive home environment for their children as possible and it is only for those very sad situations where that is simply impossible that fostering is considered. It is now the view that, because of our history of unfortunately having to send some children off-Island, because we have not had the facilities on-Island to support them, that a paid intensive fostering service is needed and is in the best interests of those children.

3.2.1 Deputy S.M. Ahier:

Will the Minister allow parents of children with disabilities to apply to become foster carers, so that they can afford to care for their own children by being paid £40,000 a year, as well as receiving maintenance allowances, travel expenses and any necessary equipment?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

No, through the fostering routes that would be completely inappropriate. It is right that support is given to families to be able to provide the best environment possible for their children but to do so through the fostering route is not the appropriate way. Support should be given for those children independently, not dependent on their parents taking on and supporting another child.

3.2.2 Deputy R. Labey of St. Helier:

Would the Minister agree that funding foster parents properly, funding their training properly for dealing with particularly difficult personal circumstances, to not do that is a completely false economy and this is long overdue for the Island?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I absolutely wholeheartedly agree with Deputy Labey. I have been very lucky in this job to meet many foster carers, who are incredible people who do such amazing work for those children they look after and I have met many of the young people that have been through that and know how much it has meant to many of them. The service that has been announced recently is for those particularly difficult and particularly sad cases where the alternative before now has been to send children off Island and I would hope that most Members would agree that moving away from that is the right thing to do, not just because of the economies of scale that the Deputy references, but because it is in the best interests of those children to have them cared for in Jersey.

3.2.3 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Given that it has already been stated that it costs approximately £200,000 to send a child to the U.K. (United Kingdom) for appropriate care - a net saving of up to £160,000 through this - did the

Minister ever consider that it should have been more than £40,000 a year that was given to these foster parents? Because, in the long term, the savings to society are much greater and £40,000 a year, in Jersey terms, is approximately the median wage and perhaps these parents should have been recognised with a greater salary than this, or greater financial incentive.

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

It is a fair question and the line has got to be drawn at some point and because this is new territory for us, we are not necessarily able to predict how it is going to go. What I will say though is that with our new Public Finances Law and the new Government Plan system that we do have flexibility in future to look at this and I have certainly said beforehand that we have to keep an eye on this, see what recruitment is like, see what sort of candidates come forward and how they make it through their training. I certainly would not rule out having a look at it again in the future to make sure that we are supporting these people as best as possible.

3.2.4 Deputy K.F. Morel:

I just wanted to check: is the £40,000 salary basis, or is it a per child placed basis?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

It is a salaried basis and there is, I think, still some discussion that is going on with Revenue Jersey about some of the added fees, because there are fees as well as the salary on top of that, but that are dependent on other circumstances and how those can be best managed to give the best support possible to those foster carers.

3.2.5 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Deputy Morel basically asked the question I was going to ask. The £40,000 I thought was for a standard placement of a child. Children who have got complex needs - and I have dealt with a number of cases where that is the case - £40,000 will not even come into it. In fact, I think you will have very few takers. Can I ask the Minister to go away and review the complex cases and the cases where people have been sent away and review it, because I think he will find it is totally inadequate for the responsibility not only the financial involvement for the foster parents, but for the responsibility they are taking on and the amount of effort they are going to have to put in? So, I would ask the Minister to go away and look at the complex cases already and again review the figure.

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I am not convinced that there is anything wrong with the system that is about to be set up. I think that it will be adequate and the response that I have so far had from members of the public who have got in touch with me to say that they are interested in this, I am of the view that it most likely will be a success but, as I said in response to Deputy Morel, it is right that we keep a watching eye over this and look out what needs to be altered in future if there are things that can be changed to improve it. But I will say that it is not just about giving these intensive foster carers a salary and then just letting them get on with it. There will be a whole package of training and support and access to support from Children's Services outside of normal office hours to support them.

3.2.6 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier:

Just to clarify, the £40,000 is a salary for an adult carer to be available and not work full-time elsewhere. So, therefore, would there be other expenses available to address the expenses of those of complex means such as carers allowance, *et cetera*, on top of it? So is that not a pathway into

providing the extra resources available to families who are taking on this challenge and really helping society?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Yes and sorry if I was not clear enough to Deputy Morel's question, which I think asked a similar thing.

[10:00]

Yes, it is the case that there is extra support and fees on top of the salary. There is the salary on the one hand and there is the extra fees and expenses on top of that.

3.2.7 Deputy C.S. Alves of St. Helier:

I think the point that Deputy Ahier was making was that there are a lot of families whose children would, potentially, be fostered by these specialist foster parents and they are currently living off very minimum income support and have had to give up careers, one particular person I know in a legal field. Is the Minister aware that these parents are obviously feeling quite let down and also they are living off a carer's allowance, which is a taxable income and they are also not allowed to seek employment? Have there been any conversations or anything thought about to put in place for these people who, potentially, if they did step away from their children, these children would end up in specialist care?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

This service is not intended to be an excuse for not supporting families in the first instance. The first instance is that families ought to be supported to provide a home environment that is better suited to their child's needs, irrespective of whether that is financial, or otherwise. It is not the intention of it to be a short cut around those situations. But one of the things we are hoping is the Intensive Fostering Service can be used for is for short-break care for children with particularly complex needs and that can be one way of giving support to families that where the child is staying permanently, to give some respite to those families and support from that end.

3.2.8 Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

I am grateful to Deputy Alves for her question, because mine is along similar lines. Because we all know of parents and families who are looking after children with complex needs and they are not being offered the support, in my view, that they should be. I would like to ask the Minister, what training is being offered to those parents who have children with complex needs or, indeed, is any training being offered to those parents?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

It is a separate question to those that have been asked before this and I would have to go and find what exact support packages are offered. But whatever support packages are offered to families are going to be tailored to their needs; it cannot be one size fits all, because every family's unique circumstance is different. If the Constable would like a more comprehensive answer to that, I am happy to ask my officers to help provide her with examples of the things they can do to support those families.

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

I would like him to make those enquiries, please.

3.2.9 Deputy S.M. Ahier:

Does the Minister agree that children and the young people, who have medical conditions, would be better off being looked after by their own parents? Will the Minister accept that economic hardship is often a consideration in parents being unable to cope and that £40,000 a year would enable parents to become full-time carers, negating the need for foster carers?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Yes, to the first part of his question; no, to the second part, because I still think he is missing the point here. This is not for children and families whose primary issue is financial hardship. This is for other circumstances, which can often be very sad, or difficult. It might be the case that a child's parents pass away, for example. It is not about getting around the issues of financial hardship, which do need to be resolved and that there are ways of doing that, some of that can be through the income support system. I think the second part of his question misses the point. This is not about getting around supporting those families in those particular issues, it is about children that can end up in very sad and difficult circumstances because of the trauma they have been through, because of a family situation that has developed in an unfortunate way for other reasons.