

2020.12.02

1.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of the Chief Minister regarding loss of childcare provision by the over 70s.

Thank you for allowing me to ask the question today. What consideration was given to the valuable role played by people aged over 70 in providing childcare when it was decided to move all of those people to the “high risk” category for COVID-19; and what support does the Council of Ministers plan to put in place to assist workers, especially essential workers, who now cannot work because of the loss of childcare provided by over 70s?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (The Chief Minister):

It was decided that the over-70s would be added to the high risk category in line with the strong evidence of the significantly elevated risk of mortality in this age group of contracting COVID-19. It was also agreed to escalate the guidance for a step up in protection for Islanders at high risk, which now also includes the over-70s. This involves, in general, the advice to avoid mixing with others in indoor environments. Now, it is important, this is different to isolating but includes in the recommendation those at high risk can choose a small number of people to spend time with, which should alleviate concerns. We have been working hard to ensure everything is in place. We will be promoting it this week as we committed to, along with all the support available, and my understanding is that guidance will be issued and published later today. We are also going to monitor any impact which may arise from the loss of childcare provision and, if appropriate, will respond accordingly to provide support.

1.1.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I thank the Chief Minister for his answer. If there are any essential workers who now do not have access to childcare because they have relatives who would otherwise have cared for their children who are now shielding or not able to care, what does the Chief Minister suggest those essential workers do to access childcare and would there be any support in place for them to do that?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

First of all, we will obviously monitor the position and if there is an issue, shall we say, we will be responding to provide support. I think the crucial thing there is to respond it back through either the helpline or the usual channels, including if they are working for the States through their line managers. What I will just emphasise, this is not shielding, this is about minimising contact and there is a subtle difference on there. Part of that is having a discussion with the family if they are providing childcare and just understanding the risk that are involved. But the first point is that guidance will be published on this today.

1.1.2 Deputy S.G. Luce of St. Martin:

Some of the 45,000 people who will have downloaded the COVID app will be over 70 and if they look at the statistics for the 7-day average, they will note that it is now twice what it has been at any time during this pandemic. It will also be the over-70s that will most feel the need to be with their families at Christmastime. Given the statistics that we see on the COVID app, given the need for everybody to be with their families at Christmas, why is the Chief Minister not taking more action now?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I have literally just come out of a competent authorities meeting. We will be announcing further action at a press conference at 7 o'clock tonight and we will be arranging a briefing for Members, which has literally just been agreed upon, time to be confirmed, probably at about 5.45 p.m. tonight, which will give the full updates on what we are intending to do. There will be further measures coming through.

The Deputy of St. Martin.

I am grateful, thank you.

1.1.3 Deputy K.F. Morel of St. Lawrence:

With regard to support for families who find themselves without childcare because of the new guidelines for the over-70s, it is not just essential workers who will find themselves having to work out of the home and having to cope with not having childcare. Will the Chief Minister confirm whether or not there will be support available for all workers who may find themselves unable to access childcare, which as we know in Jersey is very costly and so extended families have a large job in providing that childcare?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Could I just make the point that this is obviously a fast-moving situation and quite literally these measures are being put in place during the course of this week. Obviously the measures that we are talking about were announced on Monday. The guidance, as I said, is being updated and will be published later today. In terms of support, the short answer is it will depend on the circumstances. The intention of all the measures that we are doing is to keep the schools open. So the expectation is that when ... as opposed to March/April time when the schools are closed this will be a different set of circumstances. There were measures put in place if they were required, which did provide support in terms of childcare and if we need to we can put those back in place. What I will just say is that obviously at the moment, and I know it is not all age groups that the Deputy is referring to, the intention is that the schools will continue to remain open.

1.1.4 Deputy K.F. Morel:

I am pleased to hear that consideration is being given but the original question, I believe, asked what consideration was given during the decision-making process. Can the Chief Minister confirm whether or not consideration of potential support for parents, particularly of non-school aged children, was thought of during the decision-making process with regard to the stay at home guidelines?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I think the point we are making is that this is fast-moving so the primary concern is about protecting people at high risk, as we know, and ensuring that the health systems are not overwhelmed. It was not the first item at the forefront of our minds but, equally, we are aware of the consequences that came through and so when we make these decisions we also look back at what measures we put in place previously and obviously we are very minded that if we need to put those back in place we will do. I think the point I am trying to say is that we are not ignoring it, we will adapt, as circumstances change ... and the reason I am saying that is because of the very different circumstances we are in, bearing in mind exactly the point the Deputy made about children of non-school age is that obviously we are trying to keep the schools open and that will have a fundamental difference, we believe, on the impact in the wider context of childcare arrangements. I do absolutely take the point for the younger age groups but we just have to assess the magnitude of the issue.

[9:45]

If we need to do support we will do but the crucial thing, given this has literally arisen in less than a week, is to get the measures out there to start dampening the overall problem that we are facing.

1.1.5 Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier:

I would like to ask the Chief Minister to clarify, as I am now more confused than I was before asking this question. My first clarification, if possible, is if a population above 70 can now safely provide childcare for the children who are in education, if it is a nursery or primary schools, is it safe for them to provide? If it is not safe, what support will the parents get to go back to work?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Sorry, was that children who were not at nursery school or in primary school?

The Bailiff:

As I understood the question, and please correct me if I am wrong, Deputy Gardiner, you were referring to all. So the question firstly was: can those over 70 still provide childcare and, if not, what steps are being taken? Was that your question, Deputy?

Deputy I. Gardiner:

Thank you. I did have some technical problems and I heard only the last sentence. My question was: is it safe now for 70 and above to provide childcare and, if not, what support will be given to the parents to replace this childcare?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The position, as I said, is that guidance is being finalised and will be issued today. It depends on the circumstances of the family. The advice under children and education, children and young people who are at high risk, their parents or guardians are advised to seek advice from the specialist, doctor or care provider on whether they should attend school currently. I think that has always been the case. Physical distancing and all other public health advice should be followed. In terms of visitors in the household, it gets slightly complicated as to whether the people who are over 70 are part of the same household or not, and then it is about balance of risk and understanding that. It is about having a conversation with the household and understanding the issues. I think the best reply I can give is ... because I do not want to put something out now which might be even more complicated. What I will do is I will make sure that it is covered in the guidance as clearly as possible but the point we are making at the moment is that we are not asking them to isolate, but we are asking them to start minimising contacts and that is usually with a wider group of friends or going out and those type of things but ... by going out I mean in indoor environments. But equally maintaining contact with family is very important. So it will depend on the individual circumstances affecting each household. I will go back to the point that if there is a requirement to do, there will be, in the same way as we did in March and April, support put in place. However, we are dealing with a different magnitude of problem in terms of the schools will be open but equally we are also facing a significant increase in numbers, which has literally taken off in the last week.

1.1.6 Deputy I. Gardiner:

Does the Chief Minister suggest support bubbles should be created at this stage?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I am not going to comment on support bubbles at this stage. The reason I say that is that one thing we will be putting out, but it will not be today, will be guidance around, for example, Christmas. What I certainly said this morning is that it needs to be very clear and very, very simple to understand and therefore I basically do not want to confuse matters on that front until we have that guidance in place. As I said, for me it has to be very, very simple to understand.

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

I am having to adapt my question because I am more confused now. Can I ask a question as regards the decision-making process? Were the consequences raised in the question from Deputy Doublet considered at the time of the decision being made or do we have what is a reactive - and I mean that in the truest sense of the word - approach to the possible consequences that now have to be dealt with?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The point I would make is that the advice that has come through is that we needed to take account of people at greater risk, which is those ... and again with more research and evidence it is age-related unfortunately and it is being suggested that those over 70. I would also try and make the very clear distinction between what was shielding previously and what is now essentially about minimising contact. The general view is that it is about balance of risk, my understanding is that childcare can still be provided but physical contact obviously must remain low. What we will do is make sure in the guidance that is as clear as possibly can be. As I said earlier, we did not go in the second order decision-making of what is the support for over-70s for childcare but we are also aware, because we dealt with this previously, that there needs to be a support in there. So it was effectively implicit in our considerations, i.e. that because we have had the support in place previously that we will go back to those measures if we need to. Does that make sense?

1.1.8 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Certainty is the key in all of these processes so people know where they are. Does the Chief Minister have a clear picture in his head of what the concrete actions will be and what it will look like if we continue to get increased numbers in terms of childcare and the possible time at which schools may be closed, which will compound this issue?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Can I just emphasise that my focus is very much on the numbers. I am afraid my primary focus is not on childcare. Childcare, when I say it is a secondary issue, is important but the first priority is the overall numbers. My focus on the overall numbers. Yes, I have a very clear indication of what measures are being put in place. We did act on Monday, that was a result of my calling the competent authorities over the weekend, which has already announced the strong advice to work from home if it is at all possible from Monday. What we also said is that we would ask for further information and work to be done. That was on Monday, we have had the results of that work this morning, or very late last night, we have considered it this morning and we will be making further announcements at a press conference this evening and briefing States Members basically as soon as this sitting finishes this evening. In terms of the clear messaging that will be coming out tonight, yes, I have a very clear understanding of where that is going. I cannot comment yet on the issues around school timings. Our intention at this stage is to keep the schools open as humanly far as it is possible and that remains the case today, and hopefully will continue to remain the case. We do have to be cognisant and mindful of what is happening with the numbers and the measures ... do not forget we were putting measures in place more than a week ago, if not longer. We have been putting strong advice out for quite

some time and therefore we will see if some of those measures start to kick in probably in about a week or so's time, because each measure we put in place takes about 2 weeks to take effect.

The Bailiff:

We are now past 15 minutes, we are coming up to 20 minutes. I have notification of a question from Deputy Perchard and Deputy Pamplin and I will allow for a final supplementary from Deputy Doublet but no supplementaries to those 2 questions, I am afraid.

1.1.9 Deputy J.H. Perchard of St. Saviour:

In response to Deputy Doublet's supplementary, the Chief Minister advised that over-70s are not being told to shield but should "talk to their families and understand the risks involved." If people do not feel they do understand the risks fully or if they do not understand the difference between shielding and minimising contact, to whom can they speak from Government to get clarity on what the risks are to them and how to mitigate them?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The very short answer on that is to ring the helpline on 445566.

1.1.10 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of St. Saviour:

It is good to hear the Chief Minister acting swiftly. My question is about the mental health and the concerns for the age bracket you have mentioned, can the Chief Minister assure Members and the Island's public this morning that extra efforts have been put in place to support the vulnerable and their mental health with the quick, fast-paced moving situation we all find ourselves in?

The Bailiff:

I am afraid, Deputy, that is outside the parameters of the question. The question relates to childcare being provided by the over-70s and not care of the over-70s themselves in terms of mental health.

Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

Then I will rephrase that following Deputy Perchard's response to the supplementary question, the information being provided for those over-70s who will not be able to provide the childcare and the anxiety that may cause those families, if that is permissible, Sir?

The Bailiff:

Yes.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

What we have been doing is Connect Me has obviously been ramped up again. That is something we put in a place a few weeks ago and that is around offering support for mental and emotional health. Further details on that can be found on the gov website/Connect Me or again from the helpline on 445566. There is a point there that that offers not only practical support but can give other advice as well. The other point to make, and as I said this will be in the guidance, what we are trying to say is this is about minimising contact, it is not about shielding. So that is about basically a small number of contacts that can include children and this will also be covered today in the press release and the guidance that will be going out.

1.1.11 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I thank the Chief Minister for his answers. Would the Chief Minister agree that going forward children and families in these types of issues must be considered at the earlier stages? Does he

agree with me that childcare is essential for the proper functioning of our economy, because without childcare parents cannot go out to work and support the economy. I would like to know specifically, he mentioned in March and April support was in place for essential workers, was any subsidised childcare for under-5s provided at that time and is that going to be provided for essential workers who, as he has advised today, call the helpline and ask for help?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I would have to go back and check exactly what was in place. What I can confirm is that even when schools were shut, for example, we did keep some facilities open for what at that point was defined as essential workers but I think was widened out and the number of places were reasonably substantial in number. What I can do is - it may not be today unless we can include it in the presentation tonight - I will get a note to the Deputy just to outline the level of support that was in place for March and April and obviously get that to all Members.

Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Could I just ask the Chief Minister, I did ask about under-5s ...

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Deputy, no. A final supplementary is a final supplementary, there is no opportunity for supplementary questions after that. I am sure you can address any concerns you have to the Chief Minister outside the parameters of the meeting.