

21.05.11

1 Senator S.Y. Mézec of the Minister for Children and Education regarding new homes in the St. Helier town area (OQ.104/2021)

Given the high number of new homes being planned in the St. Helier town area, including South Hill, the Limes and Ann Street, what action is the Minister taking to ensure that there are adequate educational facilities to cater for the growth in population?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (Acting Minister for Children and Education):

Jersey Property Holdings are currently carrying out a review of the St. Helier primary schools estate, which will recommend the optimal distribution in school sizes with a view to informing the future use, for example, of the Rouge Bouillon, fire and rescue and former police station site. It is a comprehensive review being carried out in conjunction with C.Y.P.E.S. (Children, Young People, Education and Skills) officers to ensure the distribution of schools meets the population distribution and demographic requirements. We expect that review to be completed approximately in the next 4 to 6 weeks - that is an estimate - but after that work is to be done through the systems that need to be considered by the Corporate Management Asset Board, the Regeneration Steering Group and ultimately the Council of Ministers before any final decisions are made.

2.1.1 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

How does this fit in with the Island Plan then because we have before us something which the States will have to consider, and consider amendments to, which show a desire in the plan for an increased population in town but at this point nothing in there to identify where educational facilities may go in the town basin and all of the travel problems that can come about from that? Why has he allowed a mismatch to happen where that work on the estate is coming after the Island Plan?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Do not forget the Island Plan is a bridging plan. The point is this is around looking at existing estate and, in the round, about what sites we have available and whether therefore the Rouge Bouillon site should, for example, extend into the police station area or fire station area, or whether alternatives should be considered. I would say it is complimentary too.

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

What is the Minister's definition of "adequate" for the schools? Is it a definition in terms of space? Is it terms of equality of the facility? Given the real problems that town schools face how will he address that and how will he define adequate?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Obviously that will come out as well in the review but it is very much about the provision of high-quality primary education but obviously there will be a variety of factors that are taken into account. They will include costs and financially effective but it has to be operationally effective as well. I go back to that fundamental point of providing high-quality primary education.

2.1.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I will push again in terms of high-quality education, that is a very good statement to have. Is the Minister aware that the facilities of some town schools are becoming an obstacle to education simply through leaky rooves and a lack of space? How quickly will this address that issue or will we wait until after the next election?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

That splits into 2. In terms of identifying future use in sites, the expectation is that will be cleared very much before the next election. I emphasise "expectation". We have been informed that the site considerations will be concluded, as I said, in approximately 4 to 6 weeks but I do emphasise it has to work through the system. In terms of maintenance, if there are specific issues please could the Deputy come back to me with details. We have put quite a lot of money back into education, that is different to the infrastructure, as it were, and it is an area that we are looking in the round. By that I mean assessing overall effectiveness of the various structures we have in place. However, I am not up to speed in terms of infrastructure on where we are on what used to be the backlog maintenance scenario. I believe we have taken steps to address some of that but obviously if there are further issues I am unaware of I would be grateful for the Deputy to let me know.

2.1.4 Connétable S.A. Le Sueur-Rennard of St. Saviour:

Like St. Helier, St. Saviour is overrun and I am very disappointed with what the Chief Minister is telling us because I have made enquiries about schools. I have written to every primary school in my Parish and they are full to capacity and they have waiting lists. Yet on the plans that we have been receiving in the Parish, for all the houses they wish to put in my Parish, there is no mention of playing areas and there is no mention of schools. How on earth are we going to have these people living in a Parish where there are no schools for their children and there are no areas for them to play? Maybe the Chief Minister can tell me.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The only analogy I can use is that certainly within my political time the States approved and constructed a new primary school up behind Janvrin School. My understanding is that is a better facility and has larger capacity. Therefore it is a case of accepting at the very least we know there are one or 2 schools that do need a significant refurbishment, hence the whole point of identifying this first part of the work is to then identify whether they have taken account of some of the demographics that have been referred to, some of the plans - and obviously I refer to St. Helier, I think I am talking in the urban nature rather than the Parish nature - that I would expect all those factors to be taken into account when they look at are schools presently located in the right location. Then it will come down to, as we know, there is money in the Government Plan for investment into schools. Hopefully that will address some of the backlog maintenance issues that other speakers have referred to. But I would agree that we do need to be looking at this in the round.

2.1.5 The Connétable of St. Saviour:

I have St. Luke's School, which is old and cannot be refurbished. I have St. Saviour's School which cannot be extended. Most of my schools nothing can happen to them so I want to know how we are going to magic an area where we can put children in schools. I never signed the form because everybody is important in my Parish. But you are saying that primary school is important. Where are you going to put these families that you are putting in my Parish, where are they going to be able to educate their children? There is nothing at all in the plans. Not even a hint of maybe they will be doing something. I am absolutely disgusted. I think it is a shame. You are putting people in the Parish and there ...

The Bailiff:

Connétable, do you have a question?

The Connétable of St. Martin:

Yes, I want to know how they are going to come up with a plan to house these children that they are putting in my Parish.

[9:45]

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

We seem to have gone slightly offtrack. The point is that we are doing a review, and that is part of the purpose of the work is to look at the overall primary school estate and look at the distribution and the sizes. Part of that is triggered by looking at the Rouge Bouillon site and the fire and rescue service site to whether it is practical, from an educational point of view, to combine those 2 but also considering other requirements within the public sector as a whole, i.e. emergency services. Therefore, my expectation is that when that work is completed hopefully that will give us some solution that will address - I will not promise all of the Connétable's concerns - but will be addressing some. That is around the demographic side that people I think have rightly identified.

2.1.6 Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier:

The Chief Minister mentioned Rouge Bouillon School extension and fire and rescue services. Would the Chief Minister agree that the school should be in the area where children live and fire and rescue services can be located somewhere in the central area of the Island to be able to respond?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The purpose of the review is to basically identify what is the best location for both. What I will say is that the States in the past have had views, i.e. can we not do X or can we not do Y? To do X or Y we also have to do D, for the sake of argument. In this case D might be move the fire station. Unfortunately we then do not identify where D should go. We then spend many years trying to resolve D in order to sort out the first 2 problems. What we are trying to do is get the overall holistic approach. The point is the fire station is located relatively centrally. It is on the Ring Road and it obviously gives relatively quick access in a number of directions where the majority and significant proportion of people on the Island live. Therefore where most people are will tend to be proportionately - this is me speaking as a layman - where you will get more emergencies that need to be addressed. One has to take into account the demands of the emergency services as well as the, as the Deputy rightly refers to, requirements of pupils. That is the purpose of the review, to take those matters into account.

2.1.7 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I still was not sure if the Chief Minister agrees with me that the school should be where children live. But is the Chief Minister aware that the catchment areas were not amended for the 15 years, and definitely during the 15 years St. Helier and St. Saviour grow? When in the review an amendment of the catchment area will take place and it will be updated?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I do not have that information to hand. I will enquire of officers and come back. I will update the Deputy accordingly.

2.1.8 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

I look to the Island Plan, the education bit, where it says: "The redevelopment of existing public or private education sites and facilities for alternative uses in whole or in part will not be supported except and only where it can be demonstrated that the site or part of it is surplus for public and

private educational requirements or wider community needs.” What then does the Chief Minister consider how that applies to Rouge Bouillon School, in particular?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I have not got that section of the plan directly in front of me but my interpretation of what the Deputy just said, it is protecting the sites so that they are not used for purposes other than for which they are presently used. By that I mean protecting the educational sites and saying they cannot suddenly be converted into housing, i.e. they return to their fundamental core purpose. However, at the end of that lot, and there are opportunities it would appear, wanted to turn round and say: “We can build for example a primary school at location X that would best serve the needs of the community” and then there would be consequences that come out of that. But the priority, I would not wish anyone listening to think that if part of a school site was suddenly freed up on a temporary basis, i.e. was not required because of pupil capacity, that suddenly we would be rushing to fill it with housing. We have to make sure that the long-term requirements to the education service are met in the context of all other requirements as well. By that I mean it does not automatically mean that education will trump the fire and rescue service at Rouge Bouillon or the other way round. That is the purpose of a review.

2.1.9 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is it not the case that the school is currently competing with the fire station? Is that not the reality?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I do not like the word “competing” because obviously at the end of the day the fire service is occupying the site it has been occupying for many years. Therefore that is what we have to take in the round. I referred to we have 2 sets of needs. One is the recognised need for Rouge Bouillon School to be able to expand and also be significantly upgraded. Also the requirement to provide a good location for the fire and rescue service and other blue light services. Those 2 need to come through and that is why we talk about, and why I am trying to review to, the overall blue light public estate ... I will not say “strategy” but the interactions of the different requirements within the public estate.

2.1.10 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

My original question was asked by the Constable of St. Saviour so I have a question about Rouge Bouillon following on from the previous questioner. Has the Chief Minister visited Rouge Bouillon and is he aware of the amount of outdoor play space that there is at the school? Does he think that it is adequate currently?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The short answer is no, I have not visited the site at Rouge Bouillon. I have visited a variety of our other new schools or existing ... shall we say “other schools”. But as the Deputy is aware, the role I am fulfilling has only come into my purview relatively recently.

2.1.11 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Given that the Chief Minister is currently also the Minister for Children and Education, would he commit to visiting some of the schools, and starting with Rouge Bouillon please?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I have, as I said, visited a number of schools and the Assistant Ministers have also been visiting some of the schools.

2.1.12 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:

Will the Chief Minister not agree with me that this review is an excuse for inaction? The Council of Ministers has known for the best part of a decade that Rouge Bouillon needs more space. Is the Chief Minister seriously suggesting that Rouge Bouillon primary school is going to be moved as a result of this review? If he is not suggesting that, will he commit to visiting the school and to understanding for himself how short of space the school is?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The short answer is I will wait the outcome of the review. I have been informed, as has the Connétable I think, that it is going to take between 4 and 6 weeks for it to be completed and at that point we can then go down the various actions that need to be undertaken. Let us be clear, we have said we put children first and the education service is being significantly invested in under this Government. But what I am not going to do at this stage is favour one option over another because all that does is create yet another problem; for example, where we locate the fire station. That in itself will also generate huge amounts of difficulties and I can see us being mired in that discussion for a long time. Until one resolves both of those scenarios at similar times there will not be a solution to either of the problems. Let us wait and see what the outcome is that comes through. I do know they are looking at a variety of sites hopefully that will come free over the next few years.

2.1.13 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Is it not the case that the Chief Minister has already prejudged the review by the Council of Ministers accepting the Minister for Home Affairs' request to co-site the emergency services on the Rouge Bouillon site that was formerly occupied by the police station? How can he genuinely say that he is waiting for the outcome of the review when there clearly will not be space for the school to expand and I have not heard him say that he thinks Rouge Bouillon should be relocated?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

All I can say is that as far as I am concerned no final decision has been made and we are awaiting the outcome of the review.

2.1.14 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Does the Chief Minister accept the basic fact that the reality for all too many people in town, that the educational facilities in town are inadequate? If he does accept that, will he undertake as a matter of priority to demonstrate to the Assembly, but particularly the St. Helier representatives, what action will be taken to provide new and better facilities for our children and young people in town so that they can go to a decent school building with enough places to accommodate everyone and provide everything that goes along with that, including the safe travel routes so that we truly put children first in this way?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I am sorry to hear the level of negativity in the Senator's question. I accept that not everything is perfect. On the schools I have visited, some of which have been in the town area, I have seen happy children and I have seen dedicated staff, and that has got to be important. We know there is significant investment required within the education system; that is why the last Government Plan has put in something like £40 million over the next few years to invest into education. What I would

also say is that this debate, if you like, or mini debate is around buildings and the last time I looked any building, particularly of this size, including any significant refurbishments of facilities, usually takes several years. One is not going to magic a solution up in the next few weeks or months, even if it is before the elections just to satisfy those sort of requirements. One has got to get it right. I am hoping that or expecting that this review that is coming through from Property Holdings in about 4 to 6 weeks' time will give us insight into their thoughts. I do not have any preconceived thoughts on it. I am awaiting the outcome on what I hope is an expected and objective review.