

2024.07.16

2.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning regarding the provision of 15 hours additional nursery care (OQ.142/2024)

Further to his response to Oral Question 61/2024, will the Minister provide an update in respect of the work to develop the provision of 15 hours additional nursery care for 2 to 3 year-olds and the establishment of a pilot scheme to access empty primary school nursery places?

Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier Central (The Minister for Education and lifelong Learning):

I thank the Deputy for her question. When I answered the Oral Question 61 in April this year, I advised that if there was any way to have some pilots in place by September, rather than only the plan to do so, it would be acted upon. I am pleased to advise the Deputy that 3 primary school nurseries will be extending hours; they are open each day from September, October this year. Plat Douet will be expanding the wraparound provision to include nursery children from September 2024. Their plan is to open from 7.30 to 5.30 p.m. for 48 to 50 weeks a year. d'Auvergne will be extending their wraparound provision to 6.00 p.m. to include nursery children. This may need to be from October half-term due to staffing. I am awaiting confirmation of the staffing on this. Trinity already had an early years breakfast club for their nursery children from 7.45 a.m. and will be extending the day to 6.00 p.m. to meet parental demands. Date of commencement will be confirmed this week by the headteacher. Let me look at my ... I want to give accurate numbers. These extended provisions at 3 primary schools will offer more hours to 79 existing users of the nursery, young children, and hopefully incentivise parents to take up some or all of the 32 unused spaces. I want to stress though that the plans we have to continue with respect to the extended childcare and early education will be underpinned by the principles of choice, affordability and accessibility for families. Maintaining high-quality services are the key to success of any policy development in early years.

Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Could the Minister address the entirety of the question, including the part about the 15 hours for 2 to 3 year-olds, please?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

To extend the hours to 2 to 3 year-olds, we have to open nursery places. The first thing to do is to extend the hours in our 3 year-old spaces and use the unused spaces in primary schools, in our state schools. That is exactly what the previous answer to the question was about, in order to hopefully free up spaces for 2 year-olds in other sectors. But as I said previously, I am not going to offer 15 hours of universal care when the provision is simply not there. I want to ensure that we have a measured approach which maintains the ability to have quality early years provision across the sector as we increase 2 year-old provision. When that is in place, at a point where I believe that we are a sustainable place to do that, then that is the time to offer the 15 hours of care. I will remind the Deputy that there are over 100 eligible children that now benefit from funded part-time places within the registered child care sector or registered child care minder that come from the Best Start Nursery Plus scheme that is in place. We are on our way to starting to extend those hours and I hope that is understood.

Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Supplementary please.

The Deputy Bailiff:

You have had a supplementary, Deputy Doublet.

2.6.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

No, sorry, Sir. That was just asking the Minister to answer the entirety of the question. My supplementary would be: could the Minister just confirm that the 15 hours additional care for 2 to 3

year-olds that was committed to will not be delivered by this autumn? I just want to check my understanding of that.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

This autumn, if the Deputy refers to September 2024, then no, it would not. I think the Deputy is fully aware that nursery places really are applied for in February and March. There were no previous plans at all ready for a previous February and March, which really need to be in place the year before to extend that nursery provision. What we have managed to do, and which I am pushing officers very hard to do, indeed there are more meetings happening this week during this meeting where we may be able to announce some other areas of provision, but that needs to be done at speed, but it needs to be done in a meaningful way. We are starting really from scratch in terms of the practical provision of places. The plan was in place, the ideas were in place, the report is in place and I accept all of those things, and that was excellent work done across the sector. But in terms of providing the places, there was no way they were going to be available for autumn this term, but we are working as quickly as we can and that is what we will continue to do.

2.6.2 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I would like to congratulate the Minister to get through the 3 pilots this year. As the Minister is aware that 2 to 3 year-olds are delivered by the private sector, would the Minister advise what engagement he had with Jersey Early Years Association?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I believe we have a very positive relationship with J.E.Y.A. (Jersey Early Years Association). Certainly following negotiations over ... I was going to say solidifying the offer from the N.E.F. (Nursery Education Fund), but I cannot think of the word. Verifying so they know where we are. Yes, the private sector will be really important in delivery of 2 to 3 year-olds, but we need to work together with our state schools and that conversation is ongoing and will continue to be ongoing, so we can provide the best possible facilities and use the facilities that we have in the best possible way. I am pleased to state in this Assembly that we do need the co-operation of the private sector, the state schools and, importantly, the third sector, those charity provisions that provide a lot of nursery care as well. If we can get those 3 areas working together, we can extend the provision to 2 to 3 year-olds, and that would be a really positive thing for the Island.

2.6.3 Deputy I. Gardiner:

It is absolutely important to utilise places at the state schools. Can the Minister advise what feedback did he have from the Jersey Early Years Association and from the charitable sector? What needs to be done to be able to deliver free 15 hours for 2 to 3 years old?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

In terms of feedback, there are ongoing, if you like, negotiations as to where we can provide that care will be the feedback. As the Deputy would know, they are on their early stages in terms of the practical nature of providing those places. But I believe that the private sector and the third sector are absolutely on board with wanting to extend their provision and absolutely on board with understanding the need that is there. Because what it will give is a security for that sector of our economy in terms of the provision of nursery spaces. I think we have all agreed, and we can all agree, that the economic benefit of enabling people to have good quality childcare early on as they return to work is really quite easy to identify and something that is very important for us going into the future.

[10:30]

2.6.4 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

Given that this Government has previously committed to the 15 hours for 2 to 3 year-olds, can we have a bit more clarity on the timeline that the Minister is working to when he hopes that it can be in place, appreciating that there are challenges?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is a really good question. The officers are listening now, their head in their hands when I say to them I want this to happen as soon as we possibly can because they are under quite a bit of pressure from me, and I make no apology for that. I would like to have this in place as soon as we possibly can, even if it is a phased approach perhaps; I do not know about the best way to do that. We have to be careful that we do not just provide 15 hours for a provision that is not there. I am hoping that by September 2026 we will have a significant increase in the level of 2 year-old provision across the Island. I think there will come a point where I have to make that decision, and I am happy to go to the Chief Minister and the rest of the Council Ministers and say: "I believe we are at the point now where we can offer those 15 hours of free childcare because the provision is in place." I would hope that it is before the next election, and the reason that is the case is because if it is in place then hopefully it will not be changed afterwards. I think we all agree that this is something that we necessarily need to do.

2.6.5 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

Is consideration being given to extending the school nursery ages to include 2 to 3 year-olds?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes, and that is a good question. That is something I think that has been talked about for some time. Again, I think we are at the point that ... we seem to come to a lot of catch-22 situations in education: where is the provision available, therefore when are we going to do it? If the provision is available there, then that is something I think we can actively look at, but we need to have that provision available. That means, I think, a significant change for our state schools in the provision of 2 year-old spaces as well. Whether we can do that or not is another question, but as we develop our provision across the Island using private sector, third sector and our state schools, I think we will be in a much clearer place as to what we can provide in terms of provisions for 2 year-olds and whether we want to extend the law downwards in terms of that provision. I do understand and I would like to reassure the Deputy, and other Deputies as well, that I do see the value in the early years provision and that quality of provision, because it provides a really good basis for our young people going into schools later on. The best we can do at the beginning, the best we will achieve in the long term. That shows the value of education at all ages.

2.6.6 Deputy H.L. Jeune:

Could the Minister inform the Assembly the last time he met with the Jersey Early Years Association and what was discussed in that meeting?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I cannot remember the date. It was recently. We discussed N.E.F. and we discussed other areas; at the end of that meeting there was a very positive outcome. I will have to get the date back to the Deputy but we will meet regularly. I would set minimum requirements to meet as opposed to maximum but we have to be realistic about their time, my time as well. I would say I believe that we have a very positive relationship with Jersey Early Years Association in terms of childcare, because they recognise my commitment to early years and I recognise the role that they play in our sector. I like positive relationships with groups; they help us move forward.

2.6.7 Deputy H.L. Jeune:

That is good to hear that the Minister meets regularly with the Early Years Association and discusses his plans with them. I would like to ask the Minister if beyond finding funding, does he discuss with them other elements like recruiting campaigns, school pilots, other elements and ways of supporting the sector without necessarily just to try to find funding alone?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I have it somewhere my notes but I am not going to go through them again. Certainly recruitment and training is one of the vital areas in which we can support the sector. I believe an extra ... I do not want to say a number because inevitably somebody will look and say that is the wrong number, but in my head if I can say to the Deputy - I cannot find it in my notes, there are just too many words in front of me - there are around 50 extra places for the early years course at Highland that have been created, which I would promote while I am stood here to anybody who wants to get involved in that important sector of our economy. Yes, training and recruitment will be spoken about but also there is ongoing work and regular dialogue with officers who are on the front line delivering. There comes a point where they do not really want me to interfere in what they are delivering, they just want me to give a strong steer and direction as to where we are going. I believe officers know what that steer is and know the direction they want me to see them going in so they can then get on with their job.

2.6.8 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Could the Minister outline how he is going to progress the recruitment campaign for the early years sector that was planned several months ago, before his time as Minister? Does he agree that it is critical that that recruitment campaign is actioned as soon as possible in order to encourage people into this profession?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank the Deputy for mentioning that, because it is something I wanted to mention. Yes, absolutely, that recruitment campaign is important. It was planned many, many months ago but now we have to action that. There are a number of areas where that recruitment campaign can be important, not only for young people at Highlands College but also I think across our community. There may be people who are - I am going to think of the right term here as I would like to be referred to - not as young as they used to be that are maybe wanting to return to work after bringing up a family, for example, may want to engage in some training for modern childcare and work flexible hours or full time to return back to the workplace. We have untapped skills out there that we can use via training and recruit. We also have stability to that workforce because they are settled on the Island. So that campaign will be certainly part of that and it is one of the things that we will be chasing up this week because a good time to do that will be in the next few months to really get that campaign out there as we look to recruit more for our nurseries. Could I also mention, before I finish if I may, I think we need to move away from the rigidity of it just being September that we start nursery provision. If places become available in October, November, December, January for 2 year-olds and we can make those changes, we will act on that. We will provide those places as and when they come available and as and when staff are recruited to take on that role. I am very much understanding the urgency of the provision and I am hopeful about it, but we will continue to do everything that we can.