

5. Statement by the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding grants and payments to fee-paying schools:

5.1 The Deputy of St. Owen (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

It is me again. I am aware that States Members are concerned about the possible consequences of the proposal to reduce subsidies to fee-paying schools and are worried about the effect on parents, students and even the structure of our education system. I want to allay those fears and ask for Members to be patient while my department embarks on an open and detailed consultation with the school governors. I have stated on a number of occasions that this is the beginning of a dialogue, not the end, and time needs to be allowed for this to happen. I value the contribution fee-paying schools make to our education system. It is a unique system of which we can rightly be proud. It offers parents the choice of a States-provided private all faith education for their children and it delivers outstanding results. Parental choice is something I wholeheartedly believe in and will continue to promote. It is not my intention to pursue policies that will curtail parents' choice, lead to hardship for individual families or cause a transfer of pupils from the fee-paying sector. Equally I do not wish to see any pupil currently in fee-paying education deprived of their place through hardship and I will work with the schools to ensure that this does not happen. While no decisions have been made the option of setting-up a bursary fund will be considered to avoid any unnecessary hardship and help those affected through the transitional period. As part of the C.S.R. process, I have committed to finding the department's share of corporate savings. That share is £11.1 million. This is not easy to achieve when 80 per cent of this department's budget is related to schools and students. All aspects of the department's budget have been subject to rigorous review. From that potential savings have been identified in a number of areas, including fee-paying and non-fee-paying education and more detailed work and consultation with key stakeholders will need to be undertaken. So far in relation to the fee-paying sector, I have met collectively with the chairs of governors and subsequently visited each school to outline the proposal to reduce subsidies. I have asked both governors and head teachers to find ways to absorb the proposed saving by reducing costs and seeking opportunities to work more closely with other schools, thereby minimising fee increases. Some have already responded to this proposal and I am heartened by the approach they have taken. However, the dialogue needs to continue constructively and I am becoming increasingly concerned that the consultation process may be derailed because of speculation and fears about possible fee increases.

[12:15]

As I have already stated, this is the beginning of a process. When I next meet with the Chairs of Governors I am hopeful that we can agree the timescale for further consultation and discuss how it can be taken forward. My intention would be to complete the process no later than mid-December. This would give schools time to inform parents of the outcome before the year end. To facilitate the consultation and ensure that the views of the schools themselves are fairly represented my department will also be offering to provide governors with access to independent advice and support. This may help to identify opportunities for reducing costs while maintaining quality. While I appreciate that schools have already started to look at this, a degree of independent challenge would give pupils, parents, staff and - I hope - States Members a greater degree of confidence in the whole process. As Members will be aware, a number of parents have written to me and I am being encouraged to meet with them. I can see why some might think this is a good way forward, however, my department has only just begun to consult with the governors. Once I am more familiar with the implications of the proposal for each school further discussions will take place with the individual schools' governing bodies, on how the outcome of the consultation and particularly the findings of any independent review will be presented to parents. This will allow all stakeholders the opportunity for a more informed and constructive debate about the issues. It is inevitable that if government expenditure is to be reduced difficult

decisions will be required. I will continue to keep Members informed as my department seeks to deliver all of the savings proposals. As I have said in a letter to parents, my department needs to be allowed the time to undertake the necessary work before ultimately decisions are made. I would therefore ask parents, and indeed States Members alike, for patience while this proposal is worked through. Thank you.

The Deputy Bailiff:

We now come to questions on that statement. I call first Deputy Trevor Pitman.

5.1.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

To what extent does the Minister have the continuing support of his Ministerial colleagues in pursuing this direction? If that support is not there will he be reconsidering the initiative? Indeed could it make his position untenable?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have, collectively of colleagues on the Council of Minister, their support in pursuing this proposal and others. I accept, as I said before, it is difficult but the Council of Ministers are fully supportive of the direction I am going in.

5.1.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

While I am fully supportive of the principles that underlie the proposals that the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture is bringing forward, does the Minister not consider that a more gentle approach, say by phasing-in his proposed changes over 5 years rather than 2 would have been a wiser approach?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

This is currently up for discussion with the schools. We started with a target because this is obviously the way to move forward and it is from understanding the information that will be provided from those schools that we will determine the most appropriate - and I repeat, the most appropriate - period to introduce the changes.

5.1.3 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I can see the medium at Fort Regent being asked by the parents to knock on the head of the Minister and ask is anybody there. This seems to be one of the most ill-thought through processes that I have seen in my 10 years in the States. Normally funding is spoken of being removed when people have difficulty understanding how the structures work. So there I can see why perhaps it is only the beginning and why the Minister has to educate himself about how all these schools function and whether they deliver or not. So I would like to ask the Minister, on how many occasions did he visit these schools prior to beginning this consultation?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Visiting the schools is one thing and, as yet, believe it or not, with the pressure of work and other matters, I have yet to visit all schools that I am responsible for. However, I ...

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Could I just ask him to give way and answer my question rather than the one he has probably heard?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Rather than to educate myself by visiting the schools, more importantly I have spent my time in understanding the issues. Although I have offered Deputy Le Claire and others the opportunity to come and talk to me, they choose to exercise their right within this Assembly to ask all questions within the public domain. If that is the acceptable way forward so be it.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I am not sure it is a point of order, Sir, but I certainly have not received an invitation to speak with the Minister. I asked to speak with him last week ... if I did receive it in an email yesterday, I have not had a chance to read that.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Time is marching on. Deputy Le Hérissier.

5.1.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister accept that given these proposed cuts were going to amount to 45 per cent of the cuts put forward, he is going to find it very, very difficult at this stage to find alternative cuts? Why did he put forward a cut which took up such a vast proportion of the cuts proposal?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It was not a case of simply picking out one particular area. As I said before, a comprehensive review has been undertaken by my department. We have had independent consultants to come and challenge the services we provide and this is one area that independent body fully supported. I would just remind the Deputy that his panel also identified this area for savings, furthermore over the past 3 or 4 years not only the Comptroller and Auditor General but the Public Accounts Committee did the same.

5.1.5 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

What I would like to try and establish for myself and fellow colleagues in the public is whether these subsidies are at this present moment in time cast in stone. The reason I ask that is because I have looked through the Minister's statement that he has just read out and within almost every paragraph of the statement he talks about consultation, informed and constructive debate, and asking to be allowed time to undertake the necessary work before decisions are made. So it made me think that quite rightly he wants us to go through the consultation process, he wants time to be allowed to do that but are the cuts and subsidies cast in stone or are you saying at the end of the process that maybe there will be room for manoeuvre?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

If we are to reduce overall government expenditure, we need to reduce costs. This is one area that has been identified where it has been required that we revisit the current support that is provided. The alternative, as all States Members realise - and the public - is that we have to raise additional taxes to fund the shortfall. I know it is a difficult message but that is what we are faced with.

5.1.6 Senator J.L. Perchard:

In the third paragraph of his written statement the Minister makes reference to the hardship caused during the transitional period. Will the Minister confirm that the transitional period he mentions is the period in which he proposes to halve the support provided to fee-paying schools? Firstly, will he confirm that is the transitional period or his definition of it, and when he talks about consultation can he confirm that the decision to halve the fees paid to fee-paying schools is made and the consultation which he proposes is simply how to implement his decision?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all, it is not my decision. It has been discussed at length at the Council of Ministers, it has been supported by the committee that the Senator is on, and indeed, as I said before, equally identified by the independent auditors. With regards to the support, I am not halving support. I wish the Senator and others would not only listen to what I say but equally read all the information that I have provided. I refer him to the statements and letters and other papers that I have provided over the last week or 10 days. The transitional period and the provision for those who might find themselves in difficulty, there is an expectation that the schools themselves have a facility in place. I want to be assured that (1) they have that facility and (2) that it is sufficient and, if not, I want to know what I can do to help them. Thank you.

5.1.7 The Deputy of St. Mary:

The Minister has been criticised for mishandling the consultation process in a sense and I just wanted him to comment on the difficulties of running a consultation where you know that the response is going to be extremely hostile and, indeed, is going to be on the front page pretty well as soon as you start the consultation. So that is the first question. I just want a comment on that area. The second, picking up on other areas that maybe he should have looked at. Has he paid equal attention to the I.C.T. budget at nearly £2 million and schools advisers also at nearly £2 million, as I understand the figures.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all, with regards the form of consultation that is required, there are a number of challenges. First of all, I am dealing with private schools who are used to - and quite properly so - managing their own affairs, and discussing with the parents themselves about any action they are going to take. I also acknowledge that there are parents who are equally finding themselves in the situation that we all are, where the current economic climate is bringing pressure to bear on the money that we have left in our pockets. As such, I fully recognise this, however it does not deter me from following the right and correct path, which I will do. With regards to alternative savings, much time and effort has been spent at looking at all areas. If the Deputy reads the steering group's report that refers to my department he will see the different areas that we have considered. Is it easy? No. Is it going to be painless? No.

5.1.8 Deputy J.A.N. Le Fondré of St. Lawrence:

Just to follow on from the point made by Deputy Hilton. The Minister has referred to being at the start of the process and to consultation, *et cetera*, and I believe you have made reference in early questions to things at the start on 28th September. I do not need the details now but would the Minister undertake to at least clarify what communications have been sent to the fee-paying schools in respect of their grant for next year - it is a calendar year but it impinges on the academic year for 2011-2012 - and when those first communications were sent?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I will undertake so to do.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings questions on the Minister's statement to an end and we now come on to public business.