

4. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

I come now to questions for the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture. I invite questions. Deputy Southern?

4.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

On the assumption that his department will take its share of the £2.5 million funding for the 2007 Pay Award at R.P.I., will the Minister undertake to inform Members what cuts in service this will mean for individual schools and put these latest cuts in the context of previous efficiency savings and planned budget reductions?

Senator M.E. Vibert (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

Teachers, as I understand it, are currently being balloted on whether they will accept the proposed pay increase or not. Until I know their decision we cannot accurately gauge what savings we will have to make throughout my department to meet the States' ceiling on spending and where we will have to make those savings.

4.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Whether or not the teachers accept the R.P.I. award offer that will either mean that £2.5 million has to be saved from departmental budgets or a greater sum has to be saved from departmental budgets. Will the Minister, in principle, agree to inform Members what these cuts will mean for individual schools in the context of previously made planned reductions of budget?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We will be informing schools and all other areas of my Ministry as to what savings will have to be made. I want to ensure that there are no cuts whatsoever to the quality of service we deliver, both to students and to any other users of our premises. We will be looking and pro-rating, if necessary, areas but we will also be ensuring that we maintain our services as much as possible. I do not think it would be helpful to issue an indicative list of cuts or savings to any part of the area because they are not finalised yet.

4.3 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

The Minister will be aware that the Education, Sport and Culture facilities were used for the Swimmarathon last weekend. Given that the States' team of Deputies Le Fondré, Pryke, Martin, Connétable Jackson and Mrs. Walker achieved an astounding 42 laps and raised a total of £232, and given that His Excellency's team were absolutely outstanding, **[Laughter]** does the Minister not consider that this was an excellent use of the facilities, and that the staff should be congratulated on the support they gave this event?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Unsurprisingly, Sir, I wholeheartedly agree, and I was particularly taken with the Lieutenant Governor's Speedos; very fetching, I thought. Our staff always reacts very, very favourably to the Swimmarathon, and put in a lot of hours. I would like to congratulate everyone involved in this year's Swimmarathon, and to say that the Swimmarathon, since it began, has raised over £2.5 million and it is a fantastic community fundraising event. I would echo Deputy Ferguson's congratulations, not only to the States' team and the Lieutenant Governor's team, but to all the teams who took part and all the people who pledged money for such a good cause.

4.4 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Will the Minister give an update on Fort Regent in respect of the additional floor that may be developed for conference facilities and also an update on the progress, if any, of the lift from Snow Hill to the Fort?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am eagerly awaiting the EDAW report on St. Helier which I understand is due very shortly, which covers the whole of the town area and includes Fort Regent and on which decisions on the future of the Fort are to be made as soon as possible. It needs to be upgraded and refurbished and this could include, and should include in my view, high-speed access from Snow Hill, and it could include a conference centre, without impinging on the Fort's role as a sports centre, if that is in the best interests of the Island. I am hoping the EDAW report will at least allow us to move forward.

4.5 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

What argument was put forward by the Minister in his recent unsuccessful attempt to secure additional funding towards early years education?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

When I addressed the Council of Ministers on the proposals that I have brought forward for nursery education on the Island, I used numerous and many cogent arguments involving the fact that nursery education has proven to be of immense value, not just to the child, but to society, and is a fantastic investment in the future. Unfortunately, at present, the Council of Ministers cannot find a way under the current funding to meet the funding requirement, but I am continuing ways of looking at this because I believe that introducing the concept of an amount of free nursery education for all 3 to 5-year olds on the Island will be one of the best investments in the future of Jersey the States could ever make.

4.5.1 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

A supplementary, Sir? Would the Minister advise the House how he thinks, retrospectively, his argument could have been more robust? **[Laughter]**

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am not sure, Sir, how I could think retrospectively. I not only made the argument, I produced a report which has been published which makes those arguments. Unfortunately, the States has set a spending ceiling. There are lots of demands for that money from all the various departments but, as I said, I believe that this issue of access to early years education is an investment for the future and I will be continuing to work on my fellow Ministers to persuade them it is something we should go ahead with.

4.6 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister join me in congratulating Jersey's cricket team **[Members: Oh!]** in its recent victories over Italy in the International Cricket Council qualifying tournament, which will almost certainly mean promotion for the Jersey Island side and significant new funding from the I.C.C. (International Cricket Council) for the sport? Will he, as Minister, reaffirm his department's support and future plans for all sport, especially for children? **[Aside]**

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The Jersey cricket team has done the Island proud in Italy, and I am pleased to say... **[Interruption]** I officially wrote to the President of the J.I.C.C. (Jersey International Cricket Council) yesterday and believe the letter was hand-delivered to the team as they came off the plane at the airport, giving myself and the Ministry's congratulations to a job well done. The team had to win one and perform well in another match against Italy to pursue their aim of

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getting into the European league. They won the first 2 matches, and the third match was rained-off. So they did brilliantly and I believe it is a way forward for many sports to look at the example set by cricket. Perhaps one day we will see Jersey in the World Cup. We have development plans for all sports in the Island. Sport is a very important part of the Island's culture. It is also a very important part of ensuring that the Island remains fit and healthy in the foreseeable future, and the fitter people are, the less call there will be on health services and other areas. So I urge everyone to support sport and I urge all States Members to get an Active Card and to get up to one of our centres and keep fit, ready for next year's Swimathon.

4.7 Senator B.E. Shenton:

At the moment, some of my tax goes towards payment of nursery care of wealthy friends with pre-school children. You are proposing that in future I pay for the nursery care for all my wealthy colleagues with pre-school children. The Minister often advocates means testing; why does he not apply these standards when it comes to his own department?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I may like to inform Senator Shenton and others that his tax money goes to free education for all children in the Island between the ages of 5 and 16, regardless of their parents, and it is also used between the ages of 16 and 18 for free education. I do not know if he is suggesting that everybody should pay for all education on the Island. It is a question of when that free education starts. We looked at means testing and for that age group it can be very counterproductive, and result in children who would really benefit from nursery education and care not being able to access it. So it is a question of is an amount of it provided, as we do with all other education from 5 to 16, 5 to 18, as a free right or do we means test it? I believe that the best benefit to the Island will be to offer a certain number of hours free nursery education for all children and it will be repaid so many times over in the future when we have less problems when those young people attain adulthood.

4.8 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I do not like to discuss this in this context, but I felt that I was unable to ask a supplementary from the Health Minister. It does relate to young people. It does relate to the impacts of young people and sick, young people and people with nowhere to go because of a lack of perceived youth facilities. The issue of young people congregating outside of the hospital setting off fireworks at 3.00 a.m. in the morning, smashing bottles and screaming and shouting is one that causes great distress to sick children, the hospital staff that are nursing them and the parents that are watching over them. Does the Minister recognise that this is an issue that needs addressing - from a social perspective - the provision of more social facilities for young people? Also, is there any option or any possibility that the Minister might be able to communicate through the schools that the sensitive locations of these wards, in relation to that park, are something that needs to be borne in mind when they are setting fireworks off at 3.00 a.m. in the morning?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I regret that people would disturb the hospital at that time. I think it would unreasonable to expect us to provide youth facilities and youth clubs open at 3.00 a.m. in the morning. I think the issue here, and where the question really lies, it is young people doing this and they are below 16. For example, I would question what on earth they are doing out at that time and why their parents do not know where they are and why they let them out at that time. This is, in my view, dereliction of a parental duty and should be addressed in that way. We educate our children in the schools through personal, social and health education and respect for other people is a cornerstone of that part of the curriculum. So, I share Deputy Le Claire's regret that this happens. I believe that it needs to be dealt with by educating the parents as well as the children,

and I would hope that if things like this did happen, the police would certainly ensure that the people causing such a disturbance were moved on and dealt with.

4.8.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Briefly, Sir, the police are dealing with it on an ongoing basis. I really thank the Minister for his helpful answer. May I press him further that he might bring it up, or consider bringing it up, with the head teachers to communicate it to the young people so they are aware as to what they are doing and where they are doing it?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

As I said, Sir, respect for other people which this area covers is part of our personal, social and health education, but I will ask that in relation to noise outside the hospital it is conveyed through the schools.

4.9 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Senator Shenton did ask the Minister my question, albeit with a slightly different vocab. In light of the Minister saying that his preferred option for early years care is to provide something like 20 hours free to every child in that age group, has he considered the impact that this may have on the excellent private provision which is already being affected by his current policy?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Absolutely, Sir. In fact the proposals are wholeheartedly supported by the private providers, because it would involve them in the provision of this care, saving us from continuing the current policy of building nursery classes when we redevelop primary schools, which is a States' policy, and also funding those nursery classes through an increase from the subvention from finance. So, the private providers are very, very much in favour of this because they see first hand the benefit this would bring to the Island.

4.10 Deputy S. Pitman:

Could the Minister inform members what progress has been made by his department in establishing Youth Service service-level agreements with the Parishes?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, Sir, considerable progress has been made. We have a number of agreements with a number of Parishes and we have a number of Parishes expressing interest in reaching new agreements with us, so that initiative is progressing very well.

4.11 The Connétable of Grouville:

Would the Minister agree with me that the achievements of the Jersey Rugby Club under-18s [Laughter] is unique in its own way and that they have now reached the final of their division and that the final will be held at St. Peters in 2 weeks time and would he agree with me that a trip by States Members out there to watch this game would be very educational?

Senator S. Syvret:

Sir, on a point of order. Could I just make the point that these kind of questions, while drawing attention to the great achievements, really are using up question time would could be used for much more important and realistic questions?

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

I could say from the Chair's side I slightly share your view. I had taken the decision to allow another 2 or 3 minutes just to make sure the time taken on these matters was not preventing Members asking other policy matters. We will allow the Minister to respond briefly.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Briefly, Sir, perhaps I can make a blanket response and say that the achievements of all our sports teams is an indication of the States good sense in continuing to invest in high quality sports facilities in the Island.

4.12 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

Can the Minister tell the House what progress has been made to increase the number of places available in the construction facility at Highlands for school leavers?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, we are having a review with Highlands of the provision of not only the construction but all the trades. It is quite difficult to increase at short notice such provision but as part of our 14 to 19 curriculum review we are working with Highlands - in fact I have got a meeting arranged for the not too distant future - where we will be talking with Highlands about how we can increase provision where required.

4.13 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Would the Minister or his assistant update Members regarding negotiations for the amphibious DUKW service to Elizabeth Castle?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Elizabeth Castle will be open from this Saturday, 30th March, for free guided walking tours, I am informed by the Jersey Heritage Trust. Since the original delay in the delivery of the new vehicles by the new operators, the operators have been negotiating with the old operators to utilise their own vehicles in the interim. They have offered to purchase those old vehicles, based on a valuation by an independent U.K. expert. Unfortunately this offer has been rejected. They have also discussed leasing or subcontracting the vehicles but that has not been successful either. Therefore, alternative ways have been looked at and the new operators are aiming to import a 49-seater version of the Hydra-Terra amphibious vehicle which would be in operation sometime in May and until then the castle will be open, as I said, for free guided walking tours.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

Final question, Deputy Pitman.

4.14 Deputy S. Pitman:

I would like to expand on my last question. Could the Minister confirm what Parishes have entered into service-level agreements with the Youth Service and what is the detail of these service level agreements?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I cannot give the detail of these agreements that have been signed between the Parishes and ourselves and I do not think people would expect me to read out agreements such as this. There are a number that have been done, St. Ouen is an example. I have not got an up-to-date list of all the Parishes that have signed agreements but, as I said, the initiative is proceeding well and if Deputy Pitman wishes to know which ones, if she would like to contact the department or the Youth Service, or even ask somebody she knows who is very closely connected with the Youth Service, I am sure they can tell her, Sir.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

That brings question time to an end.