

2019.12.10

9 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of the Minister for Education regarding the provision of canteen food in the Island's schools: (OQ.302/2019)

Further to the answer to my written question, WQ.545/2019, what measures are either being taken, or are proposed, to ensure that canteen food, across the Island's schools, is not only healthy, but also affordable for all students?

Senator T.A. Vallois (The Minister for Education):

All contracted and in-house services have to meet the schools' food standards, which are intended to help children develop healthy eating habits and ensure that they get the energy and nutrition they need across the whole school day. The standards are linked to the Government's Food and Nutrition Strategy and are being reviewed, as part of the retendering process, to ensure the schools' food model is fit for purpose. This is planned for the first quarter of next year. Affordability is always a consideration, as there is no nutritional value in food that is not eaten.

3.9.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I thank the Minister for her answer and also her written answer to my question, where I note that one of the providers has given the recent increases this year, the reason being the introduction of an hourly rate equivalent to the Jersey living wage on staff, that is why they have put up their costs this year. This, as she knows, came from some students, who contacted me on Facebook, about their concerns. Will the Minister agree to meet with me and some of the concerned students, from various schools and listen to their concerns about the increase in costings in their school?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

Yes, I would be more than happy to do so.

3.9.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Is one of the obstacles to any of this work, in terms of healthy food, or whatever you provide, the fact that in some schools they have as little as 30 minutes to serve hundreds of children in a canteen and that is whittled down to about 25 minutes by the time they all go back to class and unless we prioritise a lunch hour, where the children have the opportunity to sit down and eat in a civilised manner, any effect will be lost?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

Yes, following Deputy Ward's question from the last States Assembly, we recognised, I believe it was 2 schools that had a 30-minute lunch allocated. That is, of course, as Deputy Ward will understand, a determination made by the head teacher of the relevant schools. Of course, as an Education Department, as the Minister for Education, we need to ensure we hold those head teachers to account. I can certainly look into that further and identify whether there is an ability for us to appropriately allocate an hour for those children, at those particular schools.

3.9.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank the Minister for that; that would be very constructive. But, also, I would like to point out that in some schools, particularly some secondary schools, the drive to drive down costs of food is leading to lower and lower quality food and goes diametrically opposed to what we are trying to do in terms of health and diet. I would urge the Minister really to look at that, as well.

Senator T.A. Vallois:

Yes, in answer to the question from Deputy Pamplin, I did state that we were looking at the schools' food model and this is planned for the first quarter of next year to model against our food and nutrition strategy that we uphold at the present time.

3.9.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

While looking at this important area, would the Minister also consider whether students could be encouraged to cook their own food at school, prepare it if they have extra time in which to do it? It always tastes better, when you have made it yourself.

Senator T.A. Vallois:

In some primary schools, we work closely with the charity, Caring Cooks, who put a Get Cooking programme on, that helps children to learn how to make wholesome, nutritional meals themselves. That is in line against the Flourish Initiative in terms of the school pilot that we have on for school hot meals at present day. But, of course, this has to be looked at in the round and I think there are opportunities, considering some of the things that are going on across the States, at present, in terms of how we can properly provide nutritious meals across all of our schools, equally and fairly.

3.9.5 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

Again, I thank the Minister for her answer to this question and I just go further to the written question, where we are seeing the reasons for increases: incremental increases to living wage; unusually high food inflation price volatility, because of Brexit. Will the Minister agree with me, as part of the review, we need to look at the contracts? If companies are making a loss at providing nutritional food for our students in our schools, something is wrong, does she agree?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

The current contract will end in July 2020 and a new contract will be awarded from September 2020. Therefore, during that process, as with any contract, I would expect appropriate challenge and appropriate negotiation about how we can fulfil appropriate nutritional meals for our school students, going forward.