

Rod Bryans – States of Jersey Minister for Education

Dear Sir,

It is with regret and concern that I write to raise my concerns with the plans I have become aware of within your department.

I have become aware via media reporting (as opposed to meaningful communication with parents from the Education department of which there has been none) of the plans to implement a one-step means test on what was previously the entitlement to 20 hours of free nursery care for young children in their final year before mainstream education.

My wife and I are lucky enough to be parents to girl who will turn three later this year. We both work in the health and social services department, myself in social services and my wife as a nurse in the general hospital. We currently spend £12,000 per annum on nursery fees. My wife has had to drop a day in her nursing role as the saving is more effective versus her working and our daughter going to nursery. In doing so she has relinquished her own entitlements in terms of housing etc, and we now live in Jersey off mine solely. I don't claim hardship in this, we value the time my daughter and her mother spend together and are happy, if we must, to be entitled on one householder only (though of course would need to leave the island if anything happened to my employment or me personally). I merely wanted you to understand our context.

I am desperate to attend the planned public scrutiny meeting and demonstration - thank you Ms Doublet for convening the former. Unfortunately our work commitments make this impossible. Therefore I would be grateful if you could, by reply, address the following points.

Why is this being done by way of an arbitrary cut off point of £75K combined income, and why was a sliding scale not considered? I say this for a number of reasons, not least a basic fairness. My wife and I sit just above this threshold. Having been required to give up the security of a full time contract my wife now sustains her income by way of bank shifts. These will now have to cease as it not worth us being over the threshold by 1, 2 or 3 thousand pounds to then have to pay £8-10,000. Over the course of the Easter weekend I have spoken to 6 other families, 4 of them from the nursing fraternity where one parent is going to have to reduce or cease work in order to avoid being worse off.

How is this right and fair? Further, how is this congruent with the general message from social security about encouraging parents back to work? How is it congruent with the recent scrutiny panel issues within HSSD regarding recruitment and retention and in particular maintaining staffing numbers in nursing? I am aware of the pressures to reduce costs within SOJ but this does seem like a very poorly considered "silo" approach to financial management.

Why is this deigned so heavily to hit middle earners on an arbitrary in/out basis?

I wish to be clear on two things : Firstly, were there a sliding scale on this, for example a combined income of £75,000 means you only get 10 hours funded, an income of £125 plus means you pay in full then not only would I have not objected to this, I would have understood and probably supported. Secondly, I am a protagonist of the view that if you have children, you are responsible for them and should not expect external support. Consequently, I prided myself on not having children

until I had adequate savings to know I could fund nursery care for my daughter. To do so from my income alone was not possible given property costs etc. However no time has been given for diligent financial planners to address this - I simply cannot find £8-10000 by next year and don't know how you expect me to do so.

Why was there no consultation on this with parents whatsoever?

What consideration was given to the impact both generally and to those hard working, middle earning families who earn at, or just above the threshold amount? What thought has been given to the other outings a hard-working, middle earning family will have and what this leaves if the free nursery care can no longer be counted upon?

Why has communication been so poor? As yet there are a number of things that remain unclear – seemingly even to your scrutiny panel ?!!? Was there a cynical attempt to sneak this news out under the radar?

Was it a coincidence or cynical timing that your department released this news in such close proximity to the verdict in the tragic case of Morgan Huelin, the timing of which was known in advance and was almost identical to the release of this news?

Again, in trying to be diligent, I submitted my primary school preferences shortly after my daughter's birth. I did not put her on the waiting list for the nurseries at those schools as I had no idea your actions would be forthcoming. Is there sufficient capacity within states provisions that all children can be accommodated?

How will this be married with the schools preference list in order to avoid my daughter being moved out of one nursery, into another, then into another school in a short period of time?

What quality assurance is in place? I choose the nursery we use due to their opening hours, provision of hot meals and snacks, structured pre-school learning and development, regular outings by foot and minibus, provision of French lessons in preschool and the provision of a beach club. Will the provision within states nurseries (which may or may not be at the school my daughter will go on to attend) match this?

Putting quality aside, how will capacity in the states nurseries be married up with capacity on the private sector?

What will the opening hours be?

Will the states nurseries open in term time only? As accommodating as they are, I cannot reasonably expect my current nursery to hold a private provision open for children to attend during holidays only.

With me working long hours and my wife working shifts, how can we be assured that the nursery provision you intend to force upon my daughter will meet her needs safely and not lead to us having to take time off work to move from one facility to another, or to accommodate lesser opening hours?

Given all the above, are you merely hoping that the alternative provision is going to force people to keep their children where they are but pay, as the provision you are offering does not meet parents or children's needs?

How is financial assessment to be undertaken and when?

Should we now be stating nursery preferences having previously been misled that we did not need to?

Finally, the point that concerns me most of all and arguably the most important: How are you satisfying yourselves, and more importantly how can you satisfy parents, that there will be no impairment to our children's development as a result of this measure? What impact assessment/risk assessment and mitigating mechanisms have been undertaken/implemented? I am not a child development expert but what research I have read consistently states the importance of the development in toddler years, or more painfully, the damage that can be done which will last lifetime if development is affected in these years. What research have you considered in this? I would really like to satisfy myself that this is not a knee jerk, poorly thought through money saving idea with no other intent than to meet departmental pressures within the MTFP.

In your pre-election biog, Mr Bryans, you state you believe that nursery care is too expensive. What has happened for you to come from there, to this decision and how are they congruent?

Whilst I am struggling to hide my anger and distress at the threat you are posing to my family, I hope you can this letter for what it is: A plea from a hard working family with a much loved and cherished daughter, who was planned and financially planned for, asking you to reconsider or amend measures you are taking which we are anxious will have negative effects on her development and our ability to contribute to Jersey through our professions. We are not people who wish to be "takers" from this island, we wish to contribute, enrich and develop alongside it. Measures like this prevent all of that happening. Most concerning of all, they potentially impair our child's development, the very thing we are trying to protect and that you are supposed to be responsible for.

Deputy Doublet, I hope you don't mind me copying you in this and I thank you for picking this issue up. I felt it may be useful for you be copied, in confidence into this letter in order for you to see the concerns this is causing amongst normal families. If it can help provide some context for the work you are doing then all the better.

Be assured that whilst this stands, you will not receive any further electoral votes from within this household.

Thank you for reading and in anticipation of a reply.