

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

4.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Further to my earlier question regarding the swimming pool at Fort Regent, Sir, and notwithstanding the restricted covenants that applies vis-à-vis the Waterfront pool which prohibits the States of Jersey from operating a covered pool within a certain radius, and notwithstanding the Minister's reply that we have Les Quennevais pool - I am sure he is aware of the traffic implications of going east and we are trying to cut down on our carbon footprint - does the Minister think that St. Helier will benefit from an Olympic size swimming pool?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

An Olympic size swimming pool, for example, is a 50 metre swimming pool which would be prohibitively expensive and which normally will serve populations of several millions. In fact, there are only a few, and a handful in the whole of the U.K. and Australia and things like that. So I think, although it would be desirable from some swimmers' points of view, from a community point of view it would be very hard to justify the outlay that we would require for an Olympic size swimming pool. In fact, when we last looked into the matter and we talked to some people, and one of the newer 50 metre swimming pools had been built in Australia, the reply was: "Well, 90 per cent of the time we have a boom across the middle dividing it into 2 25 metre pools because people find the 50 metre pool for normal swimming too long" so the Olympic size pool, no. There are a number of swimming pools in St. Helier: there is a Waterfront pool; we also have pools around and about in schools which were used for various things, including Haute Vallée and Langford. I believe, again, we had a survey done and for a swimming pool open for leisure swimming and competition swimming, Jersey is very well catered for.

4.2 Connétable T.J. du Feu of St. Peter:

Would the Minister inform the House of what and why there is a delay on the St. Peter's School development, when can we expect the contract to be awarded, and when the work, indeed, will commence?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

At St. Peter's School, the demolition is now completed; it is currently out to tender. We are also finalising lease arrangements for Field 649 for use by the school. It is a complex situation. We now are interested parties, but a lot of the work is carried out by Property Holdings, but I am pushing for the project to be kept on track so that we can have a new school delivered for St. Peter as soon as possible. But I am pleased to say I visited the temporary school, and the temporary classrooms, and it is operating very well indeed and, in fact, the comments I received most were that the temporary classrooms we put in there were larger and better than the classrooms of the old school which were being developed.

4.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister confirm that some schools are finding extreme difficulty in finding accommodation at a reasonable level, either to rent or to buy, for teachers coming to the Island to take up posts?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The housing of new staff coming to the Island - and we try to keep them to a minimum, because we always try to appoint locally if we can - has been an ongoing issue for a number of years. I have not had reported to me particular problems more than usual, but I can understand that at times there will be issues; there will be problems. We try to help out as much as we can but we no longer provide such accommodation and that people have to take their chances in the market. Now, perhaps in the future when we are redeveloping and looking at various ways of housing

there may be ways in which we can look to support what are known in the U.K., for example, as key workers' accommodation, but that is something for the future and has to be developed in conjunction with the Minister for Housing. But at present, yes, there is always an issue of people finding suitable accommodation on coming to the Island - not just for teachers, but for anyone - and we try and help as much as we can.

4.4 Senator B.E. Shenton:

The Minister employs 166 "j" category teachers within his department. What action is he taking to try and reduce the dependency on bringing in "j" category labour?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

That is correct. As supplied in written questions the complete list of "j" category staff that we employ - that is 166 out of nearly 1,500 employees, and as I just said in the reply to Deputy Southern - we always advertise and try and fill posts locally if we can. For example, we have not - certainly, in my experience - ever appointed a primary head teacher from outside the Island for at least 10 years, probably considerably longer, but I am talking about my experience of it. We always try to employ locally. One of the things that is always an issue is when there is a shortage of specialist subject teachers, particularly at secondary school level. Certainly, I am sure, everybody would want to ensure that we have sufficient specialist subject teachers to provide the curriculum that we have to provide for the benefit of our young people. This, on occasions, does mean that we have to employ "j" category teachers from outside of the Island because we have no demand and no reply to adverts from the locally qualified specialist teachers in certain subjects.

4.5 Deputy J.G. Reed of St. Ouen:

I was under the impression that all property was being transferred from individual departments to Property Holdings. Could I ask the Minister to confirm whether or not the Fort Regent pool has been part of that transfer?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I can confirm that Education, Sport and Culture is one of the departments that has transferred all its property, including Fort Regent, as agreed by the sort of planning we had to Property Holdings.

4.6 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

A quick 2-part question: yes or no, Sir. The Minister has made great mention of the review to justify even more expenditure, has this been approved by the Council of Ministers? The Minister stated that he asked the Comptroller and Auditor General to review financial planning and management in his department, is he sure of his facts on this, as this is not my understanding?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

A quick answer to the questions: first of all, to correct the question, the review is not to justify even more expenditure; that is the Deputy's interpretation, wrongly, of the independent review. The independent review is to look at the level of funding for education, compare it with other jurisdictions so as we can judge it against other jurisdictions and how well we are doing in the Island. Yes, the Council of Ministers is aware of my request, and I am in discussions with the Treasury and Resources Minister about how such a review could be carried out. The second part of the question - which I am desperately trying to remember - oh, yes, I believe it is minuted. At a Council of Ministers' meeting I wished, and asked, that the Comptroller and Auditor General carry out a review.

4.7 The Deputy of St. John:

I wonder if the Minister could advise the House as to what, if any, process he has in place that provides a forum for his senior head teachers, particularly in the secondary schools, to discuss policy issues with him. In other words, does he have planned regular meetings with them and, if not, does he think he should?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We have a Head Teachers' Association; we also have regular meetings within the department - of which I have attended on occasion - of primary head teachers and secondary head teachers. But also we have 2 other bodies: one is the Consultative Council, which I chair and meet regularly, which represents teachers' unions and teachers' associations, and the other one is the Consultative Council which involves head teachers and other teachers, representatives from schools and other parts of the educational establishment, which I meet with regularly, who give advice on all aspects to do with education.

4.8 The Deputy of St. John:

Is the Minister satisfied then that all head teachers are perfectly happy with current policies that his department is putting forward?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I would be frankly amazed, Sir, if all head teachers were happy with all the policies put forward in my department. I met with a representative of secondary heads and primary heads very recently to discuss the problems caused in schools by the savings that I had to insist on schools making to meet the latest pay increase for 2007, which I very much regretted having to do. I explained to them the difficulties, and part of the reason for wanting an independent review is to convince and to assure everyone that the spending that we are doing in Education is an investment in the future, and we should be looking to increase that investment if we believe it is the right thing to do, and not decrease it because the problems through that will not arise next year or the year after, but 10 to 15 years' time, and we should be looking that far ahead.

4.9 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Families now who are on a low income and are in receipt of a HIE (Health Insurance Exception) card are able to get either a free or a reduced Active card for the whole family. Could the Minister inform the House what protection his department has put in place to make sure this scheme carries on when the new income support scheme takes place?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

It has been my wish, and it is minuted from a long time ago, even when I was President of the then SLR (Sport, Leisure and Recreation) Committee, and then the Education Committee of which, of course, Deputy Martin was a valued and esteemed member, that it has always been our intention - and still is - to ensure that people who are currently qualified for Active cards through HIE and other social and financial need continue to do so. In fact, I would like to extend it, and I am in consultation with the Social Security Department as to how this can be achieved. It all goes along with trying to keep our population as healthy as possible in ensuring that anyone is not deterred from using our excellent facilities for sport and health through financial deprivation.

4.10 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

With the advent of the Skills Executive, would the Minister tell us whether there is a shift in his budget, places like Highlands and other vocational training areas, from the academic to the vocation?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We are currently reviewing the funding regime for Highlands; we are in the throes of setting up a Skills Executive, and once that is completed we will have to see whether we need to apply for

more funds, or use funds from Economic Development in a different way if they are involved in this issue. I will be dealing with this in conjunction with the Minister for Economic Development. But, certainly, what we want to do is to react to need and the Island's requirements for the future, and that means supporting both the academic side and the skill side.

4.11 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

It is a follow on, in a way, from the question asked by Senator Shenton about the employment of "j" category teachers, and I note from the written answer that we have a very high proportion of "j" category teachers employed at secondary schools, my understanding is that we have graduates who want to come back to the Island to work as primary school teachers, and they are unable to find work. How is the Minister addressing the fact that he is employing a very large number of secondary school teachers when our own graduates are unable to find work over here as primary school teachers? When students apply for university grants...

The Bailiff:

Deputy, I am sorry to say that there will be no time for an answer, unless your question comes pretty quickly to an end.

Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

Sorry, Sir. I will leave it at that, then.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The Deputy answered her own question. Our vacancies are in specialist subjects in secondary schools, and where we have people waiting, local people waiting for posts, is in primary school and the only way, unfortunately that we would offer to help would be through retraining into specialist subjects in secondary school. Unfortunately, you cannot just appoint a primary school teacher to a specialist secondary school subject.

4.11.1 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

Could I have a supplementary, Sir? Why does the department not offer incentives to university students to train as secondary school teachers, rather than primary school teachers?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We offer incentives for young people to go on to higher education including teacher training in the subjects that they wish to pursue, and the difficulty with something like that is we could have a similar problem in the future the other way round, with too many specialists in certain subjects, if we encourage them too much. People have to make their own decisions. We advise them but it is a free society; they make their own decisions.

The Bailiff:

That concludes the second question period.