

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

The Deputy Bailiff:

Very well. I am afraid that we have run out of time so, Deputy Fox, I am sorry, we do not have time for your question. We then move to Questions without Notice of the Minister for Education. Deputy Pitman.

4.1 Deputy S.Pitman:

In a recent meeting with the Minister, between Scrutiny and himself, the Minister has indicated that he is all for social inclusion. I do not know how much he is aware of this issue but I do not feel that when you have trips, residential with the youth service, and when children are on those residential and they are disabled, there is a higher insurance on those disabled children, which limits what they can do. Could the Minister please comment on that and also take issue?

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

Yes, Sir. Obviously, with social inclusion and with the youth service, we try to be as inclusive as possible, with the youth service and we make provision to do so. Obviously, it is very important on residential trips that we have the appropriate insurance and, depending on the needs of those who are being included, that insurance will vary. I have no control over what insurance companies charge. What we always try and ensure to do is, as much as possible, to include everyone as far as possible.

4.1.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

Can I ask the Minister to take up this issue, please?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am not sure who the Deputy is asking me to take the issue up with, Sir.

4.2 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Can the Minister confirm the number of children on the priority list for nursery places in September and also confirm that he remains satisfied with his department's current policy in this regard?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am afraid I have not got the number with me at the moment. I know we have had a number of appeals because we were far over subscribed for nursery education and, as I hope everybody in the House knows, I remain very unhappy with the current policy that my department has to pursue because the States, last year, did not feel it was possible to provide the money so that I could offer free nursery education to all children of appropriate age. We are having a meeting on Thursday - which I hope the Deputy can attend. I do not know if he is attending or not - supervised and run by Jersey Childcare Trust, where we are looking at the whole issue of nursery education, again, nursery education and care. I am hopeful that, while the Council of Ministers supported it in principle last year, that this year I may have even more backing when I come back to the States later in the year, seeking again that we can have a fair and equitable system of free nursery education for all 3 to 4 year-olds.

4.3 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

I would like to establish whether the offspring of a (j) category, whose licence is due to expire, would still qualify for a further education grant?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The criteria for higher education grants are quite clear and we have criteria that are very similar to the U.K., because of movement between and, quite simply, when they are taking up the

course, a young person is living in the Island and has been here for the requisite amount of time beforehand, with their parents, we would receive an application for a grant and adjudicate accordingly.

4.4 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

The Minister has identified that an additional £370,000 is needed in his budget next year to continue funding the Aquasplash Pool. In April this year he advised the Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel that he will be seeking to renegotiate the contract with the operator to ensure both that they take more of the risk, thereby reducing the risk to the States, as well as to better incentivise them to perform well. Will the Minister advise the House at what stage those negotiations have reached?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

A report has been prepared by my officers, which looks at the options to reduce the levels of subsidy provided to Serco to operate Aquasplash, which is under a contract agreed previously with the operator. The report makes recommendations to renegotiate the contract, or to re-tender the contract, operate the facility by E.S.C. (Education, Sport and Culture), close the facility, use the site for development. They were all looked at, as we know. It has been agreed that E.S.C. take on the responsibility for the administration of the contract and the budget will be transferred to my department from the Treasury from 2009. We have begun discussions with Serco to renegotiate or negotiate the contract because we believe that we want to work with them so that there is less drain on States funds for the running of the pool.

4.4.1 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I asked the Minister what stage those negotiations have reached, because my understanding is that when he came to speak to us in April, he told us then that he had begun to negotiate with Serco and my panel made a recommendation, indeed, to the Council of Ministers, that the renegotiation needed to be dealt with swiftly and that by the time of the Business Plan debate in September of this year, all Members should have been given, by the Minister, a clear idea of the options available to him, including the implications of potentially closing the Aquasplash. I want to know at what stage these renegotiations are and whether the report the Minister has just referred to was prepared before or after he spoke to us in April?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The discussions have begun and are ongoing with Serco, who have a current contract with the States. We are trying to negotiate with them to improve the details of that contract. I hope that those discussions will have borne fruit by the time the Business Plan comes about. But discussions involve 2 parties at least and there is an existing contract. We are relying on a lot of goodwill to renegotiate that contract and we are doing it on an ongoing basis. When I have information and news to report to the States, I will do so.

4.5 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

It is my understanding, Sir, that Jersey will be bidding for the Island Games directly following on from, I believe, Bermuda. What additional infrastructure does the Island need, if any, to bring it up to standard?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, the Island Games Association of Jersey has indicated that it would wish to bid to host the Island Games in Jersey again in 2015. That will involve a substantial commitment on the part of my department, on behalf of the States, which I will be discussing in more detail, or the department will be discussing in more detail next year because the actual formal bid has to be in in 2010 but a lot of work has to go on beforehand. As part of this, we have done a review of the facilities and the facility that needs the most work done on it is resurfacing the running track at

F.B. Fields and that is included anyway in the capital programme. I believe it is for 2012 but Members, if they look - I believe it is 2012, I am not sure - because it needs resurfacing anyway because it is coming to the end of its existing life. But, otherwise, the facilities we have in Jersey should be able to cope, but obviously there are other costs involved in hosting an Island Games.

4.6 Deputy J. Gallichan of St. Mary:

In recent questions in the House, we learnt that in circumstances following a potential review of the Firearms Law, the police may be able to enter schools and search without a warrant. Could the Minister please advise if he has any concerns at all about this development and about how it will be effectively put into practice?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I was concerned about the reporting. I heard of this when I was unaware it was going to be raised on the news. We have been in consultation for some time and are still in consultation. I have just received another report from Home Affairs, to review it. What we want to do is to ensure that our children in our schools are as safe as possible. What we are seeking to agree with Home Affairs is that, with the permission of the head teacher of the school, that if the police have a suspicion that there may be knives on the premises, or something like that, that without the need for them to obtain a warrant, that with the agreement of the school, they can come in and search pupils, again agreed by the head teacher. I think that is a very sensible way forward. What we are not going to be looking at are random searches in schools, because I do not think that is necessary in Jersey and would give quite the wrong message out to our young people, the vast majority of whom are very well behaved and would not dream of bringing any sharp implement that they should not into schools.

4.7 The Deputy of St. John:

Is the Minister satisfied that grant provision for post-graduate courses, particularly in the field of medical science, is adequate? If not, what improvements would he like to see?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Grant provision for post-graduate courses is now done on a competitive basis from a fixed sum. Because I am a great supporter of education and higher education and the more you can get, the better. Yes, I wish I had more money to allocate to post-graduate grants but we do encourage companies and others, where it will be of benefit to them, to support post-graduates as well and we do what we can, within the sum we have. But, as I am a great supporter of education, I wish I had more funds but we have a fixed budget, fixed by this House and I have to operate the whole of Education, Sport and Culture within that budget.

4.8 Connétable M.K. Jackson of St. Brelade:

The Minister will recall that when Hautlieu School was completed there were considerable difficulties over the heating system. Would he confirm that the system is now working satisfactorily and that the running expenses are in line with the department's expectations?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have not got the details here and I will check. All I can say is that previously, when they were not, I was told about it often enough and I have not had any complaints recently, so I hope everything has been sorted out. I will look into it so as I can reassure the Constable that it has been.

4.9 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Would the Minister not agree with me that the Battle of Flowers is an important part of Jersey's local culture? What is he doing and what is his department doing in order to ensure that the

problems that the Battle of Flowers faces on a year by year basis are considered by his department, under the auspices of culture and what assistance is he offering, if any?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The Battle of Flowers, as far as I am aware, have never approached my department for any assistance. They have always gone through the Economic Development Department and, before that, the Tourism Department. In fact, I remember having discussions with the Battle when I was Vice President of the then Tourism Committee. It seems a long time ago now. I agree; the Battle of Flowers is a very important cultural event. I believe that considerable investment has been put into it by Economic Development. I also believe that the Battle has to do a lot to help itself, particularly in getting increased sponsorship, but I pay tribute to everyone who works hard for the Battle of Flowers. I believe it is a major part of Jersey and will continue to be a major part of Jersey and they need to help themselves and we need to help them as well.

4.10 Deputy A.J.H. Maclean:

Following the extraordinary decision by the Jersey Heritage Trust to spend some £500,000 purchasing the Puddleduck service; the Minister made an undertaking that he would review the circumstances surrounding this particular transaction. I was wondering how the review was progressing and when Members are likely to get a copy?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

As I said at the time when I was asked oral questions on this, that I have asked for a full report from the Jersey Heritage Trust, going into the whole background of this decision and I am pleased to say that that report is now being delivered to the States Greffe for onward circulation in its entirety to all States Members, and I hope it will be with members in the next couple of days.