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4.7 Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour of the Minister for Education regarding the loss to families caused by the withdrawal of 20 hours of free nursery care:

What action, if any, is the Minister taking to mitigate the loss to families caused by the withdrawal of 20 hours of free nursery care?

Deputy R.G. Bryans of St. Helier (The Minister for Education):

Thank you to the Deputy. If I could just grab your indulgence for a second. I would like to make a sort of public apology to all States Members and the public at large. I am deeply sorry that I was away from the Island at the time when my presence was necessary to answer concerns regarding the N.E.F. (Nursery Education Fund) Fund. I deeply regret that and a series of small miscommunications amounted to people believing that I was going to be on the Island when I was not. I am really truly sorry for that and I accept full responsibility. In answer to the Deputy's question, the important thing is the majority of places will still be free on the N.E.F. Fund. Means testing as a principle is right. It means the States funds have to be targeted to those who need it most. We gave notice of the problem or the proposal, I should say, as early as possible.

4.7.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I thank the Minister for his reply. I think it is a well-known fact that there are many young families who are paying more for nursery care than they are for their mortgages. Will the Minister agree to take no action on nursery care fees until a complete cost benefit analysis has been undertaken with both parents and nurseries?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

It is common knowledge, I think, that Scrutiny have a public meeting on Wednesday, which I will be attending, and then subsequent we have already agreed to meet with the private sector and parents. I received the petition, which we will go through and we will talk to everybody in receipt of this. The decision has still been made that we will be doing this, but the actual detail has yet to be finalised.

4.7.2 Deputy J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Could the Minister clarify why it would appear that a number of his ministerial colleagues are claiming that they were unaware of the changes until the media release? Was this not properly discussed at the Council of Ministers before it was implemented?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I cannot answer for those because I do not know what the considerations were. It was certainly posted in all the documentation that we have concerning our workshops and it was placed as a news release sent to all Ministers a week prior to the release going out. So I cannot answer on behalf of my Ministers.

4.7.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Minister confirm if during his time, I presume it was a holiday in Cuba while all this was going on, whether he learnt anything about their education system given that they have got one of the highest, if not the highest, literacy rates in the world? In particular, did he learn anything about their model of nursery care in Cuba that he might be able to apply back here in Jersey?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Thank you, Deputy. I wish I could say yes. It was my intention to visit a couple of schools round there, but unfortunately I was ill when I first arrived and the first 2 opportunities to do that disappeared. In reply to your 2 questions, the answer has been no on both parts.

4.7.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

In his answer to the first question he said, and I quote: "The principle of means testing is right." Given that the 2009 business plan for education amendment, which established the 20 free hours in the first place said: "The principle of means testing in nursery education is wrong because non-means testing provides the broadest learning opportunities for those children and takes away the stigma from children from poorer backgrounds in nursery", would he agree that the principle of means testing is wrong?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, I would not. This is a really important part of what we are doing. This is making sure that those who can afford nursery care will do so in the future. For those who cannot, the vulnerable will still be protected. What we are doing with the funds that we save from this particular situation will be redirected to special educational needs and pupil premium, which is what we targeted to help those more vulnerable pupils.

4.7.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Supplementary, if I can? Does he accept, then, that moving away from this principle of providing the broadest learning opportunities for children, and taking away the stigma attached to children from poorer backgrounds, is a step backwards from acting in the best interests of those children and would he accept that this is simply about saving money and not acting in the best interests of those children?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, I would not. We are not here as a principle behind the proposal. It is not about stigmatisation at all. It is making sure that those people who can afford nursery care, as I say, are going to pay for it. For those who cannot, they will still be covered and we are redirecting the money to those principal children who need it most. That is where we are working from, from this position.

4.7.6 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:

If the Minister believes that means testing is the right way forward, can he explain why that in his proposals this only applies to families with children in private nurseries and not to those families earning £75,000 or over in States nurseries? Surely this proposal is entirely unfair if the Minister believes that means testing is the way forward.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think the Deputy has a very good point. In fact this is part of the detail that we have to work out over the next 6 months. In consideration of his question, I think we will have to reconsider the situation, the differences between the States and the private sector.

4.7.7 Deputy J.A. Martin:

In the previous answer the Minister said of course he is going to consult and he wants to hear what the nurseries and parents have said. But we have already made a decision, so which is it, please?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Thank you, Deputy. Yes, we have made the decision about the actual route that we are taking, but the actual detail of that decision has yet to be worked out in consultation with the private sector and the parents.

4.7.8 Deputy J.A. Martin:

And that will be brought back to the States for a decision?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think Deputy Southern has a question about that regarding the debate for the States, but that is part of the M.T.F.P. (Medium Term Financial Plan).

4.7.9 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister quoted and stating that this has no impact and no relation to the 1,001 Days initiative. How can he justify that when 1,001 Days takes a child to the age of 2, approximately?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

The 1,001 Days is again ... I am glad the Deputy has raised this issue, relates directly to the more vulnerable members of our society. It is designed to, in terms of special educational needs and the pupil premium, are those 2 elements that we have decided to focus on when reducing the savings from this particular proposal. He is quite right that the Early Years and the 1,001 Days takes us up to the age of 2, and it is also worth mentioning that the consideration that we have for this proposal will only be one year within those 2 years.

4.7.10 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may? The Minister surely, does he not agree, he has got the wrong end of the stick on this? The initiative of 1,001 Days applied across the board to give all young people the best possible start in Jersey because we can afford it. Does he not consider that is a principle that underpins 1,001 Days?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes. I am part of the taskforce that is related to the 1,001 Days so I am fully aware of what the 1,001 Days and the Early Years taskforce is focused on. I support exactly what he is trying to say, but this is why we are trying to redirect the funds from those who can afford it to those who cannot.

4.7.11 Deputy T.A. Vallois of St. John:

The Minister stated that this decision was an outcome of the Nursery Education Funding, so can he explain if this is about savings, and purely savings, roughly £250,000, why is it that the Council of Ministers agreed to increase childcare tax relief by £2,000, costing the States £100,000 in revenue, and bearing in mind that the threshold of £75,000 under the criteria for childcare tax relief you would have to be a married couple with a mortgage and a child under 16 and earning £106,000 in order to claim that childcare tax relief. So can the Minister explain how joined up this Council of Ministers is with regards to childcare? **[Approbation]**

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

The Deputy once again has excelled at providing figures in this particular area. I would have to get back into the detail to have a look at what it is she is talking about. But, yes, we have looked at all these particular areas and we have had those discussions around the Council of Ministers. But the decision in this particular case is more about making sure that we have got, as I have already said, a position where we have got a rising demographic, so we have got more nursery care and more

provision being asked for, and that situation was unsustainable. So that was the particular driver for that. If we wanted to get into the detail I would have to come back to the Deputy on that.

4.7.12 The Deputy of St. John:

If the Minister believes that £75,000 is an appropriate threshold for this particular Nursery Education Funding, what will he be doing to urge the Minister for Treasury and Resources to resolve the marginal relief tax system?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

The Minister for Treasury and Resources and myself have had several discussions around this particular area. As I say, we are looking at the £75,000, we are going back into the discussions with the private sector and the parents to make sure this is the correct figure. We wanted to get this information out as quickly as possible so the parents had the opportunity to come back and discuss it with us. So the discussions in relation to that particular figure are ongoing.

4.7.13 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

I have been contacted by a number of constituents on this matter and they are, frankly, confused. The understanding of them is that nursery care in the state sector was set up in order to meet educational needs. In other words, provide people with an early start at 3½, and that I believe was a States policy. The subsidy in the private sector was to enable more places to be provided because the States simply were not providing enough places. Is the Minister still committed to providing preschool education from 3½?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, which is in fact why we are increasing the number of nurseries within the state schools. So we are putting in 3 new nurseries into Springfield, Trinity and St. Mary. So we are still focused on providing that provision.

4.7.14 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Surely that is going to cost more than subsidising the private sector?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, it is not. We have done the figures on this and I can provide the information for the Deputy.

[10:30]

4.7.15 Connétable J. Gallichan of St. Mary:

Most of the points I wanted to raise have been raised in excellent questions by Deputy Maçon and the Deputy of St. John, but I would just like to ask the Minister: does he understand the climate of the feeling of inequality that prevailed at the time that the Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel in 2008 produced their Early Years report, and that was specifically addressed by the equality of provision. Does he not consider this as a retrograde step and will re-engage the feeling of inequality that existed there?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, the Connétable got in touch with me and asked me to look at that. I have not had a chance to do so and I understand why this was brought in, in the first place. I thank her for that. This is bad news. It is not good news at all. I am not trying to dress it up. I am trying to be as open and honest as I possibly can about it. It is very difficult. We live in difficult times. All I can say, the discussions will still go on. I understand the ... I do not feel it is a retrograde step in that sort of context. But I do

feel it is something that we need to really pay a little more attention to as we go forward over the next 6 months.

4.7.16 The Connétable of St. Mary:

The Minister said several times today that this is not good news and it is going to happen. But in setting the bar at £75,000, has he really considered, for a young family with perhaps another child costing perhaps £9,000 in childcare, who is before the nursery age, a mortgage, pension provisions that we have talked about at length this morning, does he not understand that, although it seems like a huge amount of money, for a homeowner and in this economy, in this Island, it is not, and that we should be looking at people who have spare capacity, not those people who are struggling, to make sure that they do not need help and assistance from the State at some other time in their lives.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

As usual, the Connétable articulates her point very well. I am acutely aware ... I think it is public knowledge that I have a daughter and a granddaughter in exactly the situation that she describes, so I am acutely aware of that situation. Like I say, as she said at the tail-end of her point there, that is what we are trying to do, we are trying to make sure that those who can afford it will pay for it, those who cannot will not.

4.7.17 Senator Z.A. Cameron:

This policy does not seem to fit, for me, with the Council of Ministers' 1,001 Days policy on maximising the brain development in the early years. It is my understanding that there is plenty of evidence from the U.K. and the rest of Europe that targeted means-tested nursery provision that limits the diversity of that provision has not been effective in maximising brain development in these years, compared to universal provision. A pound spent on education at this time ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Senator, it has to be a question. It is perfectly permissible to set up the question by reference to one or 2 of your understandings, I think, but to list detailed information and then expect the Minister to comment on it is really not the function of Question Time.

Senator Z.A. Cameron:

I would just like to hear from him the evidence to the contrary that justifies this thing that will not benefit our economy in the future by maximising the chances of the children in Jersey.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

As the Bailiff has directed, I cannot answer specifically related to the question regarding what is happening in the U.K., but this is a difficult situation for us where we find ourselves. It is, in relation to what we set out in our principles with regard to education, to provide, as much as we can, access to early nursery provision and early years teaching. Again, I go back to this is why we are opening up the 3 nurseries in the States provision. The reason for that, and this goes back some time, this is not just something we have decided on recently, it goes back to the last administration, all schools have looked for nursery provision, we only had 5 that did not have it, so we are putting 3 of those back in. Unfortunately that leaves 2 left, which I think is St. Luke's and Les Landes. Schools feel this is a necessary thing; we want to accommodate that, we want to balance it with what the private sector are doing.

4.7.18 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I am not sure, I do believe that the Minister is aware of the climate of fear among young parents at the moment. My final supplementary was touched upon by Deputy Martin but I would like some clarification. The Minister said that the decision has been made, but there are meetings coming up with both Scrutiny and indeed parents. Just exactly how much room for manoeuvre is there?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

There is room for manoeuvre and we have already looked at it since I came back and we have gone through the information that we have already been provided. There will be room for manoeuvre, but I need to sit down and listen to what parents have to say so, as I say, I will be attending the Scrutiny meeting on Wednesday, and then we will be setting up a meeting post that situation to explain where we are and what the information is that we have accrued and where the decision or where the wiggle room is as the case, as Deputy Lewis has asked, where we have got some space for manoeuvre.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Sir, could I reiterate the request I made earlier in the sitting, please?

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, the point I think made by the Chief Minister is that he wishes Senator Ozouf to answer the question and Senator Ozouf is not present in the Chamber.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

He is not here, Sir, and it is my turn. I think Standing Orders are fairly clear on that. We have a Minister here and we have a questioner here, so why can we not proceed?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I was endeavouring to be helpful; I will be making a statement on these matters later in the sitting. The Assistant Chief Minister has delegated responsibility for it. The questioner did not ask that it was specifically taken by the Minister because I double-checked that, but of course I am prepared to answer if that is the wish of the questioner.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I think it clearly is the wish of the questioner, Chief Minister. Standing Order 13(3)(a) provides that a questioner may, when giving notice of the question, indicate the questioner wishes to have the question answered by the Member to whom it was addressed. Now that notice was not given specifically on this occasion, so in theory it would be possible for Senator Ozouf to answer the question on your behalf. However, we have reached the point where the question has been called and Senator Ozouf is not here to answer it, and therefore I think the correct interpretation of Standing Orders is it falls to be answered by you, Chief Minister. **[Approbation]**