

3. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture

The Deputy Bailiff:

We now come to questions to Ministers without notice. The first question period is for the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture.

3.1 Deputy S. Power of St. Brelade:

Could the Minister give the Assembly an indication of his department's estimate as to demand for primary school places this coming autumn and the autumn of 2013 and could he indicate to the Assembly whether his department has sufficient capacity, particularly in the urban Parishes?

The Deputy of St. John (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

Originally we expected 760 applicants for new primary school places in 2012. The non-fee-paying sector, I am told, remains static. Normally this gives us an accuracy of one per cent. However, this year we have received 830 applicants (that is an extra 70) and I understand the fee-paying sector is still at a normal intake level and the birth rate remains high. I think the second part of the Deputy's question was can we cope with it? We have opened 2 new forms of entry, one at Samares and one at Rouge Bouillon School, both of which are in the urban Parishes. I think the Deputy also mentioned 2013. It is too early yet for us to estimate 2013, but suffice to say that the birth rate remains high and at higher levels than we have seen perhaps in the last decade or so.

3.2 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I wanted to ask this earlier, but I do not think you could see me via the mace. With Deputy Hilton's question earlier about teenage mums and ante and post-natal assistance, can the Minister advise whether the excellent project being run at Le Squez recently is still up and operating and, if not, would he consider providing some funding so that that could be developed further, because it is clearly in need?

The Deputy of St. John:

The question of 0 to 3 or lower than 3 years of age support is high on my mind and on the department's mind. The question of funding for individual projects is an interesting one and one that I am currently talking to my colleague, the Minister for Health and Social Services, about because there is a considerable overlap there and I know that her forthcoming White Paper will address this particular issue. I am very supportive. As far as funding is concerned, we will just have to wait and see how this works out.

3.3 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Previously I have asked questions with regard to the number of places available in the construction faculty at Highlands College and I know that Highlands College has been constrained by the physical size of the department. My question to the Minister is has any work been carried out to increase the number of places available to our ever-growing number of young unemployed?

The Deputy of St. John:

Highlands College is under pressure. The Deputy is quite right to highlight that. We have created some extra spaces for the 14 to 16-year age group on a pilot basis over the last year or 2 at Highlands specifically in the construction sector. It is at capacity. So we cannot do a lot more than we are currently doing, but it is certainly on my agenda and, as a result of the results of our consultation exercise earlier in the year, the question of vocational training and increases to the offering and availability of vocational training is very high on my agenda, as indeed are apprenticeship schemes.

3.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In his role as a member of the Skills Executive, can the Minister inform Members what financial support is given to the creation of apprenticeships and how many additional apprenticeships have been created over the last year, 2011?

The Deputy of St. John:

Apprenticeship schemes in general are an area of particular interest to me coming, as I do, from that particular stream of education, having left school at 16 myself. Apprenticeship schemes are currently with the Economic Development Department. It is their responsibility and there is an apprenticeship scheme of some sort available and has been available, but I have to say that it has not been particularly successful. We are currently investigating and researching what might be required for a brand-new launch of an apprenticeship scheme and I hope to be able to make an announcement about that sometime later on this year. I hope so, but there is much work to be done.

3.5 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

What is the extent of requirements for catering for students whose first language is not English? We talk about the 800 or so primary school children. What is the percentage whose first language is not English?

The Deputy of St. John:

This varies around the particular schools. As you would expect, in the urban Parishes it is much higher than it is in the country Parishes. It can be as high as 35 per cent of new intake, English as an additional language. What provision do we have? We have a specialist English as an additional language unit based at Rouge Bouillon. There are, off the top of my head, something in the area of - I am guessing, so I stand to be corrected - about 5 to 10 specialists that deal with English as an additional language and go round to different schools. We also, I am very pleased to say, get a certain amount of assistance directly from the Portuguese Government who fund a number of specialist teachers to assist us in this. I have recently had a letter back from the Portuguese Government confirming that, reading between the lines, they did not intend to reduce that budget in the short term and I am very grateful for that.

3.5.1 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

You mentioned Portuguese, but is there not a demand for other languages as well?

The Deputy of St. John:

Yes. I have to say to the Senator there is, but what we are finding as a department is that English tends to be spoken more at home and there is better language ability among children from Eastern European backgrounds in general; much more so than there is from children with a Portuguese background. There is also, I have to say, a very good and recent addition to the education offering in that a group of Polish local residents has started a specialist school for English-speaking Polish children on Saturday mornings and I think that is a brilliant development and that should be congratulated as well.

3.6 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

With the increasing redundancies in the finance industry and other sectors of the economy, does the Minister believe, firstly, that the States should give tax breaks to people who wish to retrain and update their skills and, secondly, does he also believe the States should subsidise those who are making an effort in this regard?

The Deputy Bailiff:

The question is not one for the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture, is it? Tax breaks are for the Minister for Treasury and Resources.

3.7 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:

What policy changes have been introduced following the previous Scrutiny Panel's report on the examination results with particular regard to the noticeable difference in the lower achievement levels in 16 year-old boys in the G.C.S.E. (General Certificate of Secondary Education) standards? My questions is what is being done to upgrade them, not what alternatives are being offered.

The Deputy of St. John:

We are shortly to launch a maths review. We have focused on literacy and mathematics in both primary and secondary areas and we are looking more and more to focus on these key skill areas. In addition, the third key skill area that we are reviewing is I.C.T., not so much as a curriculum but as a third basic skill level because that is the way the world is moving.

[11:45]

3.8 Deputy R.J. Rondel of St. Helier:

Would the Minister agree that the sudden and unexpected surge in applications for primary schools is primarily due to the fact that the States of Jersey have failed to control immigration and enforce an effective immigration policy?

The Deputy of St. John:

I am very happy to answer the question in that we have done some fundamental but initial research. So I do have the information and I am happy to answer the Deputy's question. Based on a previous year's analysis, 37 per cent of the unexpected entries tend to come from the United Kingdom. This information, I have to say, though, is something like a year to 2 years out of date, but I have no reason particularly to believe that things have changed: 37 per cent come from the U.K.; 38 per cent will tend to come from Portugal, Madeira and Poland; there will be a small number of local returners, locally-qualified people returning to the Island, say 5 per cent; and the remainder come from a spread of 50 to 60 other E.U. or other non-E.U. countries. I hope that will give the Deputy the kind of information he is looking for.

3.8.1 Deputy R.J. Rondel:

So would he agree that perhaps a large contributing factor is due to the immigration policy?

The Deputy of St. John:

I cannot say that it is from the migration policy. I cannot make that comment. That is for further analysis, but what I can say is that those percentages speak for themselves and one can draw one's own conclusions.

3.9 Deputy S. Power:

I would like to ask the Minister a question to clarify his response to my first question. In the spike that he referred to, the extra 70 places over and above the 750 his department have projected, does the department feel that any analysis based on trend for 2013 would show perhaps 70-plus places for 2013 and does his department have sufficient capacity?

The Deputy of St. John:

It is unclear whether this is a spike for this year or whether that increasing trend will continue in 2013. If it does then quite clearly we are going to find it difficult and we will need to increase capacity. Either that or, in the very short term, if we cannot increase capacity sufficiently quickly, then we will have to, regrettably, allow increasing numbers of children and pupil/teacher ratios in our schools, which I do not want to do but I may have no choice.

3.10 The Connétable of St. John:

Given the diversity of the fishing industry, from fish farming to deep-water fishing and the like, what help is there for apprentices to join the fishing industry and would the employers have financial assistance?

The Deputy of St. John:

Again, the current apprenticeship schemes are resident with the Economic Development Department. So I am not absolutely clear on the detail of that. I cannot answer that, I am afraid.

3.11 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Figures released in an answer today on the use of temporary and zero-hours contracts has the Education, Sport and Culture Department way out in front with 582 zero-hours contracts. How can such widespread use of zero-hours contracts be justified? Should they not be temporary, fixed-term or part-time contracts?

The Deputy of St. John:

My understanding is that the vast majority of these zero-hours contracts are for things like supply teachers and teaching assistants that are employed on a temporary basis. We also have a situation where there is fluidity between whether teachers wish to cover lunchtime duties or not. Bearing in mind the number of schools we have got and the total number of employees that we have, we feel that at the moment zero-hours contracts are the appropriate way to employ people.

3.11.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister review his policy on zero hours and ensure that zero-hours contracts are the appropriate mechanism and not temporary or part-time, fixed-hours contracts?

The Deputy of St. John:

Yes.