

2.15 The Connétable of St. Helier of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the allocation of places at the new States-provided nursery at St. Peter's School:

Would the Minister explain how the free places at the new States-provided nursery in St. Peter will be allocated, when parents will be informed of the outcome of their applications and whether he would consider deferring the allocation of additional free places until the publication of the findings of the current Scrutiny Panel review into the funding of nursery education?

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

Free nursery places in the new St. Peter's nursery will be allocated in the same manner and with regard to the same criteria as all other nursery places in the States system. I look forward to the publication of the findings of the current Scrutiny Panel's review and as that is, I understand, likely to be published early in the New Year its findings will, of course, be taken into serious consideration in relation to the allocation of places. Parents are normally informed in March of the allocations for nursery class entry for the following September. Since it seems likely that the new nursery at St. Peter's School will be opening in January 2009 we will be contacting parents and determining whether they wish to be considered for a place in another nursery in September 2008 or wait for a possible place at St. Peter when it opens early in 2009.

2.15.1 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I thank the Minister for his answer. He said that the criteria used will be the same as the criteria used in every other nursery run by the States. I wonder if he would be good enough to publish that criteria and allow States Members to have a copy of it?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I can do better than that. I can read it out and inform States Members now what it is. The criteria given is such, with the first 3 being the most important given and given a greater weight: children with social educational needs, children from families with particular needs e.g. very low income families, siblings with special needs, parental illness, and children suspected of being at risk. Those 3 are given extra weight. The other criteria are children with siblings in the school. There must be approximately equal numbers of boys and girls in the class. Children must come from a cross-section of backgrounds so that no particular social group dominates. A balance must be maintained so that the social and educational demands of the group are not overwhelming. Approximately 20 per cent of children may be taken out of catchment at the date of application. If Members wish so, please contact the department and it will be made available.

2.15.2 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

While I thank the Minister for that lengthy set of criteria, I am afraid it appears to me that it does not seem to be worth the paper it is written on. Would he confirm how on earth parents will know whether they meet the criteria or could meet those criteria, and yet parents still wait week on week on week not knowing whether they have met the criteria or not?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I regret the Deputy's lack of understanding of the procedure. The criteria are there so that parents do understand when they apply the likelihood of their success or not. In fact, it is included in the application form for parents and parents know and visit the schools and are informed by the schools when they apply that there will be a procedure and they will be informed. Of course, if we could offer free nursery places to all the children in the cohort we would not have this problem, would we?

2.15.3 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

Will the Minister advise how these parents are identified?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The main procedure is the parents apply and fill in a form and give details, and if necessary we have further information from schools and interviews with parents. Parents provide us with information so that we can make a decision and, of course, there is an appeals mechanism.

2.15.4 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

May I have a supplementary? The Minister said that parents apply. I would like him to advise the House how parents are aware of the application procedure.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The application procedure is publicised but also it is through schools, we keep a list of births, et cetera, and we try to be clear as possible. Parents obviously do have some responsibility in the matter because it is not compulsory to send your child to school for nursery education and those parents who wish to do so apply to do so.

2.15.5 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Given that one of the objectives of the Strategic Plan was the provision of equitable child care by the end of this year and that objective is not going to be met, how determined is the Minister to introduce equity and to avoid perpetuating an unsustainable and inequitable situation when St. Peter is opened?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have been working with and met with the Jersey Early Years Association on this very issue. Of course, had the States, including the Constable - who is a vociferous talker in this - supported an amendment to the budget we would have had a much more equitable system with some free nursery education to be offered to all parents of 3 to 4 year-olds who wish to take it up. Unfortunately, the States did not do that so I am now investigating alternatives because I am very determined that the inequity should end and also that we should continue to offer this valuable service to as many children as possible.

2.15.6 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Given that extraordinary list of criteria which requires the wisdom of Solomon to judge upon, would the Minister identify which of the criteria would disqualify people from going further in the process?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am very surprised that educationalists like Deputy Le Hérissier finds this criteria list difficult. In fact, I think he is being slightly disingenuous in saying this as he knows quite well how these lists operate. As I read them out, the 3 given most consideration are to do with social and educational needs, families with particular needs and children suspected of being at risk. I am sure every Member of this House would agree that we should give preference to those children. Because there are more spaces than, thank goodness, children in those categories, we then have to have other categories otherwise how would we decide when we do not have enough places? The problem simply is we do not offer enough in the way of free nursery education; as an Island and as a States we should be thoroughly ashamed of ourselves for that.

2.15.7 Deputy C.H. Egré of St. Peter:

As a fairly fundamental requirement, would the Minister advise when the new build of St. Peter school is liable to start?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

As soon as possible and we hope that they will be able to move in and open the school in January 2009 at the very latest.

2.15.8 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Will the Minister confirm that following a recent Complaints Board case that I took against the Education Department that a recommendation has now been made by the Complaints Board that in future the Education Department will be producing an explanatory note to assist parents in filling in the form so they do know what the criteria are. Will he confirm that explanatory note will be issued to all prospective parents as soon as possible?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I can confirm that the Deputy took a case to the Complaints Board which the Complaints Board rejected but made one recommendation which, of course, we have taken up.

Deputy A. Breckon of St. Saviour:

If I may? This morning I was asked to vouch for Deputy Scott Warren who has a medical appointment and she did not think she would be in. Obviously, the medical appointment is work **[Laughter]** so I would just ask the House to note that and if the Health Minister would accept it, I will attribute that to his term of office.

The Bailiff:

The Greffier will note that the Deputy is now happily restored to health and has returned to the Chamber.