

23.02.07

8 Deputy R.S. Kovacs of the Minister for Children and Education regarding the free school meals programme (OQ.21/2023)

Will the Minister provide an update of the progress of the free school meals programme, including details as to which schools will be included and when the programme is intended to start within each school?

Deputy I. Gardiner (The Minister for Children and Education):

I thank the Deputy for her question. The plan is to roll out the school meals programme to all government-provided primary schools. Secondary schools have already a hot meal service. Further to the answer to the Written Questions 218 and 249 from October last year, the project team are currently looking to upscale the model to meet the 4,000 school meals requirement, assessing the current methodology and making recommendations to ensure delivery. Once this has been completed, more details to rollout, including a timeline for all provided primary schools, will be shared. I expect to be able to announce further details of the rollout plan by the end of March 2023 this year.

4.8.1 Deputy R.S. Kovacs:

I have also understood from previous responses to this that it is also due to some schools not having the kitchen facilities ready. Where those kitchen facilities are ready and the programme is ready to start, could that be implemented sooner and, if not, why not?

Deputy I. Gardiner:

I thank the Deputy. I cannot be more frustrated than anyone else because I was part of the Back-Benchers from the previous term who pushed for the school meals. The methodology that was used for 5 schools is currently impossible. I wish I could. I tried all possible ways to increase and to add at least another one school or 2 schools; I tried to do it. So we are definitely now in the process to establish a sustainable way to deliver. When each school would receive and will be enrolled in the programme I will announce by the end of March 2023, as indicated previously.

4.8.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is clear that the project has been held up by inability to scale up production, not necessarily the provisioning schools of facilities. Can I ask, when the contract was issued, was it clear that there would be a problem with scale in production or was that something that has arisen since the contract was given?

Deputy I. Gardiner:

I thank the Deputy. I worked a lot with Deputy Ward in the previous term on this one and you are absolutely right. It is the production and what is clear, the contract was issued before my time, long before my time in the job. First it was 2 schools and after, 3 schools were added. When 3 schools were added and a methodology was developed there was no capacity. There is no contract. I could not extend the contract; I wish I could extend the contract. I asked if I could extend the contract and include more schools and go to different providers. This is the reason that we needed to go back to say: "What is the sustainable way to deliver 4,000 meals?" Because what is important for me is that I will not deliver, and I will not be able to because there is no capacity within the system, so I am creating now this system that will have enough capacity to deliver this.

4.8.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

May I ask, the publicity of this was great that we were going to have free school meals in all of our schools. Parents in really, really needy areas in the centre of St. Helier, for example, looked forward to that very much. Could I ask the Minister, does she feel that perhaps the wrong areas were prioritised first in order to get the maximum impact of the provision of free school meals and where they are most needed, i.e., in the centre of St. Helier where there is a concentration of need?

Deputy I. Gardiner:

I cannot agree more but this is what I found: I did not add any schools; I found 5 schools in the system; that there needs to be a trial how the school meals can be delivered to the schools outside of St. Helier. It is important to emphasise there are other schools not in St. Helier. There are several schools that I visited, and was surprised, in suburban areas that have a very similar need. Personally, for me, the St. Helier schools because of their urgent needs will be prioritised but I need the capacity to deliver these meals. It was not my decision, I found this system, I am in the job 7 months. I got the money in the Government Plan to have £1,600,000 towards this project, and it would be delivered. There is full commitment from myself, from the Chief Minister and from the Council of Ministers to prioritise the delivery.

4.8.4 Deputy R.S. Kovacs:

We have heard that the main problem is the capacity. What exactly is needed for the programme to be able to be delivered in all the schools that it is needed and sort this capacity? While this capacity and methodology is sorted, does the Minister intend to look at offering free meals to secondary schools as well?

Deputy I. Gardiner:

There are several questions and I will try to respond to all of them. It is really important not to underestimate the scale and complexity of the task. If it was simple to cook 4,000 meals a day safely, transport to schools, serve to schools, clean after and make sure that you are prepared for another day; it is the whole logistics from the preparation, cooking, delivery, serving. I would invite the Deputy and other Deputies to join for the lunchtime and see how it works in practice and how much operation is involved. I have done it with several Ministers, including the Chief Minister. They have each gone to different schools to see how it is working. It is a lot of work required to upscale production to the level and the service and the staff of the schools because we do not want to put extra burden on the teachers. We need to make sure that it is all delivered without extra burden on the teaching staff. Secondary schools: definitely we are looking to introduce free secondary school meals for children with Jersey Premium and work is in progress as well for this year.