

2.9 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding interim measures employed to ensure the Children's Service performed adequately:

Would the Minister advise what interim measures, if any, he is employing to ensure the Children's Service is performing adequately in advance of any recommendations that may arise as a result of the present inquiry?

Senator B.E. Shenton (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

My Assistant Minister will act as rapporteur for this question as he has special responsibility for Social Services.

Senator J.L. Perchard (Assistant Minister for Health and Social Services - rapporteur):

Clearly it would be wrong to anticipate and thereby potentially undermine the Andrew Williamson Inquiry which is now underway. It is expected that Mr. Williamson will report before the year-end, possibly - and if necessary - by means of an interim report. The House will be mindful that the previous Minister for Health and Social Services appointed Professor June Thoburn as Chairperson of the Jersey Child Protection Committee. Members may be aware that Professor Thoburn visited the Island last week to attend meetings with senior officers, senior social care professionals, politicians and others. I met Professor Thoburn on two occasions during her visit, once with the Minister for Health and Social Services and then with the Ministers for Home Affairs and Education, Sport and Culture. I remind Members that the three Ministries represent the corporate parent on the Children's Executive, all of whom fully endorse the appointment of Professor Thoburn. The previous Health and Social Services Minister also formally invited the Howard League for Penal Reform to undertake an examination of child and young person custody provision in Jersey and pass judgment on the Grand Prix system which once operated at Greenfields. The details of their visit have yet to be finalised, however, I can assure Members that all of us at Health and Social Services will co-operate fully with the representatives from the Howard League. Also, the Minister has appointed me as his Assistant Minister with special responsibility for Social Services which includes the important element of the social care and welfare of our vulnerable children. Since my appointment, I have met senior officers and senior social care professionals on a number of occasions. Having received answers to very clear questions, I am satisfied that all vulnerable children requiring a service from the States of Jersey are being supported appropriately. Therefore, in the interim period from my time of being appointed until after the publication of the Williamson Inquiry, I assure Members that the service will be robustly managed with all staff being supported and encouraged through what is a difficult, sensitive and challenging time.

2.9.1 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

I thank the Assistant Minister for his answers, Sir, but I was slightly concerned when he told us that all vulnerable children are being supported appropriately, Sir. Not according to what I read in the *Evening Post* and certainly not according to messages I have had from very concerned parents. Frankly, some of the decisions which the service is coming up with are outrageous, Sir. Does the Assistant Minister not agree that we need an immediate solution to rectify the situation before a tragedy occurs, Sir, and in order to assist Members, would he consider issuing us with a breakdown of the structure of the Children's Service and how it interacts with other bodies such as the States of Jersey Police because I am becoming concerned about the situation. He did tell us that Mr. Williamson's report might be with us by the year-end. Would he not agree that that may be so, but then it has to be analysed and actions drawn-up? Clearly we will not have any action much before Easter, Sir. Would the Assistant Minister not agree with that?

Senator J.L. Perchard:

The timescale on action will depend on the recommendations in the report. I do not accept, Sir, that there is a crisis with regards to child welfare. There are issues that will need to be dealt with. There is a new Ministerial team in place and we are working very closely with the professionals that we have engaged at the moment. It would be unreasonable to take any dramatic actions to the contrary

before Mr. Williamson has reported, and in fact, the Howard League have reported, because I place a lot of value on their report as well.

2.9.2 Deputy J.J. Huet of St. Helier:

I have to say right away this happened last week. Is the Assistant Minister aware that if anybody, say myself or different places or people, would have any concerns about young children living with drug taking people - adults - when reported to the Child Care because of these concerns... I am sorry, I cannot make it very... the only advice that they will give is that you must report it to the police, and if the police are convinced that there is a case, the police then will report it to Child Care and they then might take it up. My worry is, Sir, that I have had an official complaint in with the police for the last three months about 'Prison, me? No way' expenses. Nothing has been done in 3 months and goodness knows what could happen to a child if you cannot present the evidence because I could present the evidence with one but not with the other.

The Bailiff:

You must come to the question, Deputy, please.

Deputy J.J. Huet:

Yes, well, I am just this does not agree, sir, with what he is saying here in the Chamber, that these children are covered. They are not covered and I would like his assurance that he will do something about it.

Senator J.L. Perchard:

On any specific case that the Deputy is concerned about, I would be delighted to meet with her and the officers at Social Services to discuss in detail and I will do that immediately. With regards to the decision as to whether a child should be taken from a parent, it is a huge decision and it is a decision that perplexes officers all the time. I know that because they have explained the complexities of those type of decisions to me. The fact is there is the facility and ability to remove a child from a parent. It is done as a last resort, of course, and it is a decision made by professionals and not politicians.

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

Will the Assistant Minister advise the House whether it is still the case that children who are in care at Heathfield Children's Home are still absconding from the premises during the evening thereby tying-up valuable police resources in trying to locate them?

Senator J.L. Perchard:

Regrettably I am unable to answer that specifically. I will undertake to answer that at a later date for the Deputy, Sir.

2.9.4 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

Does the Assistant Minister agree that any evidence should be given to Mr. Williamson rather than giving any credence in public to anecdotal and potentially unreliable evidence?

Senator J.L. Perchard:

Yes, I do agree but I do also agree that there is serious concern over the provision of childcare and welfare on the Island and that it is the Deputy's right to raise these issues in a public forum, and the service will be robust enough in time to be able to hold its head high and offer a service that we are proud of. It is my intention to be part of that regeneration.

Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

Can I make it clear, I was not referring to one Member in this House's comments. I mean generally.

Senator J.L. Perchard:

I completely agree. The appropriate forum is Mr. Williamson or the Howard League.

2.9.5 Deputy J.B. Fox:

Appreciating the Assistant Minister is new to post, have you had a chance yet to visit the children's homes like Heathfield and Greenfields, please? Thank you.

Senator J.L. Perchard:

I am sorry, Sir, I missed the first part of that question.

The Bailiff:

Have you had the opportunity to visit the children's homes?

Senator J.L. Perchard:

I have met with the professionals that operate most of the children's homes. I have not been on site. I felt that my time has been best spent thus far not looking around facilities but looking at policy.

2.9.6 Senator S. Syvret:

Further to the question raised by Deputy Huet, I can confirm that there are many examples of children left with drug taking parents...

The Bailiff:

Senator, you must ask questions; not give answers.

Senator S. Syvret:

I am going to ask a question. No, it is quite fascinating if you allow other people to ramble on at great length but you interject against me immediately. Yet more naked bias. Would the Assistant Minister agree that there are, in fact, many examples of children being left with junkie parents - sometimes very severe and heavy users - and there is one case in particular which he can confirm via the department where a 15 year-old daughter also became addicted through being left with these parents? Would he also agree that there is grotesque lack of consistency in cases? Would he agree to undertake a detailed qualifications audit of all of the people working in this field because many of the people who are working in the field - and this is not a criticism of them - are not adequately trained, have not been adequately trained and are not adequately qualified for the kind of work they are being asked to do?

Senator J.L. Perchard:

Taking the last point first which is the very essence of the question as far as I am concerned, I will remind the Senator that the fourth term of reference for Mr. Williamson is to: "Investigate and report upon the standards, experience and qualifications of staff at all levels within all relevant departments." Again, I want to advise the House that the officers tell me it is a huge dilemma as to whether to remove children from parents and at what stage do they intervene. It is not because they do not want to; it is a professional decision they make. What we have here are politicians advising me that our professionals are not making the right decisions. I will go back to my team and Social Services and challenge them on this but at the end of the day, Sir, we engage professionals and we must support them. At this stage, I and my Minister are not prepared to do anything rash while we are waiting for Williamson and the Howard League to report.

2.9.7 Deputy J.J. Huet:

Is the Assistant Minister not aware that these professionals will not even listen? A child can die within three months.

Senator J.L. Perchard:

That is not the case. These professionals do listen and I will arrange a meeting in the next 24 hours with the Deputy - if she is available - at Social Services where we will air this matter fully with our officers.

The Bailiff:

I am afraid I cannot allow a debate to develop so I will ask one final supplementary from Deputy Baudains.

2.9.8 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

I am becoming slightly concerned the Assistant Minister keeps telling us that he is taking professional advice. Could he assure us, Sir, that that advice is not from the organisation currently under examination because if it is, surely it is hardly likely to be objective?

Senator J.L. Perchard:

I can assure the Deputy that the advice I am taking is from our professionals that we engage and I am proud to take that advice. As I will repeat, that the whole process is under investigation; I have been in the job 2 and a half weeks. I am spending every waking hour on this issue and I intend - and it will not, Sir, take me 8 years - to deliver a service that we are proud of.