

2018.01.30

5 Deputy J.M. Maçon of the Minister for Education regarding the progress made in bringing forward proposals relating to the Nursery Education Fund: [OQ.15/2018]

Will the Minister update the Assembly on the progress made in bringing forward proposals relating to the Nursery Education Fund?

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

I am planning to bring a report and proposition to this House, as I mentioned during the sitting on 27th November. As Members will be aware, I previously stated that I do not wish to proceed with the nursery means testing. This was for a number of reasons, including a recommendation from the Early Years Childhood Partnership, which felt this was a retrograde step for our youngest children. The report and proposition will seek the Assembly's support for a rescindment of the decision on means testing. I will just read out the relevant part from the report, just in case Members have not read it. The report says: "Retracting the current proposals to means test families for access to the 20 free hours in the private and public sector nurseries, to revisit the Nursery Education Fund Partnership Agreement and consultation with parents to assess demand to inform future policy and provision." So that is what we are doing.

4.5.1 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

The Minister could have added, before the report or the department, the Scrutiny Panel made the exact same recommendation and would have saved the Island quite a bit of money. Can I therefore ask the Minister, he has identified that in his report - in the report that has been produced - that several other recommendations were made; in the proposition that the Minister will be bringing forward, will it just be a rescindment debate or will there be additional proposals brought forward arising from that report in his proposition?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, we will be looking at all of the proposals brought in that report. I cannot say at this moment in time what will be in that projet that we bring to the Assembly, but certainly the main agenda will be to rescind the means testing for the nursery, but everything else will be taken into consideration. That was the purpose of us creating the report in the first place.

4.5.2 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

When the Minister brings forward these proposals, will there be a cohesive look at the whole of a child's early years and will the Minister be working with the Minister for Social Security in conjunction with her proposals for family-friendly legislation to ensure that there is provision for a child from birth, either parental leave to be cared for by the parent, or some kind of subsidised childcare to assist parents in their return to work and to ensure that the child has the best start in life?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, those discussions will continue. There is a great deal of joined-up thinking with regard to early years. We have Deputy Moore looking at 1,001 Days; we have the Minister for Social Security, Deputy Pinel, having discussions with myself in the context that the Deputy has just suggested. There is a holistic overview. What widened the parameters for me was the report from the doctor who said we need to go further down - pre-conception - and that solidified my view over some of the stuff I had been doing within Education to amplify our desire to make sure that we look after children as now, as I have stated, from pre-conception right the way through their education post

the point they leave our schools and go on to higher education. So there is a collective point of view; we do have those discussions and we will continue having those discussions.

4.5.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Supplementary please. Can the Minister just clarify: will these plans include any subsidised childcare in the years between the parental leave and the currently provided Nursery Education Fund when the child turns 3, so around the ages 1 and 2?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think it was a consideration, it has been given consideration, I know it is part of the discussions. I do not know that we have confirmed any of that sort of thing. I think the problem we have at the moment is we recognise that there are budgetary pressures on this and taking away the means testing that we still have to work within the parameters of the budget and we do that in deep discussions with Treasury. Also we are now in a position of having to fund the 1 per cent pay rise for our staff and we have to play our role in making sure that the States budget is balanced. But to give the Deputy some reassurance, all of these considerations are being discussed because again that was why we produced the report in the first place.

4.5.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister throw his full weight behind all the recommendations contained in the Family Friendly report recently published and not cherry-pick where he sees fit or because of costs?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think all Ministers would want to, in terms of looking at reports that they receive independently in the way that we have, want to put their weight behind some of the considerations. Again, it was that very reason that we asked the doctor to contemplate what she has done. Those propositions and those ideas are discussed, we have discussed them with the doctor, but again it is in consideration of everything else that we have to deal with in our Education Strategy. It also has an impact on our budget matters, so the Deputy is right; I think the doctor has come up with some very sensible suggestions and I will be pushing forward on most of the fronts as far as I am aware.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the public and this Assembly in particular look forward ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am sorry, Deputy, we have just gone inquorate, so could I invite Members to return please to seats so that we will become quorate again? Very well, we are now quorate, please do carry on.

4.5.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The question was: can the public and this Assembly in particular expect the Minister to throw his full weight? The answer he gave was very circulatory and I want to hear commitment from this Minister to the entire plan and no cherry-picking, is that his position?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think the Deputy would accept to some extent that this Minister has particularly set out right at the beginning of his term of office to set out the principles that we were working on and one of those principles was working closely with families and that is the reason we have family workers now working more closely with our schools, working with Social Security. All the various aspects that we have discussed in the past to do with early years has focused our attention on a greater need for

addressing this problem. The more we address this problem, I think it is more apparent to everybody, and I will just read a small piece from the report, which underlines our thoughts here: "The main message from the report is an extremely strong one, is that all the evidence shows early years education is vitally important. The E.Y.C.P. (Early Years Childhood Partnership) wants us to recognise this as a Government and to put more effort into supporting the early years. Their report shows that children who have good-quality early education start school 3 months ahead in their literacy and language skills, the benefits carry on throughout a child's life. They are 20 per cent more likely to get 5 good G.C.S.E.s (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and they earn more as adults. This is hugely significant for our community and for our economy." I would also further add, for the well-being of our children. So this Minister has been purely focused on making sure that those things happen within our community and within this Education Strategy.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister again has failed to even address the question; he has just talked around it.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, that was a supplemental, I will just see if anyone else wants to ask. No? I will take it again then, please do.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

In simple terms, full support, yes or no? Simple as that.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think the Deputy is always looking for simple answers to simple questions and of course it is far more complex than he would assume. We are attempting to, on all fronts, address the situations that arise within the early years of our children on this Island and from various positions, whether it is the Minister for Social Security or whether it is the Minister for Home Affairs, all of us are focused on making sure that the well-being of our children and the education of our children is paramount. The reason for bringing this report in the first place was to make it public, hence the reason it sits within our government website. So I am looking at that report, I am not cherry-picking, I am taking the detail of it and I am making sure it is written into our policy as we move forward.

4.5.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Is there anything in the report that the Minister disagrees with?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Fundamentally no. I think there are some elements of it that we would have to restructure in terms of what we do and give reconsideration and the problem exists around the budgetary matters that were described in an earlier question. So once we can strip away the Treasury content of what we have to do and work within our own parameters, the whole report for me talks about the well-being and the structure in which we put our early years together. I think that is important and it gets my support.

4.5.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Supplementary please. Does the Minister agree then that in the next term - the next political term - we need to divert more funding to education so that we can fund the things in this report, which the Minister clearly agrees with?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I cannot obviously say what will happen in the next term of office for whichever Minister stands for Education, but I think it is clear from all of these reports that we have. I think there is a quantum shift now in terms of right across our government in terms of how we view the future of the childhood of this Island. It has come through, not just the sort of stuff that we have been producing with the Early Years Childhood Partnership, but also with the Care Abuse Inquiry, it has given the focus, and the Deputy herself has put some focus on that in requesting that every time we make a decision within the Council of Ministers we put the child at the forefront of that, we do it within Education; I am sure the other Ministers around me do it when they are making the same decisions, so hopefully in the future term there will be more money given to early years, but I think it is already beginning to produce that in effect.

4.5.8 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

The rationale for bringing the proposal in the first place was that the Nursery Education Fund would not be able to accommodate any new entrants into the use of the fund. Can the Minister update the Assembly whether this is still the case and, if it is, does the Minister have the budget from the Minister for Treasury and Resources in order to support further additions into the Nursery Education Fund?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

If I just outline, the discussions about fee levels and conditions of the Nursery Education Fund will take place in February and a new contract will be set up at the beginning of March, this is the *modus operandi* in which we deal with nursery education funding. Private nurseries will have until the end of the month to sign and return if they want to take part in the scheme and parents will be made aware of that. But it does leave us, without no doubt, and I have just articulated this before, with a budget pressure and that is what are our considerations at the moment. So it is expected that we will have to absorb some of the savings from other areas of the service and that is for me as a Minister extremely difficult, but we are working on it and we will produce an equitable result.