

3 Questions to Ministers without notice

3.1 Questions to The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings all the questions to an end and so we now move to questions to Ministers without notice and the first period involves questions to the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture: Deputy Pitman.

3.1.1 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

The Minister has advised Members of the House that approximately a quarter of a million pounds of extra funding has been put into the Youth Service over the last 3 years. Despite this, serious health and safety concerns over professional youth workers having to regularly open youth facilities that are acutely understaffed have been raised in a number of recent reports, the latest being commissioned by ESC itself. Would the Minister clarify how much of this additional funding was spent on the provision of funding for ground workers and how much has been spent on new management posts?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I cannot give the exact figures because I have not got them in front of me because that is a detailed question, but I am quite happy to get them for the Deputy. Yes, there is a concern about opening of premises and so on. We run a youth service that is operated by professional workers but very reliant on other part-time paid workers and also voluntary workers. Unfortunately on occasions that puts us into situations where not the full complement of people may be at a youth club when required and decisions have to be made by the paid workers whether to open, how to open, et cetera. The extra money we have been putting into the Youth Service is very much on the lines of a 3-year strategy plan that we put before the States nearly 3 years ago now, and some of it has been used in partnership with the Parishes to enhance the youth work in the Parishes. The idea that it has been put on 'management' is difficult to see what is meant by management because I regard all the youth workers as being youth workers involved in youth work. We have a youth officer, who could be described as a manager, we have area youth workers and we have youth workers at different situations. I know Deputy Pitman knows a lot about the subject and I welcome her interest in it.

3.1.2 Senator B.E. Shenton:

Does the Minister agree with the concept of charging GST on nursery fees, school fees and childcare?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I await with interest what is going to be the discussions with the Treasury and the Scrutiny Panel on this, but I voted in favour of GST without exemptions for the reason that I believe that if GST with exemptions come in (1) it will be a higher rate and (2) it will make it much easier for successive States in government to increase the rate of GST. I believe that a universal low rate of GST is the best way forward for the Island to meet the black hole in its finances that it faces.

3.1.3 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Is the Minister concerned that the total number of personnel employed in the public sector workforce continues to grow year on year? If indeed he is, will he be taking action within his department to halt - and if possible reverse - this growth, or does he believe his department to be an exceptional case?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I do have an exceptional department, Sir. I have also been involved in bodies that look after the States workforce and the growth in the States workforce there has been in recent years has been primarily in education and health and in frontline staff. We have had to increase a number of teachers to maintain class sizes as we have had more pupils coming through the schools and I know that health have had to increase their number of staff as they are faced with more people presenting themselves for treatment at the hospital. But I certainly totally agree that there should be no staff involved in the public service that are not required to deliver that public service. When my department merged, the 2 Departments of Education, Sport, Leisure and Recreation merged to become the Education, Sport and Culture Department, we made a number of staff savings at managerial level and below and they have not been taken on since. I have no intention of taking on any more managerial staff, but I think on many occasions it is vital that we have frontline staff to deal with the needs that are presented to us.

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

I understand that consideration has been given to the introduction of student loans for those who choose to pursue a university education. Following the introduction of such loans in the UK, many students, and indeed many graduates, are now facing debt and bankruptcy. Will the Minister assure the House that if such loans are introduced here, they will not act as a deterrent to Jersey students contemplating a university education?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, a very timely subject. We at present do not have an official student loan system, but I can assure the Deputy, as I have had 2 sons who have gone through university, that many students do take out loans on their own account to top-up whatever funding they have from elsewhere. We are faced with a difficulty because the UK Government has decided to allow universities to charge top-up fees. These are fees that will be increased this year and at the moment the way we support students is a combination through the States and the parents, and in determining the size of the contribution to be made by each part, in education with 2 long-standing principles. One is that anyone who can benefit from a higher education should be able to participate regardless of their financial background; and that choice, of course, should be governed by aptitude not cost. These are principles we hold very dearly. We have a system of student grants based on an assessment of family income measured against the sliding scale. So, at present a family earning less than £26,750 tax threshold makes no contribution. A family earning £70,000 or more contributes almost 100 per cent of what would be the normal fee for a classroom-based university course. So, we have been raising costs generally in line with UK inflation to our students, but the introduction...

The Deputy Bailiff:

I appreciate this is a complex subject, Minister, but as briefly as possible.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I will try, Sir, but it is a complicated subject and I was just trying to give the background. But we are faced this year with the top-up fees which will cost another £1.8 million to the number of students who are going. So, we are looking at a number of options of how we can look at this new world, because it is expected that from 2010 onwards, universities will be allowed to fix their own top-up fees and some universities are already talking about an extra £15,000 as a top-up fee. So, we are looking at how this extra cost can be met, bearing in mind the principles we had and one of the issues we are looking at - and we have been having discussions with the student loans company in the UK - is the possibility of making student loans available for those students who wish to take them out because the loans could be made available at advantageous rates and payback periods, but it will be up to students and parents, if we do introduce a system

of student loans, whether they decide that is right for them. At present many students already take out loans and, of course, the student is the ultimate beneficiary of becoming a graduate.

3.1.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister outline for Members what progress has been made towards guaranteeing a minimum of 10 per cent non-contact, that is PPA (Planning, Preparation and Assessment), time for teachers and, in particular, to guaranteeing the provision of adequate cover for absence in all of our schools?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, Sir, this is an issue that has come about as changes in the UK that have guaranteed teachers in the UK 10 per cent non-contact time and we are seeking to match that. Of course, teachers in Jersey many years ago - when both Deputy Southern and I were teachers, I believe - made a decision to break with the UK conditions and scales and accepted pay increases as a result of that, so we are not bound by UK conditions. But we realise the value of non-contact time and adequate cover and we are looking at ways in which we can ensure that all teachers in our schools have adequate non-contact time and that there is adequate cover. It is a difficult issue to be dealing with and I am expecting a report to be presented to me shortly outlining some of the options of dealing with this.

3.1.6 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Will the Minister give an update on the progress being made to establish the Council for Culture?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, Sir, and if the Deputy goes to the website www.gov.je, I would hope my ministerial decision would have been posted on there by now because it has been passed down to the Greffier setting out the way in which we intend to do this. My Assistant Minister, Deputy Labey, has got the responsibility for culture and she is pursuing the setting up of the Council for Culture and it is proposed to have 2 public meetings and to invite submissions on views on how that Council of Culture should be made up. So, we are progressing with this and there is a ministerial decision that has been posted with the Greffier.

3.1.7 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Could I ask supplementary to that, have we actually got some dates bearing in mind the policy was agreed some months ago and we are now into almost February?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We are still in January, Deputy, and we have been a ministerial government for about 6 weeks. There have been a number of issues involved and, no, we have not got dates yet, but we are actively seeking dates. In fact, the Deputy of Grouville and I were talking about it this morning and we are trying to seek dates - possibly a lunchtime and an evening session - so that we can get people's views and also open up for other ways of consultation.

3.1.8 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Two slightly separate questions, if I may. The Minister said that some positions in the Youth Service were neither management nor field positions, they were in fact both. In an answer to me earlier he said that the area supervisors were not necessarily management because they played field positions. Would he identify what jobs they do as field officers, as this was the insertion of yet another management level into the Service? Secondly, Sir, how does his aim of opportunities for all in higher education, how is that manifested in the case of the...

The Deputy Bailiff:

The questions have to cover one subject, Deputy. PPC (Privileges and Procedures Committee) of which you were President, so laid down I think in the Standing Orders.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Thank you for reminding the previous president of PPC the details of the questions. Yes, the area workers have some management duties and they also have direct duties in training and in involving themselves in work that is going on in the area that they cover.

3.1.9 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Could we have that more precisely, Sir, that sounds awfully vague.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

If the Deputy wants details of operational issues, I will get them for him and I suggest he, either through me or directly, contacts the Chief Youth Officer to find out.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Is there any Member who has not yet asked a question?

3.1.10 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I know that motor sport is not everyone's idea of sport, but I wonder if the Minister would comment on the fact that the old motorcar club who run the Jersey Festival of Motoring has received letters not only from Education, Sport and Culture cutting their grant in half but also from the Economic Development Committee. Is this the example of joined-up government that we are going to see of 2 departments agreeing to a pincer movement on important events for local sport and, indeed, for local tourism?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

As the Constable well knows and constantly reminds us in this House, we have to be careful with the public's money and we must not overspend and we must do it. We have a number of calls on the grants we give out and, unfortunately, this is an instance where because of the other calls on the limited funds we have that we have had to make a cut in grant.

3.1.11 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I understand that 90 per cent of local students choose to continue their education after the age of 16. Will the Minister tell the House what educational help, if any, is available to those in the 10 per cent who leave school with no job to go to and with few or none of the formally recognised academic qualifications generally required by employers? If there is additional help available, how is contact made with those who are eligible?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, the statutory age of education is up to 16. We cannot and do not seek to force children to stay on beyond that age. We are very pleased that some 90 per cent do, Sir. Of the 10 per cent that leave of a cohort, that is around 100, many do leave to enter employment and then return to Highlands College on day release and attend other courses at Highlands College and continue with their education in that way. Those that do not have employment and leave education, they can attend Highlands College. They have to approach us - it is compulsory - and we will try to help them. We offer many, many courses. We also have got life-long learning courses with an emphasis very much on ensuring that everyone has a minimum standard in what is needed in maths and reading and writing and we try to reach people who are having difficulties in this way. But of the 10 per cent, as I said who do leave at 16, the majority enter work and actually come back to Highlands under different guises on day release courses and other courses.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am afraid that means the time has expired,