

2.5 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the allocation of free nursery places:

Would the Minister confirm that his department will not be allocating any further free nursery places until the outcome of the Scrutiny Panel review into the matter has been published?

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

I am afraid the answer is no, I will not be delaying the allocation of further nursery places until after the Scrutiny Panel's report is published. Parents expect to be informed of nursery placements within the next few days and it would be unreasonable to change the timetable at this late stage as such a delay would cause huge inconvenience to parents in general, both to those who are to be offered places and those who will be unsuccessful. I had hoped the Scrutiny Panel's report would have been published before the allocation procedure but my understanding is that the publication is still some 3 or 4 weeks away. I will of course give careful consideration to the report of the Scrutiny Panel when it is published and will respond to any recommendations that the panel may wish to make. However, any changes to the allocation process or to the criteria for allocation could not be introduced with immediate effect but will need to be considered for introduction next year.

2.5.1 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Would the Minister confirm that he has failed to meet the target set by the Council of Ministers in the Strategic Plan, that is that equitable nursery funding proposals will be brought forward by the end of last year?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I brought forward proposals; unfortunately the States did not approve them.

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

Is the Minister aware that free nursery places are being given to new (j) category residents that are coming to Jersey and living in the country after having bought but we are unable to give free places to our children in St. Helier because there is not enough of them?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have explained to the House before the criteria for allocation of nursery places. I have it in front of me again. I can read it out again. It is carefully done in the best interests of the educational provision, and I do not believe that we should discriminate against any children in the allocation of places.

2.5.3 Deputy J.J. Huet:

Is the Minister saying that people that have paid nothing whatsoever into this Island, their children can have free places against people that are paying on a regular basis and have been paying on a regular basis for many years because they happen to live in St. Helier or maybe St. Saviour as well - I am not sure about St. Saviour, I can only talk of St. Helier?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The first criteria on the allocation of nursery places is children with social and education needs, and we offer places to all children that we identify like that. Sometimes they are not taken up if we cannot offer the place in the right area. Also other criteria, children with families with particular needs, e.g. very low income families, siblings with special needs, parental illness, children suspected of being at risk and so on. As I said before, and I repeat, I do not believe we should discriminate against any children and we should apply those criteria fairly to all children who we are legally obliged to educate in the Island.

2.5.4 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

In the furore leading up to the Minister's amendment to the Business Plan, one of the things that came forward most strongly was the fact that people felt treatment should be equitable. Now, they were quite happy to have charges in the States system as well as in the private system provided the treatment was equitable, with perhaps means testing for those who need it. Has the Minister not considered this again?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, the Minister has considered it again. The phrase such as "they will be", I am not sure if there was a referendum held on it to be able to give this blanket assurance. In fact I had considerable representation saying from members of the public that it should be free for all, not charges for all, free for all, as of course is the trend in most democratic Western countries, including the U.K. who have got an offer and intend to increase their free nursery places in the future. So I am looking at it again. I am in the process of setting up a working group with the Early Years' Association. We are planning to further look to see how we can square the circle by ensuring that all our young people have the best possible opportunity for a start in life, and I urge Members to take this issue very seriously and support the extension of nursery education.

2.5.5 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Would the Minister clarify how his proposal at the end of last year was equitable given that what he was offering was 20 hours free nursery places which does not seem equitable to me when people under his system enjoy 30 hours free nursery places?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I know the Constable is trying to justify why he voted against the proposal I put forward, but certainly no hours free against 30 hours free is a lot more inequitable than 20 hours free against 30 hours free, and I was trying to move to a situation of complete equity in stages.