

5. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture

5.1 The Deputy of Grouville:

Jersey's most celebrated poet since Wace and certainly our most published currently lives on the breadline. He is in urgent desperate need, to coin a phrase, of help from his home island. Would the Minister investigate how he can be helped, sponsored or given some acclaim in recognition from his native home?

Deputy J.G. Reed of St. Ouen (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

It distresses me to hear that any individual is suffering financial difficulties at this time and I would ask that the Deputy of Grouville speaks to me directly afterwards so that myself and perhaps other Ministers that provide financial support can help this particular individual.

5.2 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Could the Minister give us his views on the current opening times of the Jersey Archive given that it is supposed to provide access to information and to the many documents which have been placed there by members of the public and public authorities? In case he does not know, the Jersey Archive is only open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. People using it are required to leave the building during the lunch hour. It is open, I believe, one evening a month until 7.00 p.m. Does he believe these times are adequate and would he look sympathetically on any request to find the additional resources required to provide a greater degree of opening for our major archive?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all, I am aware of the Archive opening times, and I equally am aware that in, I believe, the Constable's strategy he flagged this up as an issue. If we are to provide archive facilities that need certain rules and regulations, one of the issues is that the opening times need to be extended. However, it has equally been drawn to my attention that in order to do this the Archive needs additional funds and currently we are looking at how or if indeed we are able to fund the additional opening.

5.3 Senator B.E. Shenton:

The Education Department currently has a policy of means testing university funding but nursery care is not means tested. Will the Minister be looking at bringing in a more consistent policy throughout education?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Even in the recent months, I am well aware of the concerns that parents and others have raised regarding university fees and the cost of educating our children at higher education. It is an area that I am paying particular attention to. I have recently just received a copy of the last major consultation that took place with the general public in this matter and I am going to be working in conjunction, not only with my department, but with Guernsey and the Isle of Man to see whether or not some of the issues that this Island faces cannot be addressed.

5.4 The Deputy of St. Martin:

During the last oral question time the Minister gave an undertaking to provide Members with the department's suspension policy and I thank the Minister for circulating on it. On reading the policy, would the Minister not agree that the policy is not in what I would call parent or even school user-friendly mode, and it would be beneficial if both parents and schools were issued with a much more user-friendly policy? If, indeed, the parents and schools knew exactly what their rights and responsibilities were at the outset of a suspension, policy requirements could be adhered to. If the Minister agrees will he take steps to ensure that such a user-friendly policy is drafted without any further delay?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would like to draw the Deputy of St. Martin's attention to the answer to a written question that was provided today based on a question raised by the Constable of St. Lawrence and, indeed, part D confirms that, as I have already stated, that this year I will review the application of the suspension policy and the guidance provided to schools. This is quite clearly an area that the Deputy has had his attention drawn to and I, likewise, would like to see greater clarity in this area.

5.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister inform Members what the state of the current salary negotiations is with representatives of Teachers' Unions and will he assure Members that he will work through the States Employment Board to progress these negotiations to prevent further erosion of salaries?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am aware that presently the salary negotiations are still ongoing with the Teachers' Union. I am unclear of the States position regarding the increase in pay awards that the States have chosen to follow. I, for my part and the department's, will continue as always to discuss with the Teachers' Union how best we can deal with this.

5.5.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is this not the correct word to use that the pay negotiations are stalled rather than ongoing?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not believe that is the case.

5.6 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Following on from that, will the Minister undertake to review the measures by which the performance of teachers are evaluated which could well lead to the possibility of having differential salaries for better teachers and improving the performance in our schools?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I find that quite a strange question because I firmly believe that the performance in our schools is very good. We have demonstrated that year on year. Equally I am also aware that the teachers themselves are always seeking to improve the methods and the curriculum and all the other areas that go to support our young people, and in many respects the improvements are driven by the teachers themselves. I would suggest that the department will continue in its own inimitable manner as it has done in the past.

5.7 Senator S. Syvret:

The Minister is Minister for Education, Sport and Culture. Quite rightly, we are very proud of our sporting success and the amount of sporting activity engaged in by Islanders. Again, quite rightly, a very substantial amount of money gets spent year on year on sporting facilities and supporting sports people. Will the Minister not therefore undertake to, perhaps in co-operation with the Deputy of Grouville, look urgently at the possibility, using the culture part of his portfolio, to examine the possibility of establishing some kind of stipend or honorarium for the poet referred to by the Deputy, a man who has won the Somerset Maugham Award, who is clearly the greatest indigenous writer Jersey has produced since Wace? It really is quite preposterous and disdain, I think, that we are not supporting him in some way.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would love to comment further, but indeed I do not and have not been made aware of this particular issue. I underline the commitment that I gave earlier to the Deputy of Grouville to deal with this matter. Thank you.

The Deputy of Grouville:

Could I just say the department has been aware of this.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have not been notified and it is unfortunate the Deputy of Grouville could not email me or copy me into that information.

5.8 The Connétable of St. Clement:

I heard on the radio this morning that despite the weather our schools were to be open today. A few moments later I heard on the same radio that school buses were to be cancelled. Could the Minister comment on this apparent lack of co-ordination?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would like to show you that the co-ordination between both the Met Office, the Education Department, indeed Transport and Technical Services, and Connex has been extremely good; however, firstly, I would obviously like to apologise for any inconvenience caused to individuals faced with the weather conditions we saw this morning. The department has kept in regular contact. Indeed, we did have information early on because we wanted to make parents aware, and children, of whether the schools would be open or not, that the buses were running. Consequently, it was noticed when the buses started going out that indeed this was not the case. Also, that there were areas on the Island that were far worse than others. Again, I just apologise to the inconvenience caused, but it is obviously our department's responsibility to ensure that children get educated where possible. Thank you.

5.9 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

In the recent report the Comptroller and Auditor General recommended that the Youth Service budget could be reduced by £500,000. Does the Minister support this conclusion and will he give assurances that he has no intention to move youth provision into school premises as an excuse to then sell off a number of youth centres, saving the department money?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Two parts to the question: first of all, I do appreciate that the Comptroller and Auditor General did raise the fact that he suggested that there could be a reduction in expenditure within the Youth Service; however times have moved on. I would point the Deputy and others to the recent Williamson Implementation Plan, which flags-up the issue that our Youth Service should play a major part in working with other agencies to support young people. As such, I will be working with the Minister for Health and Social Services and others to ensure that the proper provision for our young people, especially those perhaps that we class as hard to reach, is provided.

5.10 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

Many of our university students have to take out student loans to enable them to manage financially on the mainland and I believe it is a Jersey-specific issue that we have to export them, as it were. I am concerned, to go back to earlier questions regarding the excess baggage issues, and I ask whether the Minister will undertake to have direct discussions with the Assistant Minister, whose responsibility is the airport, to explore the possibility of reducing excess baggage charges for our students as we have no university provision on the Island. Thank you.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am well aware of the difficulties faced by students coming to and fro. I am more than happy to discuss with the Assistant Minister, and indeed the Minister, for the Economic Development Department to see whether or not we could introduce or discuss with carriers the opportunities to provide a discount or a provision for our students. Thank you.

5.11 Senator P.F. Routier:

Does the Minister share the view that Liberation Day is an important cultural day? Will he do everything he possibly can to enhance our national day?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Absolutely. One of my aims, I hope, over the next 3 years is to increase - for want of a better word - pride in who we are and a greater understanding in how we arrived here. Part of that obviously includes Liberation Day and understanding the occupation and the effects that that had on this Island and the wider issues with obviously the concentration camps and all the suffering that was had, if you like, at that particular time. Indeed, Liberation Day, as far as I am concerned, is a very important day. I would like to see, and I think the Deputy of Grouville had a view, that we should look at extending that particular day to encompass perhaps a Jersey week. Any ideas obviously will be very welcome. Any individuals that would like to promote a greater understanding of Jersey people and who we are please contact me.

5.12 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Apropos the figures issued by the Minister this morning, would the Minister explain why there has been a fairly rapid rise in suspensions, and would he confirm that suspensions are on average the same across all the schools, or are there any major disparities in terms of how certain schools deal with suspension?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do believe that the table that has been provided needs to be interpreted properly and that although it could be argued that the number of suspensions has increased over a 3-year period, you have to understand that we are talking about in total over 3,000 children involved. Suspensions are a temporary measure designed to help both the school, the pupil, the parents, to step back, consider the issue and deal with it. As such, I believe that we are doing and utilising suspensions in a proper manner. Are there differences between schools? I do not believe that there are large differences; however, as I said before, I am undertaking a review of how this policy is applied to ensure that where possible we have an equitable system across all schools. Thank you.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Just to confirm, can the Minister therefore confirm that as far as he is aware suspensions are on average the same *pro rata* in all the secondary schools?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

As far as I am aware, within certain parameters, suspensions are of a similar amount, thank you.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

What are those parameters?

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am sorry, time has now expired for questions to the Minister. We come then to questions for the Minister for Health and Social Services.