

3.5 Deputy T.A. Vallois of St. John of the Minister for Education regarding nursery education funding: [9738]

Following approval of the amendment to the Medium Term Financial Plan Addition regarding nursery education funding, will the Minister advise what the position with nursery education funding will be from next year and what effect changes introduced under the M.T.F.P. (Medium Term Financial Plan) have had on the early years partnership agreement?

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

Members will have seen the news release that we put out just yesterday saying that we are intending to postpone, so just to give some background to that. Since the M.T.F.P. debate, discussions have been taking place in the department and with members of the early years' community including owners of private nurseries. The conclusion has been made that more time is needed before implementing means testing, so it has been delayed until September 2018. This means that the system will remain the same for the next academic year. It was important that we put this out, rather like we did with the original discussions in the nursery education funding because we wanted to make parents fully aware of the situation as early as possible. Registration begins in January, so we decided to put it out just yesterday. Minor amendments have been made to the partnership agreement following suggestions from nursery owners. The changes included removal of out-of-date terminology but overall the agreement remains largely the same. Means testing has no real impact on the content of the contract, which exists to set up the terms under which nurseries receive the money from the Education Department.

3.5.1 The Deputy of St. John:

Would the Minister be able to advise then what is happening with regards to the funding within his department if it is staying the same for the next academic year? How he is funding that money if it is no longer being means tested.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Sorry, I just missed the last part.

The Deputy of St. John:

If means testing is not going ahead for the next academic year, how is the department funding that? Where is that money coming from?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

We have had discussions with the Treasury. Obviously the money will have to come from somewhere else, so we looked across the board. We have discussed it with the Minister for Treasury and Resources and we have discussed it with the Treasurer and indicated to them that we can accommodate it for the moment.

3.5.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Minister said that this likely will not go ahead until September 2018 when of course there may well be a new Government with different priorities in place at that point, so does he therefore concede that it is possible that this simply may not go ahead at all?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, I do not. Not at this point in time. The Assembly did vote on this quite some time ago. The problem we had, and was accepted by the Assembly, was that the funding for the Nursery Education Fund was under threat because there were so many new applicants for this fund; so St. Michael's is an example, and St. George's, in which case it was unsustainable. So the

concept of means testing was accepted. Our problem has been that it is extremely complicated so we wanted to make sure that everybody was aware of what we needed to do, hence the reason for postponing it.

3.5.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Just to clarify, I thought that this Assembly asked the Minister to go away and introduce means testing in this regard. It was the Minister who brought the overall package to do with nursery funding to the Assembly. Is it not right that the Minister should abide by the Assembly's decision even if he and the department do not necessarily like it?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think in the last answer I have just given that is the indication I have just given; is that we will continue down the route of means testing. Our problem is that when the Assembly then said it should be across all schools or state schools that complicated the matter. It is that complication that we have to address.

3.5.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Perhaps the Minister can elucidate further because again that was the will of the Assembly. The Assembly said if we are going to means test and do it across all schools, and that is something that surely the Minister should be able to reconcile because that is the will of the Assembly. If it was not possible to means test across all sectors then the Minister should never have let that go to the floor of the Assembly for debate. Is that not the case?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

No, the situation is quite simple. The Assembly decided to means test across all nurseries, whether it be private or state nurseries. What we want to do is make sure that we get it absolutely right before we go out there.

3.5.5 The Deputy of St. John:

Can I ask the Minister with regards to the early years partnership agreement is it not the fact that it was agreed at the time when this means testing was happening earlier this year, and that there are issues with regards to whether it is play-based or educational-based nursery provision? That parental choice it should be the matter of fact and that negotiations should continue with regards to revising the partnership agreement?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

The discussion is still going on in that particular area. I will just indicate that this has not been ratified but indicates another direction of travel and should hopefully answer to some degree what the Deputy is asking. This has been agreed at the moment with all partners but the actual ratification has not happened yet. The Education Department and Nursery Education Fund providers are committed to working together to improve outcomes for children and families. By working in partnership it is the aim of the Nursery Education Fund to enable the department and nurseries to deliver high quality preschool education to prepare children for school.