

2024.03.19.

**5.11 Deputy I. Gardiner of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning regarding updated employment terms and conditions for teaching assistants (OQ.46/2024)**

Will the Minister advise the current timeline for introducing updated employment terms and conditions for teaching assistants?

**Deputy R.J. Ward (The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning):**

The work that is going on with the teaching assistants is wider than the terms and conditions work with teachers. It includes a revised framework to include updated roles, modifying career progression, a professional training programme, extending the teaching framework pay scale to recognise the increased skills of teaching assistants and a focus on the impact the teaching assistants have in a positive way within schools and within the classroom. Although that is a wide range of things to do, I am confident that it will meet the timeline that the Deputy is aware of to be completed this year.

**Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Apologies, I did not hear the end of the answer.

**The Bailiff:**

This year. Completed this year.

**Deputy R.J. Ward:**

Yes. Sorry, it is because I have a cold given to me by Deputy Kovacs.

**5.11.1 Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Thank you to the Minister for stating all points which I completely 100 per cent agree with. As a Minister I have been presented with the outcome of this review that was going for one year from January last year to this time; the teaching assistants were a priority as they have the lowest pay within the school and we have the highest problem with retention. The plans that were introduced were updated, or at least partially updated, to make sure the teaching assistants would receive extra funding in quarter one. I understand that it is not happening.

**The Bailiff:**

What is the question?

**Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Is it correct that it is not happening in quarter one and will it happen by the end of the year?

**Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I think, first of all, we have to take the changes and consult with teaching assistants as to whether they agree with the changes before we implement them. I will say one thing though, I think they are much more likely to be adopted and have a positive impact given that we now no longer have an industrial dispute within schools. We have settled that industrial dispute for 3 years, showing very clearly, as Minister and as a Government, that we value our education staff and rather than sending divisive letters, we will work with them to improve their terms and conditions, value their place in the workplace and value their role within our schools. So I am confident that with those combination of factors the money will be there at the right time for the right reasons to make the right changes.

### **5.11.2 Deputy K.M. Wilson of St. Clement:**

I think the Minister may well have just answered the question but I would like to ask him whether or not he could confirm if funding is there to support the teaching assistant pay conditions.

#### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

The funding from last year's Government Plan did not have detail as to how it was going to fund the changes that come from the terms and conditions because they were not completed. What we will need to do is look very closely at the implications for funding of those terms and conditions changes and what is needed, so that is investment in schools. I am confident that when that investment is required it will be taken on board because that is going to improve our schools. I think we do have an emphasis in the importance of our education system and I certainly will want to continue that.

### **5.11.3 Deputy K.M. Wilson:**

Could the Minister outline how long he envisages the result that he anticipates?

#### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

The target is that everything is in place by September for our teaching assistants. Yes, September.

### **5.11.4 Deputy T.A. Coles:**

Will the Minister also commit to looking at the terms and conditions of all support staff within schools and that comes down from the caretakers to the welfare support officers?

#### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I really do thank the Deputy for the question because I think sometimes we forget the importance of the other people who are working in schools beyond teaching assistants and teachers. Certainly, caretakers, and I learnt when I was teaching always be on the good side of the caretaker if you want something done, but certainly they take an important role in the combination of supply of provision within our schools. They are also civil servants and are on the same civil servant pay scales and certainly I believe that is something that needs to be looked at. What I would say about the role of caretakers is that I think they were mixed up before in a job re-evaluation that was not particularly successful for them the last time this happened. Again, it is another repair job that we are going to do in education so that they are valued within our schools. I would take the opportunity to say that I do definitely value those people who make sure our schools are running effectively day in, day out.

### **5.11.5 Deputy J. Renouf:**

It is indeed excellent news that the Government has been able to settle the teachers' pay dispute. Is the Minister confident that the situation with regard to teaching assistants will not lead to any further disputes between unions and Government?

#### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

Yes, I am as confident as I can be. I think we have managed to re-set trust to some extent that has been lost in the education profession over the last 2 years and beyond because of the industrial dispute that was happening. We have a clear line of dialogue, we have a clear line of value for our profession and I think that cannot be underestimated. I think that gives us an opportunity, and a window of opportunity, to say to staff: "Look, we want to move forward together." The process that has been ongoing, what I am very pleased about the process is that it included teaching assistants and representation from their trade unions so that there is a direct representation from the people on the workface, so to speak. I think that is the way to get buy-in and commitment and to lower the potential for industrial action. Those things only happen, I believe, when that dialogue is not there and the

wrong decisions have been made. That is certainly what happened before and I am really hoping that that will not happen again.

**5.11.6 Deputy I. Gardiner:**

I do congratulate that the industrial dispute has been finished. The teaching assistants got around the table before any other pay group in education. There was extensive consultation with very high engagement that was presented in December. Is there any way that the decision, and a possible money allocation within the inclusion growth that will mark to meet the terms and conditions, can be done earlier or do teaching assistants need to go on strike because they were patient for too long?

**Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I am looking at the timeline for implementation that the Deputy would have seen in a presentation about 2 months ago, and the implementation there is in September. In early July, an email was sent to all staff with confirmation of the new role and a copy of the revised job descriptions that they would have agreed in June and during May, so there is a process in train. It is not about saying there is not the money here to do this and so therefore there will be industrial action. This is about developing the role of a teaching assistant that has become more important over time, improving pay and conditions where necessary so that we can retain staff. I think there is an understanding within this Council of Ministers that retention and recruitment is one way to ensure that money is spent effectively and we are getting the services that we need. Those services are valued and have a value long term.

[10:45]

I will say again, and I am going to say it every time I stand up in this Assembly, we need to view education as investment, not cost, because the return from every well-educated person on this Island is significant for us as an Island. If we do not get that right, it is going to cost us a lot more in the future.