

21.04.20

**7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour of the Minister for Children and Education regarding the reconnection strategy (OQ.93/2021):**

What plans does the Government have, as part of its reconnection strategy, to return schools to normal operations and when does he expect those plans to be implemented?

**The Bailiff:**

Who is answering for the Minister?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (Acting Minister for Children and Education):**

Sir, I believe it is me because ordinarily Deputy Wickenden is acting in the capacity as Acting ... but the Deputy has asked, under Standing Order 13(3)(a), for it to be applied to the Minister in person, which means it is me. It is expected that schools will return to normal with the removal of all physical distancing and bubble systems when there is no longer a requirement for this in the community.

**3.7.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:**

I am struggling to thank the Minister for his answer because that did not really contain any information at all. Could the Chief Minister please outline the steps and dates by which schools will be returned to normal, please?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I thought it was not an unreasonable response because it bases us in line with the existing reconnection roadmap, which lays out the various stages that are in place. Obviously the end of that process to date is on Monday, 14th June, but obviously there are various measures between now and then. What I would just say is that the main priority to date has been to keep the schools open and compared to almost anywhere in the British Isles we have done exceptionally well in that area. If the Deputy feels that more could be done quicker, I am very happy to receive any submissions on that front. In particular, we can always request a review to be done on certain measures but bearing in mind, if we can, it is always subject to how we advance through the next few months, we can bring measures forward if that is appropriate. But, as I said, the focus has always been on keeping the schools open and operating as much as they can. But if the Deputy is saying, can we have a further review to see if more measures can be done and mitigated, that is possible but I always make the caveat that we change our measures according to the circumstances we face.

**3.7.2 Deputy I. Gardiner:**

I would like to ask the Chief Minister, we do have a clear reconnection map for the economy of the Island. We have a clear reconnection map for travelling with clear dates. Do we have a similar clear reconnection map for schools?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

To date the schools are not necessarily treated separately and I am just looking at it now, there is some very extensive guidance for education, which is obviously on the website. But the general intention is that we are consistent with the reconnection roadmap that is published.

**3.7.3 Deputy I. Gardiner:**

I think further clarity is required because from one side - and I am really welcoming - we have 1,000 people can watch a rugby match during this weekend and at the same time reception and Year 1 at school cannot play together. Would the Chief Minister think that it would be helpful for schools to have a clear reconnection map going forward?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I was not aware they did not have a clear reconnection roadmap because we have published a reconnection roadmap with very clear steps in there and that is being applied to the community. I have always made the point, we have had this a number of times, it is always easier to, essentially, tighten up restrictions. As soon as we start trying to ease, every area starts asking for exceptions to be made to their own particular circumstances. Let us not underplay schools at all. In my view we have done exceptionally well. Certainly the last time round we have kept the schools open and we have kept them operational. As I said, we have probably done, I think, better than pretty well anywhere else in the British Isles in achieving that objective and that is what our objective remains. Obviously all the measures that we have in place at present are understood by the schools but, as I said, there is a reconnection roadmap which is published. The intention at this stage is to come out of this by June. However, if there are specific issues that any of the questioners have, I am very happy to take those away and ask the public health team to look at and review. There is no problem doing a review and I am acutely aware that each time we do that it is pressure and resource taken away from somewhere else.

**3.7.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

What evidence or indicators will he be examining in order to decide whether to reconnect schools more fully?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

The measures that we look at in general are the measures that all States Members are shown on a fairly regular basis and particularly Scrutiny do receive updates on, which are the positivity rates, the active cases, the data around what we think may be coming down the line, what is happening with our neighbours; there are a whole range of factors that we bring in and Members, as a whole, are briefed on those regularly.

[11:00]

**3.7.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Just a follow up to that, it is my understanding that there is serious consideration given to the arrival of a third wave in the Island, is that also the Chief Minister's impression of what may be coming down the line?

**The Bailiff:**

I think, Deputy, and I am afraid that is outside the parameters of the question because this is to do with the return to normal operations in connection with schools and so ...

**Deputy G.P. Southern:**

Sir, if there is a third wave coming and if there is any connection between going back to school and a third wave, then surely the connection is there.

**The Bailiff:**

The connection might be there if the question is posed in a different way but it is not there in the parameters of that question.

**3.7.6 Senator K.L. Moore:**

Has the Minister considered any additional courses or support for students who may need to top up on gaps that have arisen during the course of this academic year and the previous one, particularly being mindful for those who would have been sitting either G.C.S.E.s (General Certificate of Secondary Education) or A-Levels this year and have been unable to do so due to the COVID restrictions?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

In a very general level, from memory we approved extra funding in the Government Plan for precisely the area that the Senator is raising.

**3.7.7 Senator K.L. Moore:**

Does the Chief Minister consider that those are adequate and is he satisfied that there is adequate support, particularly in relation to information technology for those students, as mentioned in the initial question?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I have got no reason to doubt that they are not adequate. Equally, I think, from memory, it is either coming out today or was released yesterday, there is a press release that either has been made or is being made in relation to extra resources being put into the I.T. (information technology) area.

**3.7.8 Deputy R.J. Ward:**

Would the Minister, in his capacity as current Minister for Children and Education, agree that one way to ensure a careful reconnection in schools would be to vaccinate teachers as a matter of urgency?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I think we have rehearsed that argument on a number of occasions. We do go back to the medical professionals on this and their advice remains absolutely the same, that to date the vulnerability to COVID is fundamentally age-related and to date that is the policy we have followed. There are exceptions, there is an appeals mechanism but I think we have rehearsed that argument on a number of occasions. Can I just make the point as well, is that to date, with the extra measures that we have put in place at the beginning of this year, schools are absolutely safe, have been operating very, very effectively? We are showing an average of a 95 per cent attendance rate at the moment, primary school being about 97 per cent, secondary being slightly less, so the system is working well. We can always do better but it is working well.

**3.7.9 Deputy R.J. Ward:**

May I ask the Minister, in his capacity as Acting Minister for Children and Education, if he could confirm that he does not support the vaccination of teachers as a priority?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I said we act on the advice from the medial professionals in this area and we continue to follow that advice.

**3.7.10 Deputy K.F. Morel:**

As the Chief Minister will be aware, earlier in this question session there was a discussion about antisocial behaviour among young people. Given that young people are still sitting in schools often wearing masks with the windows wide open and, as a result, are still having their education disrupted to some extent, does the Minister agree that it is important that our children experience a return to normality as quickly as is safely possible in order to minimise and prevent the likelihood of antisocial behaviour arising, which does happen when children feel unsettled?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Yes.

**3.7.11 Deputy K.F. Morel:**

Given that the Chief Minister agrees that a return to normality is important, does the Chief Minister feel that the lack of certainty about a full reconnection to normality in schools is being hampered by the lack of a full Minister for Children and Education in their role at the moment?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

The short answer is we are not in ideal circumstances but these are the circumstances we face. The operational side continues and the political oversight is definitely there. I am in the process of putting some further measures in place around that area. But in terms of certainty, in the wider context and not in a political context, we will continue to face uncertainty, probably throughout this year because the pandemic, as a whole, continues to have changes, there are iterations as new evidence that comes through, all sorts of things. Although to date we are again in a good place, things undoubtedly will change as circumstances change and we will have new challenges during the course of this year. Our task is to navigate those challenges as we see fit and as we follow the professional and medical advice that we receive. From that perspective, unfortunately, we will not get the level of certainty that I think we would all have liked for 2021, for example, relative to, say, 2019. We have different challenges ahead and they will generate uncertainty. Our objective in all of this, and particularly in the educational field, is to keep the schools open and accepting the points that the Deputy has made, to try and get as many of our children, as many of our students, to receive as good an education that they can and the evidence to date and advice is that that is by being in the schools.

**3.7.12 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:**

I just want to refer the Chief Minister to the reconnection strategy and I am looking at it at the moment and I wonder if he could just explain why there can be certainty around when standing alcoholic drink service can resume, when saunas and jacuzzis can reopen, when holidays can be taken, when people can have house parties and when nightclubs can fully reopen. But we do not seem to have certainty on when children can have whole school assemblies, on when secondary school children can learn without wearing a mask for 7 hours a day and when children will not have to miss chunks of the school day because of staggered drop-offs. I wonder if he could address those specific points, please, either in his answer today or could he get back to me on those, please?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

The reconnection strategy is obviously what is released in and so, for example, it emphasises in stage 5 that masks continue to be worn indoors. Obviously the detailed guidance on education is under the education section. But I am happy, if the Deputy wants to email me with her concerns, refer those into the team. But, as I said, to date the indication of the reconnection strategy is around

aiming to get back to something like normal life in the Island and that would be within the education system by early June.