

4.6 The Deputy of St. John of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the potential reconfiguration of the Arts Centre:

Is the Minister considering investing in a new reconfigured Arts Centre, and if so, does he consider this to be more of a priority than the continuation of grants to private schools, which benefit working parents?

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

As the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture, I have a number of duties which I am required to undertake. My department is carrying out a review with Jersey Property Holdings, looking at the department's entire property portfolio to ensure that we are obtaining best value for money from the facilities available. As part of that work, consideration is being given to the needs of the cultural organisations and whether the disposal of certain sites could be used to deliver a new complex, centralising many of the different cultural activities under one roof. I have, however, no intention of using the department's limited revenue budget to invest in a capital project. On the other hand, I am committed to continue support for the fee-paying schools, albeit that I am reviewing the level of support provided. The process that I have embarked on is as follows: I have proposed a reduction in subsidy and asked schools to consider the implications. Schools undertake their own value for money reviews and seek ways to find efficiencies. Finally, in the light of these reviews, schools determine the effect on the fees and discussions take place with the department to determine how the changes can be implemented over time to allow parents to adjust.

The Deputy Bailiff:

A supplementary?

4.6.1 The Deputy of St. John:

In the 2010 Education Business Plan, we find that in its conclusions, the current arrangements for funding primary schools are not sustainable, and in the secondary phase, while the fee-paying sector retains its pupil numbers, non-fee-paying schools do not have the capacity to manage the pronounced impact on the falling numbers. Will the Minister concur that that is exactly what is put in his business plan, and also, given that that is the case, why is he still allowing preschool education for children under the age of 5, because currently the law says we are responsible for making sure children have education from 5 to 16 and have to pay for it? Why are the taxpayers paying for preschool education for those children below the age of 5 and also supplying tens of millions of pounds' worth of property which have been built with taxpayers' money to undertake this preschool education?

The Deputy Bailiff:

Minister, this is at the very edge of the question that flows from the original question.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I will try and answer the questions in the order that they have been asked, although there have been 3. First of all, I am pleased that the Deputy has focused on one - and I repeat, only one - of the budgetary pressures that my department faces in the years to come, and it is indeed the case that our non-fee-paying schools have over a number of years faced and had to deal with a reduction in budget. This is a discussion that is now required to happen with the fee-paying schools. With regards preschool

education, this Assembly made a decision approximately 2 years ago now to deal with the inequity that existed at the time to enable 20 hours of free nursery education to be provided to all parents of children whose age is rising to 4 years of age. I will hasten to add that in an attempt to reduce the department's budget, proposals will be brought forward to look at further dealing with the current inequity that exists where certain individuals enjoy up to 30 hours free, and yet others only enjoy 20.

The Deputy of St. John:

If I could come back on that, Sir?

The Deputy Bailiff:

No, you will have a final supplementary at the end, Deputy.

The Deputy of St. John:

This is an important subject.

The Deputy Bailiff:

The subject of your question, Deputy, if I may say so, is the reconfigured Arts Centre and not primary school education. Senator Perchard.

4.6.2 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister confirm that it is his proposal to phase in a 50 per cent reduction in the level of financial support provided to fee-paying schools and will he advise the Assembly if it is his proposal to commence these reductions next year in 2011?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

With regard the reduction in grants to fee-paying schools, it includes a number of separate proposals. One of those proposals is to reduce the support provided to the fee-paying secondary schools from the current level of 50 per cent to the equivalent level that is currently provided to the children that attend the fee-paying primary schools, and that is the level of 25 per cent.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy Tadier. I am sorry, Senator, we have a number of questions.

Senator J.L. Perchard:

The question was not answered.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Well, you can make such political hay with that as you might on another occasion. Deputy Tadier.

4.6.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Clearly this is a very large issue, which will need to be addressed another time, but my question is to do with the wording of the original question. Will the Minister acknowledge that while grants for private schools may benefit some working parents, the Arts Centre, as a service to the Island, benefits the whole Island and anyone who goes there right across the board? So does the Minister agree that it is right that funding is kept for the Arts Centre, whether that be a refurbished Arts Centre or otherwise, and that perhaps it is false dichotomy to pose these 2 issues alongside each other?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am sorry, the Member of the Scrutiny Panel that is undertaking a review into this subject seems to want to conflate 2 absolutely totally separate issues. I am not proposing to utilise any of my limited budget in improving facilities with regards the Arts Centre or any other cultural facility. These properties, although under my responsibility, are ultimately the responsibility of Jersey Property Holdings, and I am in my limited ability attempting to enable Property Holdings to consider how best to deal with some of the issues that they have to face.

4.6.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Can I just come back on that quickly? In fact, I was trying to do the opposite and rather than conflate the issues just to extricate them, because I think that they have been conflated here, so I agree with the Minister and I hope that he agrees with me.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Sorry, I apologise if I misunderstood the Deputy.

The Deputy Bailiff:

The Deputy's question was seeking to avoid a conflation, yes. Deputy Le Claire.

4.6.5 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I wonder if the Minister would agree with me that these questions that have been asked of him this morning in the manner that have been asked of him by the Deputy of St. John indicate really the frustration of Members and the public in the communication which has gone so badly wrong in his dealing with the issues that are identified in these questions. Would he undertake to admit that his actions in these areas have gone badly wrong and will he do something about it?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all, I absolutely agree that these questions are premature, to say the very least. This process has only just started and with regard to communications having gone badly wrong, I would just like to highlight to States Members exactly what process I followed. I met less than 2 weeks ago with all the chairs and governors of all fee-paying schools to start initial discussions about this proposal. I had a very good meeting with those chairmen of the board of governors of all of those schools, who agreed that further discussions between the schools and the department needed to take place before any further decisions or actions were taken. At that meeting, I agreed that the next step would be to speak to each individual fee-paying school and meet with the headmasters to further discuss the proposal and again outline how we could start considering the matter.

[10:45]

This was an initial step. Sadly, certain schools chose to make the initial discussions known and, equally, chose to mislead parents and cause alarm. I am sorry for that. It was never my intention, and more importantly, and perhaps due to some misunderstanding, and perhaps because I am a blunt man and I will speak honestly, the governors and the schools are now working constructively with my department to further this matter. This is in its first initial stage and I would repeat that no decisions will be made without full and proper consultation with the schools, and ultimately, the schools with the parents.

4.6.6 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

On a point of order, I beg your pardon, Sir, I wonder if it is appropriate for the Minister - I recognise he is having difficulty communicating - to say that the teachers have deliberately misled parents? Did he intend to say that? It seems to be rather a strong statement for the Minister to make.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I withdraw the fact that I said "mislead". Perhaps the better word should have been to "cause unnecessary concern and alarm".

The Deputy Bailiff:

Thank you very much. A final supplementary, Deputy.

4.6.7 The Deputy of St. John:

In the Minister's response, he mentioned that - and I believe this is probably totally illegal, what he has been doing - his department are paying for 30 hours' free education for preschool children instead of 20, agreed by this House. If that is the case, is this where all the additional funding is being required for, and if that is the case, will he be billing those parents for that extra 10 hours' education their children have been having free of charge for the under-5s?

The Deputy Bailiff:

If you can deal with it quickly.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Sorry, it was an old policy of the department over many years that preschool education should be provided within the primary school. The issue was that it was acknowledged that only 50 per cent of parents could access this particular preschool provision and so a decision was taken to try and deal with the inequity and therefore provide 20 hours to all the parents that could not access the nursery schools, the primary schools. However, as the Deputy well knows as he attended the workshops yesterday, one of the proposals is to now seek to charge for the additional 10 hours that are provided with the States school system, thereby ensuring that it is an absolutely level playing field.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Thank you. Members will have the opportunity to come back to this point at question 11. Now, Deputy Southern has a question to ask of the Minister for Social Security.