

2.8 The Deputy of St. Martin of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the funding for children aged 3 and 4 years to access free education:

As the Minister was unable to secure funding via an amendment to the Annual Business Plan in order to extend the opportunities for children aged three and four years to access free education, what steps, if any, will the Minister be taking to secure funding from other sources?

Senator M.E. Vibert (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

We will continue to explore options for funding and nursery education for all and will be meeting with the Jersey Early Years Association shortly to further discuss the issue. However, funding of the magnitude required cannot be found from within existing resources without seriously impairing existing services. I will, of course, also be reflecting on comments made by States Members during the debate on nursery education and will look again at alternative options. The issue is being examined by the Education Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel and I will, of course, be taking their conclusions into serious consideration.

2.8.1 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Will the Minister consider looking at partnerships, probably with the finance industry? There is probably quite an interest there and one remembers most States Members were circulated with a number of emails from people within finance. So, would he not consider making contact with industry and see whether any financing inducements can come that way?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I am prepared to look at all options but my concern is to provide nursery education for all as well as nursery education for certain sections of the community.

2.8.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

What is the Minister's view towards the means testing of nursery provision?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I will look again at the means testing but in the many papers we have presented to the States there were serious arguments based on very long research showing that it had some very detrimental effects on the very poorest in our society. So, I would need considerable convincing given that evidence, but as it was raised in the debate I will be reconsidering it.

2.8.3 Senator S. Syvret:

Does the Minister now accept that it is not particularly responsible to come to the Assembly with a proposition seeking a great deal of additional spending without indicating how the additional revenue should be raised, given that he was not indicating that it should be taken from another budget?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

No, Sir.

2.8.4 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:

Is the Minister concerned that his inability to deliver equitable funding for nursery care means that the Council of Ministers will be in breach of its agreement in the Strategic Plan to deliver this by the end of the current year?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We will be increasing the provision by a new nursery class, whether it is at the end of this year or beginning of next year and, yes, unfortunately it looks like we will not be able to meet all the aspirations as highly as we would wish and, of course, that was a decision of the States.

2.8.5 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren of St. Saviour:

Concerning the Minister's reply regarding means testing, does the Minister accept that he used the word "detrimental" but there is nothing more detrimental than continuing this present totally unfair system to parents?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have been trying to convince the States for some time now of how inequitable and unfair this system is, but like I said, I will look again; but I do not believe that means testing will get rid of all the inequity and that is part of the problem.

2.8.6 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I am sure the Minister is aware there are a considerable amount of mothers who would dearly love to get back to work but are unable to do so because it is simply uneconomic to do so. Does the Minister agree that there will be savings in other areas and this will not be a complete write-off?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I totally agree there will be savings in other areas; not just with some mothers being able to get back to work though we do have a very high percentage of working mothers. But the real savings will be in the long term for a better society for the future if we provide nursery education for all.

2.8.7 Deputy S.C. Ferguson of St. Brelade:

Does the Minister not concede that if the nursery care is purely for the purposes of getting people back to work then that really is not the purpose for which it was intended?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I thought I just made that clear in the answer I just gave, Sir. The primary purpose of extending nursery education for all is for the whole benefit of society, to give every child in the Island a better start in life. One of its ancillary parts is that it will allow some mothers, if they so wish, more freedom to return to work possibly on a part-time basis. But the *raison d'être* for nursery education - and it has been agreed by the States for over 20 years - is for the benefit it gives to young children for their future lives.

2.8.8 The Deputy of St. Martin:

The Minister said he was opposed to means testing because it might affect the poorer people in society. Will the Minister explain why then he went for means testing for old aged pensioners and not for nursery education?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I have never been for means testing for old aged pensioners.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I meant to say for T.V. licences, Sir. I am sorry.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I came to this House first of all with a proposal that T.V. licences should be available to all over 75 year-olds. This House turned it down and suggested I came back with a system of means testing instead, and I did.

2.8.9 The Connétable of St. Helier:

The Minister, on a couple of occasions, has appeared to lay the blame for the failure of delivering equitable childcare and nursery provision on the States. Could the Minister remind us how long he has had this portfolio and whether he does not accept some responsibility himself for not having cracked this problem by the due date?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I accept the responsibility that I have yet to convince the States that we should provide free nursery education for all by increasing the funding to do so, yes.