



St Helena
Government

ST HELENA GOVERNMENT
PROCEEDINGS OF MINISTERS QUESTION TIME
TUESDAY 18TH JULY 2023
FOURTH SITTING

ST. HELENA
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

THE SPEAKER

The Honourable Cyril Keith Gunnell

ELECTED MEMBERS

The Honourable Rosemary June Bargo
The Honourable Gillian Ann Brooks
The Honourable Mark Alan Brooks
The Honourable Ronald Arthur Coleman
The Honourable Jeffrey Robert Ellick
The Honourable Corinda Sebastiana Stuart Essex
The Honourable Martin Dave Henry
The Honourable Robert Charles Midwinter
The Honourable Christine Lilian Scipio
The Honourable Julie Dorne Thomas
The Honourable Karl Gavin Thrower

APOLOGIES

The Honourable Andrew James Turner

Legislative Council Office Assistant

Miss Shanice Phillips

PROCEEDINGS OF MINISTERS QUESTION TIME

Tuesday, 18th July, 2023

The Council met at 10.00 am
In the Council Chamber, Jamestown

(The Honourable Speaker in the Chair)

ORDER OF THE DAY

1. FORMAL ENTRY OF THE SPEAKER

2. ADDRESS BY THE SPEAKER

Honourable Members good morning to you, and to everyone else who may be present. I don't actually see anybody else. Welcome to the fourth Minister's Question Time being broadcast live from the Council Chamber at the Castle Jamestown. Good morning and warm welcome also to all those listening over the radio. Honourable Members here we've got apologies this morning from Councillor Andrew Turner who I understand is not well. Honourable Members as we are aware the topic that Councillors chose for this Minister's Question Time is Education. Therefore, all seven questions, were going to be seven there should be six now with Councillor Turner are not able to ask his on the Order Paper today, are directed to the Minister for Education. This is Julie Thomas, who is also the Chief Minister. The questions have been listed in alphabetical order, but will be selected randomly for response. I have explained on previous occasions, that Minister's Question Time is regulated by Standing Orders and a number of rules. You will be aware that Standing Orders were suspended for the duration of the previous two Minister's Question Times sessions. This not only allowed questions, the opportunity to ask multiple supplementary questions it also and hopefully provided the listening public with additional information from which to conjure up a broader picture of the subject given. This was unlike the first Minister's Question Time when Order 9 of Standing Orders was applied in its entirety, where rule 6 imposed only one supplementary question per each substantive question. Please come in Attorney General. We welcome of course, our Attorney General. Welcome back the Attorney General hope you had a decent leave.

The Hon. Attorney General –

Thank you, mix of work and pleasure. But pleasure to be back.

The Speaker –

You will tell us a little about it.

The Hon. Attorney General –

Apologies for late arrival.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Members found this prevented thorough exploration of the issue raised and initial response given, it also meant that all of the seven questions on the Order Paper were asked and responded in 30 minutes when a whole hour was envisaged. At some point Members intend to review the Standing Orders to identify any formal changes they feel should be made. So at this time is a sort of a trial period I understand. Honourable Members I wish to pause for a minute or two to ponder this appointment of our current parliament building the Council Chamber, continually not being able to welcome all through its doors because of it being inaccessible to some with mobility issues. As you are aware, proposed development i.e. lifts that would improve accessibility has been refused because it does not comply with some objectives of the LDCP policies. Honourable Members the duration of Minister's Question Time starting from the first question is one hour. The Clerk and timekeeper? Well, this meeting is Miss Shanice Phillips. Needless to me to say that I know the rules of debate will be respected. But just a gentle reminder perhaps about the red lights. Don't draw my attention to any that may be left switched on when somebody else is speaking because that could mean someone being interrupted and an infringement of Order 15. Miss Phillips, may we have the first question please?

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –
Mr Speaker.

The Speaker –
Honourable Dr Corinda Essex?

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –
Mr Speaker, may I raise a point of order pertaining to suspension of Standing Orders in accordance with Order 19 and Order 21 of the Standing Orders of the Legislative Council.

The Speaker –
Please do so.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –
Thank you, Mr Speaker I beg to move that rule five and rule six of Order nine of Standing Orders be suspended for the duration of Minister's Question Time to be held today.

The Speaker –
Is there a seconder? Councillor Midwinter.

The Hon. Robert Midwinter –
Mr Speaker, I'd like to second.

The Speaker –
Thank you, Honourable Dr Corinda Essex, you may proceed with your motion.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –
Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Speaker, this motion seeks to suspend rule 6 of Order 9 of Standing Orders. So that the restriction to only one supplementary question per each substantive question will not apply

during Minister's Question Time today. In order to the parameters for questions in the house, as set out in Order 8 to be applicable following suspension of rule 6 of Order 9, it is necessary to suspend rule 5 also. Mr Speaker, I beg to move

The Speaker –

Thank you Honourable Member. Does anyone else wish to speak? No one. So I put the question that rule 5 and rule 6 of Standing Order 9 is suspended for the duration of this Minister's Question Time.

Question put and agreed to.

The Speaker –

Clerk the next item of business please.

3.

QUESTIONS

Question No. 1 - The Honourable Ronald Coleman to ask the Honourable Chief Minister:

The Speaker –

Honourable Ronald Coleman?

The Hon. Ronald Coleman –

Thank you Mr Speaker. Will the Honourable Chief Minister tell this Council, what development programs are in place to improve literacy and numeracy across the primary and secondary schools?

The Speaker –

Honourable Chief Minister?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. And I thank the Honourable Ronald Coleman for your question. I firstly would like to also say welcome to all our listeners out there and also to apologise if the voice gives in halfway through this because I think we're all struggling with this flu. So I think just as an introduction as well just to remind people what Education is all about. So our mission is to improve the lives of all within our community and help the Island thrive. The Portfolio is responsible for the education, training and development of our young people, and for providing further education, professional training, professional development opportunities, and careers guidance to the wider community of St Helena. Raising academic attainment and improving education for the benefit of the people of St Helena is the reason for our existence. This Portfolio works to the Education Ordinance 2008 supported by the Education Regulations of 2009 and the Employment Rights Ordinance 2010. And if I can now turn to the Honourable Ronald Coleman's question in primary we have the Read Write Inc. scheme and in maths we had the Inspire Maths. But we are changing this from September this year to Power Maths, which is more in line with the national curriculum, and has the mastery approach which will continue in Prince Andrew School. We are hoping that this will help to improve maths across the system. We are also investing gauging whether we should change our phonics program to Read Write Inc. phonics, which will enable continuity between phonics and literacy. This was trialed in one school with positive outcomes. So we might have to revert to this scheme, but this will come with a cost. Prince Andrew has the Accelerated Reader program which

is contributing to improving students reading levels. And we are linked with a school professional in Hampshire, who is currently working with the school to identify and implement strategies for improving reading across the school, which will help the literacy and numeracy. We are in the process of reviewing English in Prince Andrew and seeing where we can make improvements. We must be mindful however, that no matter what schemes we use, we will always have challenges in relation to the increasing number of students in our system with special needs. Going forward, we will report outcomes in two formats, one per cohort, which encompasses all students in the cohort, including students with special educational needs and disabilities, and the other with the number of children who sat the test. This will give us a better idea on our attainment levels. And from next year we hope to undertake SATS in year six. So this will also give us a benchmark in relation to our levels of attainment, and we can compare this with the UK. And when I say next year, I mean the next school year starting September of this year. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Ronald Coleman.

The Hon. Ronald Coleman –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can I just ask, are children achieving at the level expected in relation to the ages?

The Speaker –

Honourable Chief Minister?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think when we look at this year, we've actually overall for this year, there was a decrease in the attainment and progress levels of our students. There are a range of factors which could have contributed to this, which includes children circumstances, ability, and progress and teaching and learning experiences. In addition, for this year's problems were experienced with connectivity, and this negatively impacted on children's testing experience. As always, a degree of caution must be exercised when analysing data due to the relatively small numbers in the cohort, which is an average of 40 children. So if one or two students don't pass at the required grade, that could actually work out to 5 to 6%, because of the low numbers, work is being undertaken to review the data to determine areas of concern, and to address these.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Rosemary Bargo.

The Hon. Rosemary Bargo –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Chief Minister, can you tell me if you have the adequate resources to help children with special needs?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. The Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Just hold on a second here, I would never say we've thought we've got the resources because we're always looking for more resources, whether that is human or indeed textbooks and access to this. But as I've said in recent Formal LegCo, Education is working with Hampshire. But

also when I was away on my recent visit, I met with Minister Nick Gibbs, Head of Schools, and we will be liaising directly with them again. So it's through that connection that we've actually got SATS hoping to return as of September this year. But we've also been in contact with a leading professional who focuses on special educational needs and disabilities. But somewhat to your question just for the listening public out there, just to give you some idea of the types and numbers that we're dealing with. So on average, we've got 300 students in primary of which 49 are now seen as having special educational needs and disabilities or social, emotional and mental health issues. So these vary throughout the schools, and obviously vary, in respect of the diagnosis, some are very severe. To give some idea, we've got cerebral palsy, general learning difficulties, social emotional and mental health issues, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, speech and or language delay, Downs Syndrome, strongly at risk of dyslexia. Petit mal, oppositional defiant disorder, and the list goes on to these about 10 or 11 different types of disorder and that's in Primary. Secondary, we've got about 250 students within Prince Andrew, I'm rounding this up, by the way. And within that school, we've got 13% of our students that's got special educational needs. So social, emotional, mental health, and that comes with Tourette's, ADHD, dyslexia, literacy, language, difficulty, slow processing, and albinism. Just to give you a few. Thank you.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Gillian Brooks.

The Hon. Gillian Brooks –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Chief Minister, you spoke about a trial that been ruled out in schools, which you said was very successful that around phonics. If it was further carried out, it'll come at a cost. Can you just tell us if a cost has been identified, if this was rolled out?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much, Honourable Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I can't tell you what that cost is today, to be perfectly honest with you. But obviously, if it's going to be rolled out, that will be something that has been taken into account within our budget allocation. But as is the case, if it's more than what we're doing right now, then we will have to be again, prioritising the priorities.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Dr Corinda Essex.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

Thank you, Mr Speaker, Will the Honourable Chief Minister tell us what percentage of pupils who have not got special educational needs and underperforming in Maths and English.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much Honourable Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Having a questions on stats is not an easy one to try and put over the radio at this present time. But just to give you an idea, maybe I should ask the Honourable Dr Corinda Essex are you

speaking at Secondary level or asking for Primary as well? Secondary okay. Let me see. So if I talk about GCSE. If we're looking at A* to C grades, which is numbers 4 to 9. With at the moment, when we look at that we've got 42 students that's achieving A to C grades. After that we've got sorry, yeah, 46% getting A to C in maths and 51% getting A to C in English, if that gives you. So there's percentages I'm talking now. Thank you.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much, Dr Corinda Essex again.

The Hon. Dr Corinda Essex –

I thank the Honourable Chief Minister for her response. However, I was not just asking about GCSE results, I was asking about performance across the whole of the school. So although she may not have these figures here, I would be very grateful if she could get them and share them with all Councillors please.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much, Honourable Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

I do have them here, Mr Speaker, but it's going to take a while to get through all of the statistics in our Portfolio strategy and delivery plan. So it's not the case that it's not here, it's just finding the right pages, if we're going to go into that level of detail, so I just quickly brought up the GCSE levels. But if we're talking about age related, etc. then that's on obviously on different pages. So if I'm talking about age related in English, we are now on 57.1% for 2022 and 66.1% in maths if we're looking at age related.

The Speaker –

Thank you for those extra details. Anyone else? Honourable Gillian Brooks.

The Hon. Gillian Brooks –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can I just ask the Chief Minister, in a decrease in attainment, you mentioned several reasons, and one of them being children circumstances, did I hear that right? Can I just ask what has been done to address that particular area?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Chief Minister are you able to?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Not really Mr Speaker, I think when we talk about circumstances, I have talked about learning difficulties. If they've got social, emotional and mental health issues, that's far outside of the remit of just Education, that's an Island wide problem. And we all have to contribute to making life for children a lot more fun, and so that they can obviously, we all know when we're under stress, we don't learn as much as if we are in a happy home or whatever it is or school environment. So it's very difficult for me to say what Education is doing. We're doing all we can to make the environment one that they can learn within, but it does go outside of the school environment as well.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much Honourable Gillian Brooks.

The Hon. Gillian Brooks –

Just to say, thank you, Mr Speaker. So, Chief Minister, can I ask if the multi agencies are working with Education on this such as Health, for example?

The Speaker –

Okay, Honourable Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think that happens anyway. Because we are all Portfolios of Government. I think, obviously, safeguarding plays a real role in this. And obviously, now we've got a Children's Champion as well. So anytime we have these kind of type of issues, then there was a group formed to look at antisocial behaviour, etc. But I think these that we're talking about is more in respect of disabilities, educational needs, and as I said before, the social emotional and mental health that our children are obviously experiencing. So yes, we do work with the across Portfolios, but it very much depends on the circumstance of the child.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Next question please.

Question No. 2 - The Honourable Gillian Brooks to ask the Honourable Chief Minister:

The Speaker –

The Honourable Gillian Brooks.

The Hon. Gillian Brooks –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Honourable Chief Minister, tell this Council, are there any, and if so, what are the barriers to widening the current curriculum to enable students to have more choices?

The Speaker –

Thank you, Honourable Chief Minister?

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Well, there are barriers and I think we all know what the one of the first ones I'm going to say today, and that is budget. And having people with the appropriate skills and knowledge to offer such. If you are going to widening the current curriculum, we also need to acknowledge that we as St Helena, we offer core curriculum. And that follows the national curriculum for England. We supplement this with enrichment courses, circuit sessions, distance learning within our current budget allocation. Just for some information, distinct distance learning is costly, that is a course for up to five students currently costs £4,950, a different provider costs £665 per student. So that's the kind of financial strain being put on Education. And if we were to expand this, this would come at a cost or resources, including that of staffing. Connectivity, as I mentioned before, the testing is also another area, because our connectivity isn't reliable at all times, and the cost associated with it. So obviously, if there's students who are doing self-taught lessons through distant learning, having access to some of what is available through class discussions, etc.

We don't actually, we're not able to provide that because it's the obviously bandwidth is very restrictive. Thank you.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Next question, please.

Question No. 3 - The Honourable Rosemary Bargo to ask the Honourable Chief Minister

The Speaker –

The Honourable Rosemary Bargo?

The Hon. Rosemary Bargo –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Honourable Chief Minister tell this Council what plans are in place for the continuance of the Sixth Formers allowances after this current academic year?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much Honourable Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Similarly to what I did for the Honourable Ronald Coleman, just for the listening public, just to give them an idea of what the Sixth Form policy is all about. Sixth Form Education provision for the post school students from the age of 16 to 18 years. So that is the service we're providing. It is aligned to each individual's ambition and interests, allowing them to make informed decisions on their next steps. It removes potential barriers to allow all individuals to reach their maximum potential, raise aspirations and attainment, whilst exploring links to local labour market information, alongside presenting opportunities to develop skills. This is part of us promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth through employment and decent work for all. So to achieve these key areas of focus, we are looking to enhance educational attainment and learning outcomes for all addressing skill gaps by attracting growing and retaining the working age population, and of course, improving adult literacy and numeracy levels throughout relevant training and development programs and instilling a culture of lifelong learning. So the Sixth Form policy is guided by the Career Access St Helena in partnership with Prince Andrew School, and it is intended to meet both current and future workforce needs and promote the uptake of a wide range of training and study programs. The aim is to harness existing and new talents by equipping the sixth formers with the skills knowledge and professional development to ensure that they have the practical skills and qualifications needed to contribute to St Helena's workforce now and into the future. To be eligible for this, they must have reached the compulsory school leaving age of 16, or have received a formal exemption from school, as approved by the Portfolio Director and myself, and have chosen to take this route as part of their career preparation and to gain the necessary skills, experience, qualifications and attitudes to participate successfully in the local economy. There is four career routes of study for the sixth form, and that is the supported route, the vocational route and the blended route and the academic route. So that's the four roots. Specific to the question you've asked Honourable Rosemary Bargo, the continuation of the Sixth Form allowance is always dependent on affordability and budget allocation. The budget for this year has enabled us to continue the allowances for all sixth formers, academic and worked base, and we've also managed this year to extend the work base sixth formers up to March 2024 like their academic counterparts. To answer the question about current academic years, as we do every year, we will need to consider this in the realms of our educational budget. Thank you.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much, Honourable Rosemary Bargo.

The Hon. Rosemary Bargo –

Thank you, Chief Minister Can I also ask though, if I know you've talked about budget and monies, but are there any consideration for increases within this allowance to help with the high cost of living for families, for the children?

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Honourable Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. All I can say to that is the amount that they've got this year is what they got last year, there was no decreases and to say that we're going to increase that at this time, I would be actually making false promise, because it's very much depends on the cohorts. If you recall, at the last Formal LegCo I talked about the statistics that demonstrate that we have an aging population here with numbers dropping in our students or births, and obviously our work age population. So it very much depends year on year. And if we are, as I've just mentioned in the previous question, if we see increases in the number of students that need more, they've got to have more demand on our resources through staffing, or indeed, resources to assist them to learn with any disabilities they may have, obviously, because that's part of our core service that will take priority over Sixth Form policies. Not to suggest, however, that we don't care about our students, but it will have to be weighed up in balance with our core service provision.

The Speaker –

Thank you very much. Next question, please.

Question No 4 - The Honourable Robert Midwinter to ask the Honourable Chief Minister

The Speaker –

The Honourable Robert Midwinter?

The Hon. Robert Midwinter –

Thank you. Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Speaker, will the Honourable Chief Minister tell this Council, what measures are currently in place to protect teachers and children from individuals who are displaying inappropriate or intimidating behaviour within the school setting?

The Speaker –

Thank you Honourable Member, Honourable Chief Minister.

The Hon. Julie Thomas (Chief Minister) –

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I'll just take some water sorry. Right. So obviously, we are always mindful of inappropriate or intimidating behaviour within our school setting, and this is something that we are constantly reviewing and addressing. However, I would like to remind or just make sure that it comes across that although it's concerning, it's still a small number of students that's creating this disruption. Schools have their behaviour management policies in place which all staff should follow. We are working