



Children, Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel

Quarterly Public Hearing

Witness: The Minister for Children and Families

Wednesday, 28th January 2026

Panel:

Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier (Chair)

Connétable M. Labey of Grouville (Vice-Chair)

Deputy H.M. Miles of St. Brelade

Witnesses:

Connétable R.P. Vibert of St. Peter, The Minister for Children and Families

Deputy M.R. Ferey of St. Saviour, Assistant Minister for Children and Families

Ms. D. Marriott, Director, Children's Services

Mr. D. Bowring, Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mr. A. Heaven, Head of Policy

[14:00]

Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier (Chair):

Welcome to this quarterly hearing of the Children, Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel. Today is 28th January. I would like to draw everyone's attention to the following. This hearing will be filmed and streamed live. The recording and transcript will be published afterwards on the States Assembly website. All electronic devices, including mobile phones, should be switched to silent. I am Deputy Catherine Curtis. I am the chair of the panel.

Connétable M. Labey of Grouville (Vice-Chair):

My name is Mark Labey, Connétable of Grouville. I am vice-chair.

Deputy H.M. Miles of St. Brelade:

I am Deputy Helen Miles of St. Brelade. I am a member of the panel.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Richard Vibert, Minister for Children and Families.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Deputy Malcolm Ferey, Assistant Minister for Children and Families.

Director, Children's Services:

Donna Marriott, Director of Children's Services.

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Darren Bowring, Associate Director of Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Head of Policy:

I am Andrew Heaven, Head of Policy.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay, thanks, everyone. We have 1½ hours for this hearing and our first questions are about online harms, so I will start with that. We would just to thank you for your input and response to the review. Minister, you accepted the panel's recommendation to have political responsibility for online safety and that you will chair the inter-Ministerial group focusing on online harms. Can you describe what the focus of that group has been following the publication of the report?

The Minister for Children and Families:

The first meeting of the group took place on 18th December and unfortunately I was not able to attend that because I was not on the Island. What has happened is the terms of reference have been published. We have also, in the last week, set up ... we have contacted the Law Commission in order to look at benchmarking the gap analysis between our existing legislation and proposed legislation. Also, although I still have to meet, I would want to also look at the online harms law in the U.K. (United Kingdom) as well and the gaps with that. Malcolm, you were at the meeting. I do not know if there is anything else that you can add on what they focused on.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Yes, thank you. I chaired the first meeting and what we wanted to do was some background work, so we invited all the telecommunications providers to attend that meeting and I am glad to say they

all accepted and turned up. That was JT, Sure, HomeNet and the Channel Islands Co-op. What we wanted to explore was what are the technological capabilities from their point of view where online harms might be able to be restricted and one of the things that can be done is routers can be filtered. They explained that it is a really good way of defending against harmful content even coming into the property. I guess the slight restriction on that is that applies to the whole household, so the router cannot be partitioned where only children or young people could have access there and adults could have access to a different part, but when you think, protecting against online harm of course is primarily pointed at children but it is also pointed at vulnerable adults and, when you think about it, all adults. I am sure we have all seen content online that we would sooner not see. That is something they can do. They also described a smartphone that some of the providers sell and what they can do with some training with the parents is it is a very effective way of making sure that there are parental controls on the phone itself, which are quite difficult to circumvent. It is not like you are just downloading an app that filters and can be bypassed. This is a phone that is specifically designed to still be a smartphone, still do all the things that a smartphone does but it will filter out harmful content. What you can do is make it age appropriate, so the whole thing has a spectrum of what can and cannot be allowed. The overriding opinion from the providers was that lots of parents do come in and just say: "I want a phone" and they point them across to receive some training and some of them say: "No, I just want a phone for my daughter or my son" and that is it.

The Minister for Children and Families:

I was just going to say about that phone, while on to it, of course it still allows, which a dumb phone does not, access to the internet. I know one provider is certainly intending to sell them, if they are not already selling them, and it uses A.I. (artificial intelligence) to filter things out like nudity and whatever without blocking other things. I think it is an excellent tool for those parenting or particular concerns.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

I cannot remember where I was now. Where did I get to?

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

You mentioned a few other points about the smartphone.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Yes, I got to the smartphone. The online content being blocked from the router, I said. Yes, okay. It was a productive meeting. They were all on board and they obviously all feel that this is pointed at their industry and, of course, they want their industry to be a safe place. That is what I was getting to. Parents quite often come in and just say: "I just want a phone for my child" and they have to

encourage parents to take the training. This is as much an education piece for parents and carers as it is about Government doing something as well.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Will that information go on the new website, which is being set up to inform parents?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Yes, there is. There is a really good website, which is set up as a subsite to gov.uk and you can go on that site and what it does is it gives parents easy access to information. At that time there was only one of the telco providers on that site, so we want to get all of them on there so that parents can make informed choices.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Thanks for that. One of the panel's key recommendations was the creation of a comprehensive online safety strategy. The response was it was partially accepted but the concluding paragraph indicated that it was rejected. We just wanted that confirmed: there is no single strategy planned now?

The Minister for Children and Families:

No. I do not know, Andrew, there is not, is there?

Head of Policy:

The view that Ministers have taken is that rather than spending time now writing a strategy that may change with a new administration, the view was focusing on the actions that are being committed to within this cycle of Government, of which there are a number. I am sure the Ministers will mention that. There was a view of focus on action, not writing a strategy, in the first instance.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

One of these considerations was about the change coming up of elections and so on?

Head of Policy:

Exactly.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Without a strategy, is there a risk of duplication or an unco-ordinated approach to addressing harms?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

I think that is the beauty of having that Ministerial group where key Ministers are involved where it directly affects their portfolio, so that will be the united approach of having the right people around the table to start to inform policy rather than spend time writing what that policy is going to be so we can start to move forward fairly quickly.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay. Maybe that will be considered in the future?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes. I think it is still an area that is moving rapidly and I think we have to look at the outcomes from other jurisdictions. For every positive action, or what is considered positive, there are downsides as well. I was in Australia the day the law came into effect banning social media for under-16s and it was interesting because it was also the birthday of one of my partner's nieces and she became 16 on that day. One of the key things, there were a number of parents there and it is strange that ... I did not ask any questions and they did not know who I was but one of their concerns immediately was that you go through ... children are going through the age verification and it uses A.I. to look at a picture of them and they have to do various movements so that they cannot allegedly get round it, and then if you fail that you have then got to pass on ... the young person is then asked for a lot of their personal information, including in some cases a copy of their passport or some other document that shows their age. Of course, they are providing all this information and not every provider has confirmed that they will delete that information. You think it is very positive but there is a downside already. Another one is that we were listening to somebody from the U.K. today and you can introduce blocks by age but then the providers will then take the view that there is nobody under that age viewing, therefore they do not have to put any restrictions on the content. There are pros and cons and I think we have to look at developments. I think Jersey is in a good place that when we do it by legislation we can learn from some of the downsides in the other jurisdictions.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Yes, of course, as long as there is not too much of a lag, I suppose.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

That is interesting. Considering the U.N.C.R.C. (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) general comment 25 requires comprehensive protection for children, how do the Government of Jersey plan to further support children's rights in the digital world if things are not so joined-up?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I do not think it is a case of not being joined-up. I we have that cross-Ministerial group now and I think that provides that level of coverage. Is it comprehensive? It is difficult to achieve comprehensive when young people themselves quickly find ways around the legislation. Already we were listening to the 16-year-old saying that some of the other girls were getting siblings to do the age verification and managing to get through without any problem, setting it up for their younger sister.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Like buying cigarettes and alcohol.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Yes, but we still outlaw them for children, do we not?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes, they are still outlawed. The law can be comprehensive but children are going to find ways around it.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

They may do.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Of course we cannot lose sight of the fact that children need access to the internet for their education, for their learning. There are lots of positives, so we need to harness the positives and not lose that while being able to find a safe way for them to negotiate the internet. When we have spoken to N.S.P.C.C. (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) and other charities, what they are primarily aimed at is let us find a way that children and young people can safely use the internet rather than just block it for them because in the long term that does not cure the problem. It perhaps just pushes it down the road.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I have a more specific question now considering the Data Protection (Jersey) Law domestic purposes exemption. Currently, before anything changes for online protection, in what ways does the current framework address and reduce the risks to children arising from the domestic purposes exemption in data protection law?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

The reason we looked at that data protection framework is, yes, there are some rights already for data subjects but the main thing that we want to change in that framework is to empower citizens to be able to take information or pictures off the internet in a short timeframe and if they go to the providers and ask for that to happen, if it does not happen within a set timescale, the Jersey Office of the Information Commissioner will get involved and they will champion that individual's rights. That was something we could do fairly quickly and without changing legislation too much. It does not cure all of the problems but what it does is, firstly, it raises awareness of the issue and, secondly, it empowers citizens to be able to take that content off quickly. Of course, we know once it is on one site it can spread on to all sorts of other sites but, again, it is still down to the provider to be taking that down. There is already a report button on all of these sites, which in lots of cases is really effective.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

It often is not, though.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Yes, exactly. They are inundated with those requests and a lot of it is done by A.I. anyway, but the whole point is that the Office of the Information Commissioner will take that on board for citizens, which is really important.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I know that Helen has a further question about that.

[14:15]

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Just sticking with the response to the review, the Council of Ministers accepted the recommendation about the gap analysis and we saw this morning that the Law Commissioner has been asked to do that. Have they got a timescale? When are they going to start and when are they going to finish?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I think we are looking for the Law Commissioner ... I will just check, because there are a number.

Head of Policy:

I think we are at the stage where we are having an in-principle conversation. As part of that initial conversation, we would be keen to stick to what we put in the response, which is, I think, from memory, the end of this year. The intention is that a document will be completed, the exercise will

be completed in time with the newly-arriving Ministers and what have you. The primary purpose is a factual account.

The Minister for Children and Families:

It is the summer really, is it not?

Head of Policy:

Yes, late summer. But at this point, Deputy, we are seeking the first conversation.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay. So you have not had a conversation with them yet?

Head of Policy:

Not yet.

The Minister for Children and Families:

No. We are due to next week, is it?

Head of Policy:

There is a couple of holds in the diary.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay, thank you. Going on to finding 13, which said that: "There was no evidence that the Minister for Sustainable Economic Development's decision to reject the permissive extent clause for the U.K. Online Safety Act initiated any alternative work to address how local legislation could be developed to provide alternative protection for users in Jersey." That finding that we made was rejected and we were just wondering if you could clarify the evidence for the rejection, please.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Since the decision not to accept the permissive extent clause from the U.K. Online Safety Act, several government departments have developed policies to develop local legislation that is more adequate and proportionate for a jurisdiction of Jersey's size. One of those, which we have just covered, is the removal of images and content that is in some way offensive to the person who viewed it. That would be reported into a European body that it can be removed within 48 hours. If that fails, we have our existing route through our commissioner. There is also legislation focusing on addressing illegal ... on the other side of it where people are ... what content can be downloaded and the penalties for downloading illegal content, but we have got to wait for obviously the legislative gap analysis. It is not the case that nothing has happened. We are looking at new legislation. There

is public consultation at the moment. I am happy that we are covering ... despite the P.E.C. (permissive extent clause) we are looking at the best interests of our children and protecting them.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

If I can just add to that, Richard. Speaking to our colleagues this morning in the U.K., I specifically asked about the Online Safety Act and whether they thought it was doing a good job or not. A specialist in the subject said that while it has got some really high level successes, and she cited Grok and the way that the Online Safety Act was able to get Elon Musk to change his mind about using the ability to have deep fakes and other nasty pornography that can be created on that site ... so high level it works reasonably well, but she said by her own admission there are lots of things that still need to be done with it. When it comes to online safety, we have an opportunity here to create something better than they have got in the U.K. The other issue, of course, with having a permissive extent clause to Jersey is we lose control of that legislation, so if the U.K. decides to change the law, which may or may not be to our advantage, then we automatically have to enact that in Jersey.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

This question was that we wondered what evidence there was. We could not find any evidence of work initiated after late 2022 before we started our review at the end of 2024. Our evidence was that there was no work initiated because at that point there did not appear to be anything, so we wondered why that finding was rejected.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Earlier on in the whole process the Minister and I visited an online safety conference in Jersey, which was instigated by N.S.P.C.C. and other charities. I think you were there. The overriding message from that conference when they spoke about online safety was exactly as I have just described. They were not confident that it was going to do what it was designed to do and that is being played out in real life.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Our finding was there was no work initiated before we started the review late 2024, so we were puzzled when we had that rejected to say that that was not the case, but actually there is no evidence of any work initiated before 2024.

Head of Policy:

If I may, I think there was work that was going on at an officer level in terms of reviewing the Online Safety Act, the European Digital Services Act. There were connections being made across a number of different jurisdictions.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

There may not have been a published report but there was lots of work going on.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

It is correct that we had no evidence because ...

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

That is where I was going to, yes.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

We asked the Minister for Sustainable Economic Development for his findings for his decision but we were never given that, so we had no evidence.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Continuing on finding 43, you have talked about meeting with the telecoms providers. The finding was that: "The Government of Jersey currently has no plans to introduce regulations requiring service providers to implement age-verification measures for users." That means that young children will have no age verification, for example, to access online content such as pornography. At the moment you can log on to various porn sites and set yourself up as a user. What is your view on that?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Certainly prior to me taking that lead with the Ministerial group, there was a view that the changes in some cases in effect would be global and we would benefit from that. Of course, that has not happened and I think it is something that we have to ... I am not convinced that total bans on 16-year-olds accessing things like social media are necessarily the right thing. However, I do think that we have to look at how in a small jurisdiction we can introduce those controls. What is more likely is because we are a small jurisdiction and we do not have the sway of the U.K. or Europe, well, we will just remove access altogether. The problem with that is that you then move into areas that people go into ... sites that are totally unregulated and the situation, not necessarily for the under-16s but possibly for the rest of the population, is less safe than it was before.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

The question is specifically around age verification for pornography and the Government have said that you are not going to bring legislation to require the telcos to implement that. Are you now saying that you do not think that is the right decision and you would change your mind?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I think it is something we ... I do not know that it is the telecoms providers that we would be asking to do that but as with the Online Harms Act they have ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

The telecoms providers, service providers.

The Minister for Children and Families:

... gone to the site owners to do that. As I say, the difficulty in asking anyone to do that in a small jurisdiction is that you do not have the sway of large countries. Therefore, we perhaps have to think of doing it in a different way.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Does that not support the argument that if we had the permissive extent clause in on the Online Safety Act we could have accessed that part of it?

The Minister for Children and Families:

But there are a lot of downsides of ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

I am asking about that specific age verification process for access to pornography is in the Online Safety Act, is it not?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I have to say that you would have to look at all the downsides as to whether you would then implement it because of one item. I am saying we have to look at a different way of achieving that.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

As part of the permissive extent clause, you can decide which parts of the law that you wish to extend into local legislation and perhaps if the Government was not making plans to introduce age verification for that, that would have been ... anyway, I will move on because I am conscious of time. Your Ministerial response also indicated that: "The Government of Jersey should develop legislation that mandates online platforms and service providers to monitor or remove inappropriate content." Is that one you have already covered through the Data Protection Law?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Are you able to clarify if the legislation that is going to be developed by the Minister for Sustainable Economic Development is going to specifically address suicide and self-harm as part of that?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

It would be all harmful content that is pointed at an individual.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

You have said in your response that: "Challenges will remain where content may be considered inappropriate but is not currently illegal in Jersey's legislative framework." Can you give any examples of that?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Yes, there is harmful but not illegal content, so something that perhaps is offensive but is not necessarily against the legislation. Of course, there is that delicate balance to be struck between freedom of expression and free speech tripping over into being outright offensive. That is why the offensive but not illegal content is always going to be a grey area. It was a big piece of the Online Safety Act that was taken out at the last minute because they knew it was an absolute minefield.

The Minister for Children and Families:

It is not online, but if you think in the recent weeks we have seen images on television from America of, in effect, someone being shot. That could have a very detrimental effect on a young person and that is just the sort of image that you would want to control with age restriction. It may be all right for an adult - and even then I am not entirely convinced that it is the correct thing to show on television - but for a young person that is harmful. You asked for examples. I think there is one there. We have had that on mainstream television.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

What handover information will your Ministerial group provide to the next Government in relation to online harms? What do you think the main priorities for the Government to take forward are in this area?

The Minister for Children and Families:

The officers, Andrew and so on, will provide a follow-on document for the next Minister, whoever that may be. I would hope that the Ministerial group will continue. The priorities that ... we come back to the best ways of protecting children and I think clearly we must make sure that if the law has not come to the Assembly from the Minister for Sustainable Economic Development, the law allowing images to be removed is a priority. We then need to move on and look at how we protect

children, possibly in different age ranges, and how are we going to achieve that as a small jurisdiction. There are some items that are probably at 13 you would not, then 16. I think just a limit of 16 is probably a cliff edge and we possibly need to look at tiering some of that.

[14:30]

Those, to me, are priorities for the next Government. They will learn things from the gap analysis that the Law Advisory Commission is looking at. It will be essential that they look at that and where those gaps are. Is there anything else that you would ...

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

No, I think that covers pretty much all of it.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

I know this is probably a silly question, but will the Ministerial group continue over the summer? There is going to be quite a significant break in between when Parliament prorogues, as we say.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Well, of course, I cannot answer that because I will not be ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

I know. That is why I said is that a silly question. Are you setting the direction for the work to continue?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I would not want this work to stop, because it is constantly moving. I think our discussion with N.S.P.C.C. and the U.K. expert today was extremely beneficial in learning some of the downsides but also the opportunities for Jersey, in that it has not yet introduced legislation and, in fact, to get that legislation right.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

I think that handover files are really important for all the Ministerial profiles because some items transcend political divisions and what is for the best interest of children and young people and the Island as a whole, and this is certainly one of them.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

So we are not going to stall this work. It will just continue

The Minister for Children and Families:

I would not want it to stall.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

There will be like a flight path into the next Ministerial team.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes.

Head of Policy:

Just to add, Minister, if I may, the officer group that is supporting the Ministers will continue to meet and take it very seriously, making sure that any new Ministers coming in are very clear about where we have got to.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay, thank you.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Minister, we are going to go on to questions about the Jersey Play Plan. One of the Play in the Community actions for sites and schools to explore, opening school grounds out of school hours and research which already allows this. Can you describe who owns that action and how it will be initially taken forward?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

The Play Plan in general highlights that as an issue, so thank you for pointing it out. The officer who is in charge of the Play Plan's publication and writing has now devoted a much greater chunk of her time to this piece of work going forward. It is a 3-year plan. There will be a group set up in March of this year to look at specifically those actions and how to take them forward. I think St. John School is one of the schools which is highlighted, where they have opened the facility outside of school hours so that children and young people can have great safe space to play. We would like to see all the schools doing that. Of course, they will work with the new Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, but that group will form part of that ambition to drive those actions forward. That is certainly one of the top ones, because there is no cost and it can be done really quickly. We just need to get schools on board and making sure, of course, that the area is safe and all those sort of things. There might be some considerations taken before they can do that, but there is no reason in 80 per cent of the cases that they cannot just throw their gates open and let the children use the equipment.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Do you think there will be a requirement for extra fencing perhaps or partitioning?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

There might be some small things that might need to be done to make the area safe and secure and all that, and that is what that group will look at: what are the barriers; how can we put something in place quickly to make sure that that is circumvented and that those facilities can be used?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I would hope that we make use of those grounds during the school holidays as well, because there is a major win there. Children want outdoor activities. We do not use ... they are empty, so hopefully that is something that will be looked at.

The Connétable of Grouville:

One of the goals of the Play Plan is to improve access to play in each and every parish. How will the Government support parishes and other organisations to encourage outdoor play spaces for children and young people?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Part of it is working with the Connétables, obviously, because I know that most Connétables have identified the space. Some of it, of course, is going to be down to funding. But, of course, very often you can create safe play spaces. It is not all about apparatus. It is about finding a safe place for children and young people to play and it can be done really cheaply sometimes. So let us not get hooked up on just swings and roundabouts. It is also about what is a little wooded area where children can play safely and what can we put in there? Just some logs or whatever we need to do to make a really safe space for children to play and that encourages children to do so. If we look - not just in town but outside of town - Play Streets, which is a big thing in lots of cities, and you see lots of the schools are starting to close off certain areas so they have got safer passage to school, safer routes to school, but also you could incorporate that, again relatively inexpensively, with a play facility on the streets so that children can play on the way to school.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Malcolm, I am going to invite you up to my parish. I have a road that is in fact closed adjacent to the school. I have offered it to various people. Nobody has ever taken up the opportunity to use it as a play area. I offered to Cycle Training; they did not want it. It is tarmac, so there are some limits, but it is closed and it is 100 per cent safe. We better have a meeting to go up there and see it.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Absolutely.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Have you painted it red, Minister? **[Laughter]**

The Minister for Children and Families:

I will think about that.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Just before you ask the next question, Connétable, one of the most important things throughout all our thinking is that play spaces are accessible for children and young people who have got disabilities or sensory impairment or whatever obstacle it is that stops them from accessing the play spaces that are currently there.

The Connétable of Grouville:

That is exactly my next question, Assistant Minister. The Play Plan references a number of ways that could help promote children with special needs attending various play experiences. Could the Government support in terms of space provided itself or equipment to facilitate these measures? The Government does own a lot of real estate.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

It does. I refer the Connétable to the answer I have just given. **[Laughter]** But you are right. To expand on that, of course, disability and inclusion is a really important part of the direction of travel of this Government and hopefully subsequent Governments. We do need to do all that we can to make sure that those spaces are accessible and available to everyone. Part of what we are doing is developing a digital online map. What that map highlights is not only where the play spaces are, but how accessible they are, where the parking is, where the cycle racks are, so that people are using active travel to get to those spaces. That digital map will continue to evolve and develop as the Play Plan plays out.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Can I just ask, do you know what the timeframe would be for that? When it might ...

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

For the digital map?

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Yes.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

We have got it in a format but we have not quite published it. There is still some data to be put on to the map. I looked at it fairly recently and I thought for the sake of another month or so, let us have something that is polished rather than something that is incomplete.

The Connétable of Grouville:

My next question is similar to the one on the last topic about the handover to the next Government. How do you think the next Government will ... will you, in other words, encourage the next Government in your handover to keep up with this strategy?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Yes. As I mentioned before, there is an officer who is devoting a lot more of her time to that. The Play Plan is rolled out over a 3-year period. So that work, because it is already factored in, there was no budget attached to it. When Deputy Gardiner brought her proposition, we removed the need for budgeting. It is within the existing budget, so there is no reason that that work will not continue.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Of course, the plan, as you quite rightly say, is a 3-year plan between 2025 and 2028. What would you like the plan, in your opinion, to have achieved by the end of this period?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

I would like to see more accessibility, more availability to play spaces. I would like to see parents having more opportunities to play with their children. This is as much of an education piece for parents and carers as anybody else. I would like for children to realise that they have a right to play. We know that that is enshrined in legislation and I would like to see them exercise their rights more often. We go up to the School Council Network and they know those Articles inside out and they are more than happy to exercise them. I would hope that they would not have to ask to have permission to play and there would be no barriers for them to have those opportunities to play.

The Connétable of Grouville:

In your opinion, how will the progress be measured over those 3 years?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

We have got those actions that are in the Play Plan. I would like to see all of those actions ticked off by the end of the 3 years. That would be my ambition.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Wonderful. Do you anticipate that central government funding will be required for elements of the strategy in the future?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Some things are possible with little or no funding; some things are going to need funding sooner or later. What I would like to see is, in the forthcoming budget, that some money was allocated for the most needy areas. That is why that digital map shows us all the areas of excellence and also shows where the gaps are, so some will just stand out a mile. All we need to do then is find a piece of land that is available to everyone. It might be a relatively small amount of money, it might be a bit more, but let us get that happening.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Do you anticipate at this time, in your opinion, if there is any specific areas that you are thinking may need funding?

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

I know that lots of parishes have highlighted pieces of land, parcels of land in their jurisdiction that with a small amount of funding, they could get something better than what is already there. Let us work with the parishes to achieve that.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I have some questions now about Children's Services. Firstly, about the Children's Residential Estate. Minister, the approved Government Budget included significant additional funding for the Loving Homes Estate. Of this, there was £1.934 million approved for the Residential Care Budget in 2026. Can you provide an update as to the specific work to be undertaken this year?

The Minister for Children and Families:

The £1.934 million relates to the purchase and refurbishment of a property in St. Helier that will be utilised as supported accommodation provision for young people in care and leaving care, and to support their transition towards independent living. I will not name the property, but it is in close proximity to where the new youth centre will be built. It offers an opportunity, in effect, to centralise things in that area with the Youth Service, Y.E.S. (Youth Enquiry Service) and this accommodation. It is a collaboration with Andium Homes, who will also build, not in 2026, 3 one-bedded units adjacent to the property to provide semi-supported accommodation to assist young people in preparing for independence. Within a relatively short time - I would think 2 years - I would hope that we would then have the units at St. Peter, which will allow that independence. There are 6 units. Again, that is being done in conjunction with Andium Homes. I do not think there is not any danger of that not taking place because the parish was quite instrumental in working in the early days with the builder

and Andium Homes and suggesting that as a project. There is not only Children's Services but there is a parish element to ensuring that that happens. The £1.934 million will refurbish that initial property.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

For 2026, it is going to be the one in St. Helier?

The Minister for Children and Families:

It will be the one in St. Helier, yes.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

There was also additional funding of £335,000 for Greenfields in 2026 and then a pause in works until 2028. Can you advise about the status of the works this year?

The Minister for Children and Families:

The funding works for Greenfield includes £100,000 is to refurbish a property on ... and Greenfield here, we are talking about Greenfield as a site rather than the Greenfields building. There is a small property on that site, which will provide an emergency/remand bed, and this fits in with the legislation that was passed, which requires us to have a remand bed. £100,000 is for that.

[14:45]

There is a short wait, as we wait for the exit of La Passerelle School before we can refurbish that building. The remainder of the funding is to provide for outstanding phase 1 of Greenfield refurbishment. I should say we started the refurbishment and did works in 2025 and we achieved that from savings, but the additional money that is going to be spent, £90,000 is to refurbish family rooms on the Greenfields building, or that complex of buildings that exists at the moment. That is particularly important because what we are going to produce there is family rooms where the families can come and visit children who are in there. They can probably cook a meal, I think that is right, they will have cooking facilities and it will be a homely atmosphere in each one of those. I think that is particularly important because there is nothing of that nature there at the moment when families visit. Then the other monies, we have to also not just refurbish but change the nature of 2 of the rooms at Greenfield so that they can be used for inherent jurisdiction. That means that rather than being totally secure, you have a situation where the court allows restrictions on perhaps the young person leaving at night but during the day they are able to go for education, they are able to undertake activities, but inherent jurisdiction there are restrictions usually at night time to prevent them from leaving the premises. That means a separate entrance from the existing part of Greenfields. It was built in effect with 6 units and 2 units at one end, so it lends itself to those 2 units

being used for a different purpose. Of course, the nature of the rooms will be different as well because it is not a totally secure unit. You want them to be more homely, but nevertheless secure at night.

Director, Children's Services:

I suppose the other thing it will enable us to do, which we cannot do currently, is to be able to, if we need to, separate out custody and remand from welfare. That means that obviously if you have got children that are much more challenging, the unit at the moment does not lend itself to be able to keep those children separate. This will enable us to run 2 separate units if we need to, depending on children's needs. So, it enables you to manage risk in a whole different way than what we are able to currently.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I have got a couple of questions, which we could follow up perhaps in writing. So, if I go ahead now. The next one I have got is, Minister, please could you briefly outline if there is a policy in place about the removal of a child from their parents when questions or problems arise around prescribed medications that parents or carers might be taking, and is this taken into account when assessing their fitness to be parenting?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I do not know if it did prompt it, but there has been a recent court judgment and some subsequent media interest. I will not obviously talk about the judgment, but what I can say is that in relation to the removal of a child from their parents where issues arise around prescribed medication, my position and the department's is such that any decision is taken in line with the child's best interest and in accordance with the Children's (Jersey) Law 2002, and the Children and Families Law 2022. Concerns regarding medication would be assessed as part of a wider assessment of the child's needs and any risk of significant harm. We would not just look at the medication, we would look at all factors, such assessments obviously informed by professional advice from health and social care practitioners and undertaken in partnership with parents whenever possible. Removal from parental care would only be considered where it is necessary to safeguard and promote a child's welfare and where less intrusive measures are insufficient to manage the identifiable risks. So any decision that arises from prescribed medication would only be in conjunction with all the other factors in the case.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay. So there is not a specific policy on prescribed medication; it is looking at the bigger picture?

The Minister for Children and Families:

No. I have got to be a little bit careful because I cannot be seen to comment on that judgment. If you did look at the full picture, I am not sure the media ...

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

We did look at the case as well.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Minister, please could you also advise in relation to children in foster care, is there a policy in place around the process for the removal of a child from that care following any court decision? For example, is there a period of preparation, gradual transition incorporated so no child would just be removed from the home they are living in without any ...

The Minister for Children and Families:

No. Unless there was some extreme emergency, that would not be the case. A decision to remove a child from placement, in a similar way, you have to look at all the facts involved, but you would want a period where the child was prepared for that and that it was not a sudden change that they have suddenly moved from one foster parent to another. So, no, we would not.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

So it would only be in an emergency?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes. It would have to be an extreme emergency for you to ...

Director, Children's Services:

I think probably it is maybe about that question, because I do not know if I am misinterpreting what you are saying, but I think if there is a court decision around a child moving, perhaps when foster care ends and a permanent placement is going to be the next part, and move to somewhere else as part of the court care plan for the child, that would happen in a very planned and considered way, because that would be a thing that you do. Perhaps adoption is the plan or going home, that would happen over a period of time. It would happen as part of the assessment team would say it needs to be this many days or this long depending on the child's age. Younger children might move quicker than an older child. If it is a safeguarding concern, so there was a concern about the foster placement, then that would obviously be the same as any investigation and action that you would take to safeguard at a moment in time. It is always going to be driven by the court plan and the

court decision about the timescales, when the court determine the child will move and the care plan that they endorse and the directions that they make. We would have to comply with that and work with that always.

The Minister for Children and Families:

It could happen outside of the court decision. I think that is what I was thinking.

Director, Children's Services:

A safeguarding one, yes.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes. I can think of one where it was outside of our control altogether.

Director, Children's Services:

Due to the safeguarding concern, yes.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Considering the child's rights would always be prioritised?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

It would always be the aim to make a gradual transition for that child?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Absolutely.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes. It is always dependent on what the plan is and what is the purpose of that. Some children will be having lots of contact with their family during the time they are in foster care, and if they are having lots of contact, they have got the relationship. If they are going home, then they may go more quickly. If they are going to a whole new family for adoption and they do not know anyone, then that might look different because they will need more preparation to transfer their attachment across. If they are going to a whole different situation, perhaps into a care arrangement, that might look different as well. I think it depends really. It depends on who they are moving to and the relationship they have got with the people they are moving to and the length of time it needs to

prepare that. The professionals should be able to assess that need properly and have an expert view around it.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Thank you. I am just going to ask a question about something, which we raised, I think, in a previous hearing as well. Minister, please can you clarify what the policy is relating to the restraint of children and young people in children's homes, when the child might be going out and perhaps getting into potential danger somewhere at night?

The Minister for Children and Families:

The situation there is, unless it is inherent jurisdiction, that if the child insists on leaving, we cannot ultimately prevent them from leaving. That may seem strange, but nevertheless it is contrary to the U.N.C.R.C., and I do not think any children's service in the U.K. would have a different policy. I mean inherent jurisdiction is the ...

Director, Children's Services:

Can I just add to that, Minister? Unless there is a significant safeguarding concern at that moment, you knew that the risks were so high you might then try to be more restrictive. If you had evidence that suggests that something was an imminent risk, then those staff would be able to make that judgment, but it would be very unusual, not just because they are going out ...

The Minister for Children and Families:

Contrary to what may have been reported at times in the in the media, staff will try to persuade the young person that it is not the right thing to be leaving and they will do their very best, but if they absolutely demand, then we cannot restrain them and prevent them from leaving.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay. For example, if a child is going out regularly and sitting on a bridge somewhere and threatening to throw themselves off, they would be restrained from leaving?

The Minister for Children and Families:

If you were aware that is what they were going to do.

Director, Children's Services:

If you knew at that moment in time that child's intention was going to go to that bridge then clearly you might make that decision that you need to take safeguarding action. But you would have to be evidence-based because you are intervening and restricting that child's rights and their liberty, so you would have to do that in a moment of time. If we had an ongoing issue about that child, for

example, then we might then use, like the Minister is saying, things like inherent jurisdiction to be able to do that in a more managed way because we know it is going to be a continuing issue.

The Minister for Children and Families:

You may be thinking of one particular site in Jersey and there is very good news in the last 24 hours that finally we have got work underway, which we have been requesting for some time, to close off that area. That should be done in the next few days in fact, a week. We have been working on it for a long time, but a decision has been made now to close that off.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay. All right, thank you.

Deputy H. M. Miles:

It was just some facts and figures really about Children's Services, if you have them today. If not, we can write. It was just how many current vacancies you have currently in the service?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I can do that one. Vacancies, if we go down the various areas, we have got 8 unfulfilled vacancies in Children's Services, 31.67 in Children's Residential Service, 6.75 posts in C.A.M.H.S. (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), and 3 vacancies in the Youth Service. Now, I will just say on Children's Residential Service, that has been an area where for some time it is been difficult to recruit. The good news is that we have a review of terms and conditions that has started and we would hope that will help in that case. I do not know if you were going to ask about the number of agency staff that posed.

Deputy H. M. Miles:

That was going to be my next question. How many roles to fill through temporary agencies?

The Minister for Children and Families:

In Children's Social Work 23 posts are currently agency workers, 15 posts in Children's Residential Service, and that sort of indicates that we can only find 15 agency workers at the rates we are able to pay that will fill those posts.

Deputy H. M. Miles:

What was the cost? Have you got the total cost for agency for 2025?

The Minister for Children and Families:

I have. What I will do is I will give you a comparison for 2024. So, 2024 it was £5.762 million, 2025 was £4.48 million, so there was a saving of £1.23 million per annum because we have reduced the number of agency staff. That is very good news. I have got to say that unfortunately the residential staff, is it over 10 years since they were last ...

[15:00]

Director, Children's Services:

Yes, the T. and C.s (terms and conditions) were.

The Minister for Children and Families:

That is a situation that should not ever be repeated because it has led to a lot of pressure on the system.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Providing that a more stable workforce gives more permanency to the children and young people as well as the staff.

Deputy H. M. Miles:

Exactly. Which helps with behaviour, does not it? How is the Government's recruitment freeze affecting Children's Services? I know you are not affecting the front line, but what about the back office?

Director, Children's Services:

We have just got a bit of work going on about that at the moment, trying to look at things that are part of the new improvement plan work and that we need, because they are part of growth, how we navigate the pathway around the recruitment freeze, because some things are impacted through the system. It is trying to work out how we make sure that the things ... that priority is part of the improvement plan happen, and that work is just happening with H.R. (Human Resources) at the moment, and through the C.E.O. (Chief Executive Officer), so that we get ourselves into the right space. There are some pressures in things like administration roles, business support roles that directly support social workers. We have got to navigate a bit of that, because we have got to drive through the plan across the system and make it work, but we have been working our way through it, so I am confident we will get there. A lot of things are essential, like C.A.M.H.S social work roles, the front line staff is absolutely happening in the way it should.

Deputy H. M. Miles:

But you want the front line to be doing front line work, not office and admin work.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes, not doing administration work. We are paying social workers a lot of money.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

It is a bit chicken and egg.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes. We have got a little bit of work to do to navigate that in the middle of a big freeze across government.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

At our last quarterly hearing we asked you about short break services and you said that you had a project going on looking at the analysis of short breaks in order to make the changes to address the poor rating that was provided by parents and users. Are you able to provide an update on the status of that, please?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes. So, we have ...

Director, Children's Services:

Minister, I do not know if it would help you if you want me to give the timeline that I have got for it. We have not sent it to you. Would you like me to do that first and then you can talk to it? Would that be helpful?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes.

Director, Children's Services:

The project began late November, so the internal working groups met and we got all the key stakeholders there. The survey has gone out to 350 families. I have just got the data now. There has been 4 workshops with various family groups. The needs analysis is due the 1st, which is on time and it is going to be met on time. It is just being concluded today.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

1st February?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes, 1st February. They are just having the meeting, that is why I have only just got the data now. We will define the offer by 28th February. We are in the process of already starting, but we will have developed that sufficiency strategy by 1st March, and we think the procurement strategy will start by 31st March, because we know we need to stimulate the market. From the early feedback we have got, we know that families are saying they want more access to universal, to be able to access that more universally, more support around some of the specialist. The review of the short breaks residential homes is concluded and that is going to feed back on 1st February as well. More work to do around consistency and equity, but also we know that probably there is not going to be enough provider in the market, so that is why we need to do that procurement strategy work in March. It is well on its way.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Thank you. How are families being incorporated into the changes about service design? Are they included in the stakeholder work?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes. That work, with the survey first, which we concluded. There have been obviously a lot of surveys gone out and they will be brought back into the analysis and the rest of the work around the sufficiency development as well.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

When are parents likely to see some tangible difference to their short break service?

Director, Children's Services:

Things like the residential short breaks, which is in our gift because they are ours, and our 2 short breaks homes we will be able to implement more quickly, so things like stimulating the market will have to come post the procurement strategy because we will have to go out with new procurement probably. That will not be until later in the year, that new market stuff. Short breaks within our gift, what we are recommending is we will increase the offer we have got and utilise our 2 short breaks homes better. I think we know we can do that. That work has started but it is a little bit dovetailed by the residential short break at the residential restructure that obviously impacts all those staff as well. That terms and condition review started on 12th January. It is due to conclude on 14th February. Then we have got a period where obviously staff will have to go through a new process. That will hold it up a little bit because we clearly need to get more residential staff, but it will happen quickly.

The Minister for Children and Families:

I do not think it will surprise anybody that even the initial findings suggest that the current level of demand is unlikely to be met within the existing budget. So, something for the next Government is to look at increasing the budget for short breaks. I think we were honest last time in that we knew this was an area that needed looking at.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

You did say last time that you could increase the offer of that extra money.

The Minister for Children and Families:

We can do some, yes.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes. We can do some residential without a doubt, we know we can mobilise that.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

That is capacity management, is it not?

Director, Children's Services:

We will have to do a bit of capacity work, but also I think we just need to be more creative because it does not always have to be an overnight, and we can use those 2 units much more effectively. We have already done some things, like our home care offer, which is not short breaks but it does take children out of the family and give a bit of a break. We have already mobilised a lot more money, we have doubled the budget there for home care. We are just about to go out with a different approach that means that we will not be spot purchasing everything. There will be more contractual arrangements, which will help to get more stability in the provider market. That will help a lot because then there will be more availability and more stability for families as well, much more stability that they know that they will be able to have their break and that will keep happening, all their home care.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

That is good news. Thank you.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes. We have done some stuff, and there is quite a firm plan. We have done quite well.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Outside of our own, we do not know that there are enough suitable providers on the Island to do that.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes. It is a problem for us.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Yes. Market development has always been that, yes.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Maybe new people will enter the market when our budget is ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

But they need support to do that. That is part of the commissioning process, is it not?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes. Coming away from spot purchasing, because then you will make it viable for providers to say: "I will have X number of staff and I could offer Y." We have just done that quite successfully with our home care. Just started to, have we not?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes.

Director, Children's Services:

Once we start to follow that similar proposal into the next bit and we are clear about what the sufficiency need is, I think we will be able to mobilise some bits quite quickly, and some market provision will take a bit long.

The Connétable of Grouville:

The Children and Young People Emotional Well-being and Mental Health Strategy was for the period 2022 to 2025. Can you confirm if that strategy will be renewed this year, and if so when?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

The previous strategy covered multiple different areas, and more than C.A.M.H.S. We did a formal review of the implementation of that strategy towards the end of 2025. If you want for me to give you some headlines, that has been largely implemented. As you know, we have had significant investment and redesign of C.A.M.H.S. services. We expanded staffing from 17 to 80 full-time staff. We have redesigned services, such as now having an early intervention service with mental health practitioners attached to clusters of schools. We have got a dedicated neurodevelopmental service, which was timely given the volumes of requests for neurodevelopmental assessments. I think we

will come to some of the successes we have had with our assessment data shortly. We have a dedicated crisis and assessment service now, and we expanded the time of that service from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. 7 days a week, alongside C.A.M.H.S. nurses in the adult service so that we now have 24-hour C.A.M.H.S. nurses on duty in Jersey, which is a success. From the expansion development of service we have obviously reflected ... there was work done on governance, risk, data, quality and assurance, and we have now been through our third Jersey Care Commission and Royal College of Psychiatry inspection with year-on-year improvements and closer meeting on standards. I think we have had quite a successful implementation of what was a very good and robust strategy. As we are now in 2026, last year significant work was done on the next Mental Health Strategy, which is going to run from this year to 2030. It is going to be an all-age Mental Health Strategy and significant work has been done by Mental Health, with Donna and Andy Weir as Director of Adult Mental Health and Adult Social Care as responsible officers. There has been huge amounts of stakeholder engagement, lots of analysis, and we have just, recently, in January, had 2 workshops where we have looked at all the results of the work completed on that and the key themes that have come out and the key actions. Those workshops were very well attended by a mix of professionals, charities, people with lived experience, family carers, et cetera. Work is now being done by Public Health to shape that into the final strategy. In the next few months we will see that strategy begin to be launched.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

You said “all age”. It is not going to be separated as children and young people?

Associate Director, Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing:

No.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

How is an all-age one beneficial? How do you not lose the focus on children and young people in particular?

Associate Director, Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Within that we are going to have sections that are dedicated to the 2 different areas, but, for example, one of the key themes that has come up again is transition, development of integrated pathways, the fact that we need as an Island to focus on prevention, and because obviously there is limited finance we cannot keep investing across services in more psychiatrists and more psychologists. We need to think preventative-wise, early intervention, why we can see more and more people present. There are some common themes across the areas and some ways of being able to integrate our work and ensure we improve what we have and the pathways that we have.

Director, Children's Services:

There is something about the coherence for families and for adults and children about the pathways, the transition into the next bit, how that can be more joined up if we see things more of as a system rather than people fitting into boxes, is what clearly families and children and adults are telling us. There are too many barriers in things.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

We know transition has been a problem for many people, but there will not be a focus lost on the young people?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Absolutely not.

Director, Children's Services:

Services are the same. It is about focusing across the whole rather than keeping those strategies separately, otherwise you end up with a strategy everywhere, but how do they join? This will hopefully help it to join up across. There is still a section for children; there will still be the priorities for them.

The Connétable of Grouville:

To maintain the consistency of this panel, we have asked you throughout the assessment times and intervention, how are the current waiting times, what are they looking like and how are they comparing with 6 months ago, 12 months ago, say?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

In, 2025 we completed routine mental health assessments on average on 32 days, for which we have a target of 36 days. Obviously all our referrals come through the Children and Families Hub and are triaged. Some young people are seen the same day or within 24 hours. The ones that are rated the lowest as routine mental health assessments, we completed on 32 days, which was really quick. In our N.H.S. (National Health Service) benchmarking where we compare to all U.K. C.A.M.H.S. services, we were one of the quickest for mental health assessments, so that was really good. In 2024, it was 31 days and last year, 32 days, so not much difference in them. The neurodevelopmental assessments clearly were more of a challenge. Last year we completed in 71 weeks, compared to 55 weeks the year before. I think we need to acknowledge that between 2020 and 2024 we received 1,012 referrals for autism assessments and 1,342 referrals for A.D.H.D. (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) assessments, which was a significant challenge on such a small service to be able to address. What I would say is that 71 weeks compares extremely favourably to waits in the U.K. What I would also ...

The Minister for Children and Families:

Three years in the U.K., is it?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Yes. More in some.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Are you going to give the good news?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

In terms of a number of assessments? Yes. Last year we completed a record of 649 diagnostic assessments in one calendar year, which included 476 A.D.H.D. assessments and 137 autism assessments.

[15:15]

We completed nearly 4 times as many assessments as we had referrals last year. We are in a current position where we only have 103 young people now waiting for A.D.H.D. assessments and 224 waiting for autism assessments. Of those 224 for autism assessments, we are about to allocate 120 to a virtual assessor partner, which we have got funds for. We have also added in a significant internal capacity for the rest. What we should see this year is a clear reduction of the backlog that has caused some of those timescales and much shorter waits this year. I think that is a good news story. The service has worked particularly hard to address that. Any spare funding that we have had in terms of posts not being recruited, we paid for private diagnostic assessments. An awful lot of work has gone into that.

The Minister for Children and Families:

If we go back to 2023, there were, was it almost 1,000 referrals that came in, in one year?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

In one year, yes. If you go back to 2019, we were doing 30 autism assessments a year, the service was doing. Then into 2020, we saw this increase. What is encouraging, and I think what we predicted as well, that post-COVID bit - and I think this is positive for the Island - there has been a real skilled identification of features of neurodiversity. We have seen a greater awareness from teachers and parents. We have had lots of young people referred and now assessed. Last year, numbers referred dropped considerably as we expected, because hopefully most people with features have now been assessed and are getting support. We should see smaller numbers coming

in and, with our increased capacity, we should see a bit more consistent and shorter waiting times going forward.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Are you aware of the impact of private assessments on the service and how that has affected your service going forward?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

They have been vital. At the end of last year, we found some more funding, so we had 2 locum psychiatrists work full-time privately on A.D.H.D. assessments. That is all they did for the remaining months of the year, helpfully getting us on top of some of them. As you know, we have had a virtual autism assessment partner who do virtual autism assessments, which is very helpful for some families who like to have that from the comfort of their own home. As that contract had been in place for 3 years, we have just gone through a tender process. We have had a significant number of applications for that tender this year, and I have got interviews tomorrow to finish that. By the beginning of next week, we will award a tender again for this year. We have funding for around 120 autism assessments this year from that company that will be allocated. That gives us good capacity, and we need that with being such a small service and the volume of the referrals coming through.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Very good. A final question from me is, Minister, can you provide an update about the future location of C.A.M.H.S.?

The Minister for Children and Families:

The future location of C.A.M.H.S.? Well, there are new premises for C.A.M.H.S. to move to. Not new to the government but a building that we have had before.

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

The lease should be signed by tomorrow. I think it is been reported in the media, because of planning applications, et cetera.

The Connétable of Grouville:

No. Do not say anything if it is commercially sensitive.

The Minister for Children and Families:

But we have new premises.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Okay, good.

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

We should have a move this August. That is the current plan.

The Connétable of Grouville:

That is fine. Keep us informed, that is all we ask.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Can I just ask a question? You mentioned about the tender process for those services offering a virtual assessment. When working out who to choose from in that process, do you consider feedback from families, parents and children who have gone through that process?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Yes, we have. Obviously, everybody that has a virtual assessment completes the feedback form. I must say we have been really pleased with the company that has been providing that service, but there has been a significant interest in the current tender, and part of why we are now interviewing, because there was a number of companies who applied that scored very closely in that process. Part of the reason why we are interviewing now is to get a feel of how they would be in front of families. We have also got lots of information as part of their submissions over existing contracts and feedback from those services as well. We are taking it into consideration, but it has been quite an endeavour.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Did any local providers come forward to bid?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

No. All off-Island.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Is that because you were asking for virtual service or were you just asking for a diagnostic service?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

It was asked for a virtual service because of the increased capacity that we have had. That has worked very well where we can give families a choice of either coming into C.A.M.H.S. or one of our other centres to have their assessment or doing it at home virtually. Obviously, there are some children and young people that really struggle coming into clinical appointments and managing that with associated behavioural issues and challenges for parents. For some families they have said it

has been much easier to be able to have the option of doing their assessments from home. There are obviously some challenges to that, and sometimes it might need follow-up work done by our service as well, but we have certainly found it being a helpful addition to what is being offered.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Will every child have a choice of whether to have a virtual assessment or face-to-face assessment?

Associate Director, Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Yes.

The Connétable of Grouville:

That is good. Right, the big question, Chair.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Yes. Considering it is our last public hearing as a panel, Minister and Assistant Minister, what are your overarching reflections on this term of office? I will ask all the questions now. Which commitments remain unfinished and what initiatives are currently in progress that may be carried forward by the next Minister, should they choose to do so? So, overarching reflections and what is ongoing as well.

The Minister for Children and Families:

I think one of the big ones is the residential plan for Children's Services. I am very pleased to have been the Minister when we were able to persuade the Government that we needed to move away from short-term lets on premises that we were allowed to have, and that we could move to a proper residential estate. That will be something that the next Minister will be responsible for, but we have the money secured. I am very pleased that it is something that will happen, and it will finally give Children's Services security, but also the children security in that they know they will be in those homes for whatever time they are required to be there and that they will not suddenly be moved somewhere else. We have had a succession of houses, even in the relatively short time I have been the Minister, and that was not a situation that we could allow to continue. That disruption has not provided good outcomes for some of the children. That is one. I have got to give credit to everyone who was responsible for developing the Corporate Parenting Board. It had been in existence for a long time but it was not effective. We have got that on to a proper footing. We have got subgroups working on various projects. It is really becoming something that is useful. The next Minister will move on to the young people playing a greater part within that Corporate Parenting Board. So, those are 2. Very recently, the law came in this week, but remission has been introduced. What a positive thing that was. We have one of the young people who played a quite valuable part in that, and one has to thank her for highlighting the problem. So, very pleased about that. The Fostering

Group that we have is in much better shape. There is more work to be done, but there are positive signs there. The refurbishment of Greenfields where we have a plan, things are underway. The outdoor area has already been refurbished and made safe. It dated back to the very early days of Greenfields and needed totally revamping. That has been done out of savings last year. We should have brought some photographs because it looks really nice and I am pleased about that. There were other things. We mentioned the review of terms and conditions for residential staff. It will be 10 years this year since anyone looked at that. I am sure it is going to be good for staff and the service. We have had the Play Plan, which Malcolm is currently looking at. Finally, we have got the St. Helier Youth Centre under way. I mean, how long has that been talked about? There is a building and we are creating in effect a hub there in St. Saviour's Road of all the youth activities. Those are my reflections and there is plenty for the next Minister to get on with.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Just some extra information on the youth facility in Ann Street. The contract was signed at the tail end of last year and work began on Monday of this week with Dandara and J.D.C. (Jersey Development Company). The timelines are still May 2028 for completion, and Belmont House, which is going to be the Y.E.S. centre, its timeline for completion is December of this year. Again, a big piece of work that was hanging around for a long time. I know the panel visited the building in its raw state, and I am sure you will be as excited as I am when that building is finished and you can go around it again.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Y.E.S. was an addition to the project, because it was a youth centre to start. What I would like to say, I would like to thank all of you for the very positive way that you have dealt with me. Very fair. It is what Scrutiny should be. I am not sure that every Scrutiny group perhaps works in the same way, but I have to say it has been a pleasure. Thank you very much.

The Connétable of Grouville:

We are not doing our job if it has been a pleasure. [Laughter]

The Minister for Children and Families:

You are doing your job, but it is constructive. Everything that you have ever asked and you have ever dealt with is constructive, and I would like to say thank you very much.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

I have given evidence on 5 different Scrutiny Panels throughout these 2 Governments, and this one is productive and measured and we give answers.

The Minister for Children and Families:

To all of you, thank you very much.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Well, that is really nice, is it not. I am very pleased to hear that because I have imagined we have probably been quite annoying.

The Minister for Children and Families:

No, not really. Everything you have done has been with the best intentions and constructive, and I thank you for that.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I think that is what we all want, is it not, the best intentions for children's welfare?

The Connétable of Grouville:

Absolutely, yes. We have a common goal, and Darren is still anticipating all my questions though.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Well, I will tell you what, look where C.A.M.H.S. has come in.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Thank you very much. That is the end of our public hearing because we have come to the end of our questions.

[15:28]