

**Cabinet – 14 September 2023**

**Written question from Simon Richards to the Leader**

I welcome the reference in item 6, the Report from the Cabinet Member for Finance, Climate Change & Biosphere, to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. I wish to draw Cabinet's attention to Article 3 of the Convention which places a duty to consider the best interests of the child as a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children. As it has been evidenced by council officers, headteachers and chairs of governors that reducing the excessive surplus of school places in our primary schools is in the best interests of children, what is the timetable for taking action on this issue?

## ***Response***

We have a problem.

We have too many empty children's spaces in our schools. This is impacting on our island children's education in many ways, financially; teacher recruitment, retention and training; SEN provision; the ability to deliver a full broad-based curriculum.

Schools are mostly funded on the basis of how full they are.

Where there are fewer pupils than places then schools do not get the full amount of money they need to do their job.

The School Funding system needs to change.

However we don't know if or when that will happen, therefore we need to look at ways to effectively manage the empty spaces issue for the benefit of our island families now. Inevitably, this will involve the closure of some schools.

This is not an easy course to take.

In particular it relies on information and understanding and a consideration and, if necessary, an acceptance that there is no other alternative.

Earlier this year it was proposed we take such a route but that came about without the public having sufficient information and an understanding of the problem.

As a result we stepped back to allow time to work with everyone concerned to be able to understand fully the rationale behind the proposed consultations to close.

The unfortunate timing of a review of the partnership with Hampshire County Council for the provision of Childrens Services resulted in a decision by Hampshire County Councillors not to continue as they needed to focus on Hampshire children.

It has been made clear by senior officers that we cannot manage the transition away from the partnership and proceed with the school place planning process at the same time.

It is imperative that we sort out the management of Childrens Services and this process is already underway.

This gives us the opportunity, in respect of school place planning, to provide information and develop understanding of the situation and to explore any possible alternatives to a process of closure that might exist and to do that with stakeholders, including teachers, parents and communities.

Therefore, as indicated earlier this summer, we will now commence an informal all Island process for the next 4 months to engage with and listen to you, our residents, before potentially moving to a formal process once we have our new management arrangements in place in 2024.

No schools shall be named for possible closure until that time, but we cannot rule out at this stage the possibility of there being some school closures.

In the meantime we will ensure that sound financial support and advice for schools continues to be provided and we will work with headteachers and parents to achieve this.