

Legislation: Minister rejects claim that wording of question on home-schooling is 'undemocratic'**Education consultation 'unfair'**

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Education Minister Graham Cregeen has rejected claims that the current consultation on a new law is unfair to those who want to home-school their children.

Tougher rules on home learning are included in the draft Education Bill and critics have claimed the wording of questions in the consultation are unfair.

But Mr Cregeen said there was a section for further comment that would enable anyone to get their view across.

He also challenged anyone who had serious concerns about the home learning provisions in the new bill to table amendments when it goes before the House of Keys.

Parents are already required to notify the government of plans to home educate.

But the draft bill would take the law further, stating: 'The department must assess the educational development of children in the island receiving home education.'

It adds assessments must be carried out for each child and the parent of a child 'must comply' with any request by the department to provide information for assessment.

In the House of Keys on Tuesday, Mr Cregeen insisted: 'Home educators have the right to comment on these provisions, which will be reviewed by the department when the consultation closes.'

But Rob Callister (Onchan) took issue with the wording of this question in the consultation: 'Are the assessment proposals sufficient for the department to ensure that a suitable education is provided to home educated children?'

He claimed: 'If I answer "yes" to that question as a home educator then I will be stating very clearly that I am happy with the proposals.'

'But if I state "no" then this indicates that the provisions are insufficient and therefore do not go far enough.'

Mr Callister argued that the wording of the question

was 'forcing' respondents to say yes or no and deterring them from making a comment.

UNDEMOCRATIC

'This particular question is unfair, undemocratic and clearly shows that the Department of Education has once again failed to listen to genuine concerns being raised by those who choose to home educate,' he said.

But Mr Cregeen insisted the question was fair.

'All they have to do is put the comment in the box below,' he said. 'If somebody is concerned about home education, whether for it or against it, why would they not want to make a comment?'

The Minister added: 'I have had discussions with home educators and, unfortunately, got to the position that we could not agree on the way forward.'

'So we are coming forward with these proposals.'

He challenged MHKs who 'feel that there should not be any regulation on home educators, come forward and say that these children are quite acceptable to be kept invisible'.

Cabinet Office member Alex Allinson (Ramsey) pointed out that in an earlier consultation, to gauge public opinion before drafting the bill, respondents were asked: 'Should the department seek evidence from home educators on the education they are giving to their children?'

The response was 67.1% in favour, he said.

But Daphne Caine (Garff) said home educators felt they were being 'singled out' for harsh treatment.

She demanded an assurance that comments, as well as tick box answers, would be considered when the latest consultation results were assessed.

Mr Cregeen said: 'We will take account of what is put in the comment box.'

The consultation period on the draft Education Bill runs until March 20 and education chiefs hope to have the bill ready to go before the Keys by late April.