

3. Questions to Ministers without Notice - The Minister for Housing

3.1 The Deputy of St. Martin:

There is a smile from the Senator. I return him back to his roots of St. Martin, although he is a Trinity man I am told. Will the Minister give an update on the sale of La Falaise, Fliquet, St. Martin, and now that permission has been given for the premises to be demolished, will that be likely to lead to a rise in the site now?

Senator T.J. Le Main (The Minister for Housing):

Since receiving confirmation from the Planning Minister that La Falaise was not considered a site to be designated as a special place, the property has been put back on the market and re-advertised for sale at the original asking price. The question we wanted to know was that there had been suggestions that several developers were interested and I wanted to make sure that the public benefit was protected. If developers could come along after and make a huge killing out of it, I thought the public would be the better placed to have some indication whether the property could be altered or demolished in any way possible.

3.2 Deputy S. Power:

Can I ask the Minister to assure the Assembly that he will continue to use all his experience and authority to find a solution to the current crisis we have out at Fields 190-192, St. Brelade so that we can find a solution that is acceptable to all concerned and existing residents in that area?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I am not quite sure what the Deputy was asking but I know that I am involved in negotiations and attended a public meeting on behalf of the Connétable and parishioners a couple of weeks ago. My view is that the current situation with La Moye is that the amount of homes being put on the site is causing concern and detrimental to the parishioners. My view as Housing Minister... when I joined the Planning Committee, who were part then of producing a 2002 Island Plan, my vision was and always has been yes, we need homes as housing, but not at any cost or to the detriment of residents or otherwise. So, in this case, I believe, Sir, there ought to be some changes. There ought to be some changes to the makeup of this development so that residents are not affected by the build.

3.3 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

Will the Minister advise the House of approximately how many units of social and first-time buyer homes require to be built in order to meet foreseeable demands?

Senator T. J. Le Main:

I can only respond to the need. Yes, there is still a great demand for first-time buyer homes and for social rented homes, 45 per cent off re-zoned sites. What I have to say, Sir, is that the 45 per cent social rented homes is going to be needed to replace homes that the Housing Ministry may come forward to Assembly for permission to sell to give more home ownership to families in Jersey. I do now believe that there is enough land earmarked in the current H2 sites and the proposed H3 and H4 sites in the next 3 years to meet the current demand. Although they will always need to have an ongoing need of some 200 a year to meet the demand as it goes along. Of course there will need to be some land exchanges and further rezoning to meet the very urgent needs of housing our elderly rising population and tomorrow morning I am meeting with the... We are working on this with the Planning Minister and tomorrow I shall be working to try

to resolve some of these issues. It is quite clear, Sir, that my view is that - H3 and H4 sites - I would not like to see more land re-zoned. I believe, Sir, that we ought to perhaps reject and not consider some of the H3 and H4 sites but we would hope to work with the Connétables in every Parish to see if we can identify within the village schemes, homes for the elderly. It is a huge problem, Sir. Currently at the moment we have got 16 per cent of our retired population in retirement and by 2030 it is anticipated 30 per cent of our population in Jersey will be in retirement. There is a huge, huge problem. I have to say, again that my policy, when I joined Nigel Queree's Planning Committee was - although I wanted homes and we were desperate for homes for Jersey people - it would not be at any cost. I believe that the Planning Minister and the Housing Minister must work with the Parish Connétables, with the Deputies and the parishioners to provide a reasonable outcome. I do not believe for one minute, Sir, that the parishioners are opposed. What they are opposed to is the amounts and the size of some of the developments.

3.4 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

Would the Minister be satisfied with the building of no more than 97 units of accommodation on the Bel Royal Marsh site?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, Sir, I would be very satisfied with 97 on Bel Royal Marsh and in fact, if I had any decision - that is a planning decision - I would work to achieve homes on that H2 site but I would make sure that I had the residents and the parishioners on board with me.

3.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister concerned to note the increase in house prices by 10 per cent recently reported and in particular, to note the increase in one and 2-bedroom flats? Does this not contradict his repeated assertion that rents and prices are coming down? Is it not the case that, short of covering the entire Island in concrete, he will never, never be able to match demand on this Island?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, the increase I believe is caused by many more young people working in the finance industry and it is quite clear that the prices have gone up in cases because there are now many options. Every night in the *Post* you see developers advertising no deposit, 100 per cent mortgages and longer mortgages. Of course these kinds of new initiatives - and particularly with employees in the banking industry managing to get mortgages at 2 or 3 per cent - is causing a current demand and the same issue is happening in places like Ireland. Currently they are doing 35, 40 and 50-year mortgages, currently creating a huge demand in homes.

The Bailiff:

Minister, there are a number of Members wanting to question you so I wonder if I could ask you to be a little bit more concise, please, in your responses.

3.6 Deputy A. Breckon of St. Saviour:

Could you manage to give some indication of the time-scale for proposals to establish a management body to manage public sector housing?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

We are at the present time collating and looking and we will be coming back to this Assembly in September or October, with a full workout on the business we deal with; social rented housing, housing trusts and how they fit in. Currently, Sir, it is anticipated that now that we have guaranteed funding from the Council of Ministers - for which I am very grateful - of £6 million next year for the 5 years, that currently it is not high in my thoughts of having a management company at the present time.

3.7 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Would the Minister say whether or not he agrees with the recent statement by a member of Social Affairs Panel, namely Deputy Martin, that there should be some kind of sell-off of public housing and that if this were to occur, it could reduce the Rent Rebate Bill? Does he agree with that statement?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Of course he agrees with it. He is doing it now, Sir. We are doing it in Le Squez, we are doing Le Marais. I am pleased to announce that the La Mare Phase 1 is now finished - 3 clients have moved in, have bought the properties. We will be coming back - as I was saying - in September and October, with a plan that will help home ownership, either with shared equity; home ownership schemes and with the sell-off of property, which will put more home ownership. I am totally in support of it and I would be very grateful for any help or advice from any Member of this Assembly.

3.8 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Deputy Le Hérisier rather stole my thunder there. Just to expand and develop on that theme, does the Minister have any idea how many States' tenants would welcome the opportunity to buy the property in which they live and would he undertake to do a survey to establish the facts?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Currently we have got about 25 per cent of our tenants that pay full fair rents, so they are on fairly good incomes, but many of those are now people in their 50s and 60s and have worked all their lives and now have improved themselves. But at the current time we have got Phase 1B of Le Squez coming on-line and we have got all names for the purchase of those we are selling on that site. So I am confident, Sir, that for the unforeseeable future that we will have enough names over a period of 4 or 5 years, to certainly put quite a lot of home ownership.

3.9 The Deputy of St. John:

The Senator alluded to this earlier on, but could the Minister advise us as to exactly what long-term plans he has to identify sites for homes for the elderly, and can he advise whether or not he is in discussions with the Planning Minister with regard to creating a specific land zone category for sheltered housing?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, Sir, and in fact the Planning Minister and I have been in deep discussions for some time now and we both realise it is a very urgent part of the plans. As I say, tomorrow morning my Assistant Minister, myself and the Planning Minister and officers will be having a morning session again, so that we intend to come forward with some plans to either further re-zone land or seek the co-operation of Connétables to have a Land Bank in the Parishes. Certainly my view is that I would not like to extend the H3 and H4 sites. Some of those perhaps ought to be deleted

and an exchange of land within the Parishes, with the support of the Connétables and the parishioners should take place. This is urgent. It is really a very high priority at the present time.

3.10 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

We have a lot of new evidence this morning - not at any price - which I must admit comes as somewhat of a surprise to those of us at St. Clement: the need for social housing, possibly creating an imbalance between the 45/55 split. It also seems to be possibly self-created by the housing sale of property. Would the Minister agree, Sir, to bring forward a policy statement covering these new initiatives so that we are all aware of the Department of Housing's new position on these matters?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, I am not prepared to do that at the moment. As I say, I will be coming forward with a proper report and document for this House to debate in September or October and it will take place at that time. There will be plenty time for the document to go to Members so that we can fully consult with Members and if there are any views or amendments that need to be added, we will do it exactly like the Chief Minister is doing in his Strategic Plan. We will take everyone on board and if they are reasonable, we will accept them.

3.11 Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Clement:

While I am fully in favour of encouraging and enabling States' tenants to purchase their own homes, I am alarmed to hear this morning that the Minister believes that this will drive a requirement to build more and more. I would ask for his clarification on why he believes that this will be the case?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I did not say that. I do not know where the Deputy has got that from. What I said is that we need to put more home ownership into the community. One of those things is that we have an opportunity with housing, and with 45 per cent of social renter to replace, we have an opportunity to create home ownership by the sell-off of perhaps some flats on a shared equity basis, some homes on a discounted basis, and we need to look at all that. That will come before the Assembly in the report and proposition that I am proposing to bring in September/October. What I have got to say is that the question is always being asked that if we are selling-off family homes to people, they are vacating, but we also have an opportunity of replacing - like we have done at Hodge 2 - to purchase brand new 3-bedroom homes and 4-bedroom homes that are around £160,000 to replace the rental need.

3.12 Senator L. Norman:

Would the Minister agree that the Parish of St. Clement has contributed more than its fair share of category A housing over the years and that any further major planned development should be resisted?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I cannot give that assurance. I know there are one or 2 politicians in St. Clements that are bitterly complaining but I have many people that live in St. Clement who desperately also need a home, particularly the elderly. So I cannot give that assurance at all.

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

Can the Minister clarify, regarding a suggestion made by Deputy Martin. Is he saying that he supports - the Minister supports - advancing loans to States' tenants rather than tenants paying rent, giving tenants back rent rebate over many, many years?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, I do not support giving loans or giving grants to States' tenants. I have, under my remit, very, very many lowish-earners in the community. Particularly, as I have said often, single earners where the husband may be working and the wife has 2 or 3 children; there may be a disabled child. There are also many young people who have gone to university - highly educated - wanting to come back and their number-one gripe is they will not come back because of the cost of housing. We need to meet the needs of all the community and I believe it would be a very retrograde step in picking out tenants to sell them properties with loans, when we have other people who are equally demanding in the community. It would be a retrograde step to be granting loans or grants.

Senator J.L. Perchard:

Can I just make a point of order on the period that has just taken place? I am not sure whose responsibility it is to ensure that the Minister answers the question he has been asked. I notice certainly in 2 or 3 questions, the Minister did not answer the question he was asked and I would ask in future that Ministers listen to the question and answer the question that has been asked.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

On purpose. [Laughter]

The Bailiff:

It is open to the chair and I am willing to discuss this with the Privileges and Procedures Committee to allow a supplementary question from a questioner who feels that his or her question has not been properly answered by the Minister. We will try that as a practice on the Chief Minister as his second question period now opens. [Laughter] I invite questions. The Deputy of St. Ouen.