

3. Questions without notice - The Minister for Housing

3.1 Deputy J.A. Martin

Would the Minister inform the House of the process of evicting tenants and who has the final say on that eviction?

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

The process of evicting tenants is a long, drawn-out process of consultation with the tenant, if he or she will comply with all kinds of offers. The current situation is that there is - or has been - a core of tenants who will not behave themselves and will not allow their neighbours to live in their homes peacefully; and there is also a core that do not see a priority in paying their rent. They are given all opportunities with officers - with agencies - in regard to complying with their tenancy agreements, and only at the last resort is the eviction signed. We are not there to evict people; we are there to house them - and we know that the Housing Department have some great difficulties with different clients and their differing needs - but we are not there to evict them. Once all avenues have been explored, the notice of eviction is signed by myself as Housing Minister. Then, of course, after that, the thing goes to court.

3.2 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Will the Minister give the Members the reason for the rise in the States' rental housing waiting list, and also advise Members what action he will be taking to reduce that size?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Predominantly the rise in waiting lists is caused by the rise in the aging population, and we have got at the moment something like 322 cases that need urgent re-housing and housing. The majority of the accommodation does not suit people in old age, and particularly many of them with mobility difficulties. The current housing list is down to around 220 at the moment, Sir, with a huge amount waiting to be assessed.

3.3 Connétable M.K. Jackson of St. Brelade:

Will the Minister confirm that his quoted figure of circa 400 retirement or last-time buyer homes would be significantly reduced if the Social Security defined retirement age of 65 were to be used instead of the 55 retirement age used by Housing, and will the Minister be influenced by a private survey by a local development company using 55 as the retirement age?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, I would not be influenced by the local company putting a survey on 55. The Housing Department use the benchmark of 60, and at the moment we have 332 currently today requiring sheltered accommodation, many of them with needs because of mobility or illness. The figure I used of 400 or 400-plus is because as the months go by the age of the population gets greater, and I have said on several occasions we have a time bomb ticking at the moment whereby the statistics provided to us on the aging population show that we have 16 per cent of our population in retirement, but by 2030 there will be 30 per cent of the population in Jersey in retirement. Even if we started rezoning land now - for which I hope the Planning Minister will come to this Assembly at the end of the year - nothing will be developed for another 12 or 18 months, and the figures will probably be well in excess of 400 or 400-plus.

3.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Did the Minister note the house advertised in last night's *Evening Post* at £349,000 as a first-time buyer house, and what actions will he take to promote house ownership for first-time buyers in the Island, given that that is over 10 times the average wage? How can young people expect to enter the house buying market with today's prices?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, it is a very, very high price, but there is still a great shortage of first-time buyer homes - and of the land that is being rezoned, there are many sites still that are undeveloped and not being built upon. The basis was that the 45-55 per cent split would show that the 55 per cent would be sold on to first-time buyers at the price they could get, and the more property we put in the market with rezoned land, hopefully the prices would have dropped. But saying that, Sir, I agree with the questioner that prices are very, very high, and as I say, Sir... currently I stand here a little embarrassed because I intend to come forward with a property plan which is still with the Treasury at the present time, so unable to share it with Members. But there will be plans in that, where we will promote shared equity and all kinds of home ownership. It is my intention that this House will hopefully support me in, as I say, having a shared equity sell-off of housing stock to existing tenants on a shared equity or home ownership basis. There are discussions going on, Sir, with the Planning Minister that land should be rezoned on a shared equity basis where a percentage will be shared equity. So we will expect Members to certainly give us all their help and advice in achieving the aims of the questioner.

3.5 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

I would like to come back to the question of evictions. I understand that the Minister mentioned that every effort is made in discussions, and I just wanted to ask whether there is an appeal process, firstly to the Housing Ministry or, in the final event, to the Royal Court?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

There is an appeal process. The appeal process is that anyone can appeal - whether it is in the Population Department on Law and Loans or in the Housing Department - to the Assistant Minister. The first line of appeal, as I said, is to the Assistant Minister, and this has been working very, very well. The Assistant Minister looks at the case, re-looks at the case if there is any further information or any hardship or exceeding difficulty, and if the appellant is dissatisfied with that, then the Housing Minister has the final say prior to any other appeal to the Review Board.

3.6 Deputy S. Power of St. Brelade:

The Housing Minister will be aware of the sensitivity felt Island-wide with regard to the rezoning of green field sites. Can I ask the Minister to confirm whether he has made any progress in negotiations with the Planning Minister and the Treasury Minister in retaining the Bellevue site?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The issue is that for a long time now I have put a claim in for the Les Quennevais site to be used for sheltered housing. The Planning Minister is determined that all sites - brown field sites and sites such as Les Quennevais and glasshouse sites - should be identified and used in preference to open green field sites. Sir, the current situation is I met with the Planning Minister a week or so again and he was writing to the Treasury Minister making a case that the whole of Les Quennevais site should be turned over to sheltered housing instead of part-sale and part-sheltered.

3.7 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

On the issue of higher prices for first-time buyer homes - and we have just heard this morning it is now over £300,000 for some - is the Minister aware of the evidence which has been uncovered by the Environment Scrutiny Panel that the 45-55 split is causing first-time buyer homes to be surcharged by something in the region of £40,000 plus? In other words, a first-time buyer home

is subsidising the social rent. Is the Minister aware of this and, if he is, what does he intend to do about it?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, Sir, I am well aware of the 45 per cent split, whereby the developer has to provide 45 per cent for social rented homes to a Trust or the Housing Department at a cost which is affordable in rental purposes, as a social landlord. I am well aware that because there has been still a great shortage of first-time buyers in the marketplace that developers have been able to get on their 55 per cent - still a fairly high price. The issue is that the more sites that have been rezoned - the H2 sites and H3 and H4 sites and come forward - then the prices, hopefully, will reduce. But talking about the £340,000; most of the developments being sold at the moment to first-time buyers on the 55 per cent are on an average around £280,000 for a 3-bed house.

3.8 Deputy J.A. Martin:

For the first time this morning in a presentation from the Chief Executive of Planning it was stated that 2 per cent economic growth will create greater demand for housing. As the Minister for Housing, has he been kept informed of this and could he inform the House how many more houses will be needed for first-time buyers and social housing given this statement?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I am informed: I have meetings with the Planning Minister on a regular basis. But at the end of the day, Sir, I have been waiting for some time now for the "Planning for Homes" document, and the issue is that I cannot really comment on that at the present time until I have full knowledge of the "Planning for Homes" document which will give all that information.

3.9 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister confirm that he gave assurance to the House that the appropriate appeal mechanism for matters within housing was from the officer, through the Assistant Minister, through to the Minister? He just seems to have contradicted himself by saying: "Appeals will go to the Assistant Minister who may overrule the Minister." That seems to me the wrong way round and I thought we had assurance that that chain was as it should be.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

It is absolutely what I have said in the past. The appeal goes to the Assistant Minister who looks at the individual case with officers - after the officers - and then it comes to the Housing Minister afterwards, if the appellant is unhappy with the Assistant Minister's decision. I have got to say, Sir, that - through the Chair - it has been working very, very well up to now, particularly on all the appeals.

3.10 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister give the House his absolute assurance that no States' tenant will ever be in a position where they are simply, as a result of the complaint, given 28 days' notice to quit?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The Housing Department cannot give that, it is the court that gives it. All the evictions that I have signed go to the Magistrates Court and the court will decide on the basis of how long they are entitled to stay.

3.11 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Notwithstanding the great need for sheltered housing, it is pleasing that somebody has taken those figures seriously. Would the Minister please tell us why this figure seemed to have come

out of the blue, and what are the sacred features of the Island Plan, i.e. no building in green zones, that can apparently be undermined?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

In 2002 - and I was on the Planning Committee at that time - the Assembly did not even consider very, very seriously the issue of the growing elderly population. The issue is that, as I say, there has been nothing built by way of sheltered housing for people - particularly those with mobility problems and ground floor accommodation - apart from, perhaps, Trinity and St. Martin who over the last few years provided some new additions to the sheltered housing stock. But apart from that, certainly since 1999 when we first started rezoning again, nothing had been provided. The planning obligations on the land did not include until 2002 any social housing for renting or any sheltered homes, and the issue now is that it is becoming very serious. We have got a huge waiting list for one-bed accommodation apart from the sheltered homes' requirements, and, as I say, the aging population is putting on a lot of pressure. Three years ago or 4 years ago I think the aging population was 11 per cent of our population in retirement. It is now up to 16, and as the years go by then it is adding complete pressure.

The Bailiff:

That completes the first question period.