

3. Questions without Notice – The Minister for Planning and Environment

3.1 Deputy J.B. Fox:

I will just ask the Minister if he could just reaffirm what his policy is in relation to the heights of buildings. In the last list of planning applications published there are 2 buildings, one on the Waterfront and one on the Island site, that are 8 and 7-storey applicants respectively. I just want to know what his ...

The Bailiff:

I do not think you can ask a question about specific applications.

Deputy J.B. Fox:

What I am asking is the general policy, yes. Thank you, Sir.

Senator F.E. Cohen (The Minister for Planning and the Environment):

Sir, the supplementary planning guidance prepared by Chris Shepley and implemented earlier this year makes it very clear that the overall recommended average height should be 6 storeys. Any building over 6 storeys will have to be of exceptional architectural quality to even be considered. That does not mean buildings of 6 storeys or below do not have to be of good standard, but a significantly higher standard will be required of taller buildings and this is all, of course, under the assessment of Sir Michael Hopkins and his team's architectural supremos.

3.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Could the Minister explain whether he has been able to examine the figures supplied by the Minister for Housing for sheltered housing and, as a result, is he now ready to go forward with a search for new sites?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

It is not up to me to analyse the figures prepared by the Housing Minister. I am absolutely sure that the Housing Minister is doing everything he possibly can to assure the whole of the House of the accuracy of his initial assessments. I regard the Planning Department as the delivery arm of all forms of housing and clearly, if the Housing Minister has identified a specific number of houses, particularly for the retired population at a social level, it is incumbent upon me, as Minister, to do everything I possibly can to adequately deliver such housing.

3.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Could the Minister tell the House what the actual options are he is considering, assuming the reliability of the figures?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

The first option is - and I think Members already know this - that I have been to see the Connétables with the Housing Minister and we have asked the Connétables to do their very best to identify sites within their Parish that they can purchase at an affordable rate and thus have a better chance of providing affordable housing. That clearly will only provide some of the required houses, assuming the figure of 400 is the correct figure. We then have to look at things like disused glasshouses and only as a very, very last resort would we even consider the concept of green field sites.

3.4 Deputy S. Power of St. Brelade:

The Minister and his department recently appointed a new Chief Executive to the Planning Department. Is the Minister in a position to confirm that the new Chief Executive has by now

taken full control of the department to his satisfaction and that the Chief Executive and his family are happily domiciled in Jersey?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I can confirm that the Chief Officer, in accordance with standard practice, is on a 6-month probationary assessment. I would, with great respect, suggest that such a detailed question would be best put to the Chief Executive of the States, who is responsible for Civil Service appointments. I feel it would be inappropriate - but again with great respect to the Deputy - for me to go any further in public.

3.5 Connétable D.J. Murphy of Grouville:

Can the Minister inform me, following my questions and also meetings with his department, what progress has been made on the investigation and implementation of a policy with regard to tidal energy?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

Investigations into tidal energy and recommendations and public information will be rolled-up into the programme that I have recently announced that has been labelled "Eco Active". It will deal with a whole range of solutions, both at micro level and at larger level, and tidal energy will be one of the key components of such a programme.

3.6 Senator J.L. Perchard:

The Minister for Housing claims that there is an urgent requirement for an additional 400 new sheltered residences to be built. He, in answering questions this morning, seems to be confused between sheltered residences and retirement homes. Will the Minister for Planning please confirm exactly what is required in the way of additional building in the countryside?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I am addressing the issue of social retirement housing. That is the provision of homes for elderly people in the Island who cannot afford to purchase their own homes. There is no specific requirement presently for building in any particular area in the countryside. As I have made clear repeatedly, our first port of call is to look at areas that presently have some form of development on them.

3.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister satisfied with the coverage he has achieved for his "Eco Active drive project? It is described in the paper as the biggest project yet. But will he admit that, in fact, it is merely a website designed to encourage people to save energy? Will he come to the House with figures before and after his drive to show the drive to save energy has been successful? And will he finally further admit to the ownership of the bicycle he is pictured with and described as an "eco warrior" on the front of the paper?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I will answer the bicycle question first. I hope that the Bailiff will allow me a few extra seconds to cover this. The bicycle belonged to none other than Deputy Le Hérissier. The reason that I was pictured with his bicycle rather than my own was that I own an electric bicycle and it was raining. My electric bicycle regrettably tends to short out in the rain and therefore I was caught at the photographic session with no bicycle. Deputy Le Hérissier appeared and came to the rescue and very generously allowed me to use his bicycle in the photograph, for which I thank him. In relation to 'Eco Active', 'Eco Active' is an all-encompassing project that is designed largely to encourage people like me who do not come from an environmental background to accept the obligations upon all of us to do little things to improve the environment which we leave for the

next generation. It will be driven through a website. I am not expecting we will test it statistically. I am sure that each and every person who participates will be able to assess their own achievements in relation to the objectives set out on the website.

3.8 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Would the Minister be able to advise the Assembly as to the yield of homes required - retirement homes - for people who are unable to afford to buy their own: I think that is the definition we could go with? What would the yield of homes per vergée be and how many vergée will be required to build 400 homes in the countryside?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

At the moment we are not proposing to build 400 homes in the countryside. With respect to the Senator - and I do understand he has this idea from the media, despite my attempts to clarify the position very carefully - the position is that presently the Housing Minister has come up with a figure of 400 homes. Those figures are presently being assessed by the Housing Minister. They can be delivered through a combination of brown field sites; perhaps redundant greenhouses, perhaps urban sites that are part of the regeneration programme. There is a whole range of possibilities before we start looking at green field sites and presently I have no idea what area of land, 'brown or green', will be taken up until we know exactly how many homes we need to provide.

3.9 Deputy S. Power:

The Minister was good enough to answer a question of mine 2 weeks ago relating to illegal low spring tide fishing for ormers on the Ecréhous and some questions relating to the rested "Norman Le Brocq". Could I ask the Minister if he would be good enough to ask his department to circulate to States' Members the statistics on the usage of the "Norman Le Brocq", as he orally replied 2 weeks ago?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

If I gave a commitment to circulate figures, I would apologise to each Member of the House if those figures have not been circulated. I was under the impression ... in fact, I saw an email that responded to every question I had been asked where I was unable to give a full answer or where supplementary information was required. From the nods of other Members, it would appear other Members have received that. Clearly something must have gone wrong with the communication to Deputy Power and I will send a copy to him today.

3.10 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

I understand the Minister will be bringing a proposition giving exemptions to small items in planning applications. When is this going to be available and will it include small movable items such as enclosed chicken runs, pig arcs and calf arcs used by farmers?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I am presently working on the list of exemptions. The construction of the list of exemptions is quite tricky because this exercise was carried out in 2002 and I am trying to extend on the existing list. I am proposing to concentrate on ensuring that environmentally friendly or environmentally conscious decision-making is encouraged in construction and in home ownership. Much of the exemptions will be centred on things like solar power panels and wind generating systems with all sorts of provisions to protect neighbours. I have no specific provisions at the moment about pig arks, but I do have specific provisions about garden structures where people should be allowed to have larger structures in their garden without consent.

3.11 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville:

Could the Minister confirm if the same amount of rigour goes into the approval of glasshouses and polytunnels and if there is an obligation, once they have served their purpose, to bring them down again, in which case his answer to the sheltered housing seems to be a bit of anomaly in that respect.

Senator F.E. Cohen:

Considerable rigour does go into such applications, although as far as I am aware there are not any current applications that fall into that bracket. I am aware of certain advice that was given informally in relation to the ability of the Planning Department to require the removal of disused glasshouses and polytunnels and it is an area I am intending to clarify with the Law Officers Department shortly to confirm whether the information I received informally many years ago is accurate.

3.12 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

To go back to the small movable items for farmers, if they have to make an application to the Planning Department it can get very expensive, particularly for small farmers. Will the Minister give us the assurance he will look at this?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

Yes, I can. I can also add ... perhaps I should apologise. I perhaps did not answer the Deputy's question properly. We are looking - and it is not confirmed yet because we need to further analyse the list - at allowing farmers to put up one building to house particular types or classes of animals. Most certainly I will look at this very carefully.

The Bailiff:

We come to the second question period for the Minister for Social Security. I invite questions to the Minister.