

2.2 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier of the Minister for Housing regarding the demolition of Convent Court and Caesarea Court, St. Helier:

Would the Minister inform Members whether Convent Court needs to be demolished within the next 18 months and Caesarea Court by 2010 and, if so, would he provide Members with detailed research supporting this decision, and would he further explain whether the plan made public last year to assign Caesarea Court as accommodation for the over-50s has now been abandoned?

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

Convent Court does not need to be demolished within the next 18 months, however, Sir, the building suffers with concrete degradation and as such requires work every 5 years to check and repair affected reinforcement and concrete spoiling. It was last carried out in 2004 and, therefore, is due again in 2009. The work would be very substantial. The department is keen not to expend further monies than absolutely necessary. Should the States Assembly and the Planning and Environment Minister agree to allow the building to be demolished it will be demolished, hence the desire, if possible, to relocate tenants before additional works are required. The building is not unsafe. Naturally, I wish to see tenants at Convent Court living in high quality, warm and appropriate homes. The sooner that happens the better. The Housing Department has not abandoned plans to use high-rise buildings for the over-50s, however, this takes time and will be in full consultation with our high-rise panel made up of existing residents. However, in respect of Convent Court and Caesarea Court, the case for replacement and regeneration is frankly quite overwhelming. I am sure that if the States Assembly agree the end product for residents of Val Plaisant and St. Helier and ultimately the new residents of these proposed schemes will be superb.

2.2.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

According to the Minister, structural engineers have informed him that concrete has been falling off Convent Court. What would he say to residents who have informed me that, in fact, the only concrete that has fallen is that from a neighbouring plant pot? Furthermore, that having been shown around the building myself, I could not see any evidence of such falling concrete whatsoever.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Well, what can I say to that question, Sir. The evidence by the professionals that advise us - the States' quantity surveyors, the professionals we employ - is quite clear. It is unambiguous, it is quite clear that there has been... and it continues to have problems with the concrete falling off, and only recently a lump of concrete fell from Convent Court and luckily nobody was injured because nobody was around. I cannot see where Deputy Pitman, as a lay person, can lay claim to saying that she does not see that there is anything wrong with the building. I think it is quite incredible. We have to rely on the people that advise us and the people that advise us are quite clear. And, as I say, Sir, the other issue is that the States insurers over the years have on occasions made it quite clear to States Departments - particularly Transport and Technical Services, when I was a Committee Member, and over the years to my department - about the need to properly maintain high-rise buildings especially when concrete degradation has been identified and this has been identified some years ago and is a continuing problem.

2.2.2 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:

I am sure the Minister is aware of the work of a local historian on the destruction of many of Jersey's finest buildings and the Convent in Val Plaisant must be one of the worst examples of the wanton destruction of the 1960s. Would the Minister agree that, if the state of the current building is such that it warrants replacement, that he will look very closely at the possibility of in some way having a building design which will truly hark back to the architecture of the former site and in some way repair the streetscape which is currently in such a bad condition?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, Sir, I am in absolutely 100 per cent agreement. I do not think it will be the Housing Department or my department that will finally... if the States approve this plan, I think it ought to go out to public consultation. It should be with the Parish of St. Helier, it should be with everybody concerned that live in the area, that what we replace in the future is going to be something that is going to be a credit. It is an absolute disaster what we have seen happen over the years and the demolition of wonderful old buildings and replacing them with buildings such as Convent Court, De Quetteville Court and others.

2.2.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier of St. Saviour:

Given the Housing Minister's understanding that concrete is at risk of falling off, will he be taking precautions so that nobody within walking distance of Convent Court will be walking under areas where they are liable to be hit by falling concrete?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

As I say, Sir, Convent Court and others that are suffering with similar problems are monitored on a regular basis, and we regularly monitor... and it is due to take place again very soon, I think, I did say in 2009. But all precautions are taken to make sure that there will be nobody injured or otherwise.

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

Could the Minister clarify further please on the original question? What is the position regarding the elderly residents living at Caesarea Court at present? What is going to be the situation? There are, obviously, elderly residents at Caesarea Court and some of them must be very concerned. Could the Minister please clarify this?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Currently I am working very closely with the Planning Minister to try to identify some land that we desperately need to produce more sheltered homes for the elderly and many of our elderly are living in conditions that do not warrant the year that we are in and all the elderly tenants will have a top priority. I will treat the elderly tenants as if they were my mum or my dad and I would make sure personally that they will be seen to as top priority and they will be treated in the best possible manner.

2.2.5 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

Will the Minister agree to release technical details of the nature of the problems with the concrete and including the estimated demolition and replacement costs and the costs of continuing maintenance?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, not at the present time, I do not see any point. That will take place once this Assembly approves issues, but my staff are terribly busy at the moment. We are short... as I have explained to one or 2 Members. We have got one senior manager on maternity leave, another one is a vacant position. We have complied with the States' request to reduce our staff membership and at the moment we are very, very busy. I do not see any point in scaring people or otherwise at the moment in acceding to that request.

2.2.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, Sir. By what right does the Minister believe he can withhold information from this Chamber? This is information about the state of buildings which people are currently living in which is vital to give them assurance that their building is not going to fall on their heads and projected costs must surely be estimated since he is working on a plan to go forward.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, I am not prepared to accede to that, Sir. The Deputy is one of those that will run along with this and scare people. I am not prepared to put up with that. If the Deputy... **[Interruption]** can I finish please? If the Deputy or any other Member would like to come in and talk to officers I am very happy they come and talk to officers, but I am not going out in the public gallery with some of these issues at the moment.

2.2.7 Deputy S. Pitman:

First of all, I would ask the Minister if he could get his officers to point out the structural damage at Convent Court and, further, Sir, why if the department declared that Convent Court was structurally dangerous in 2004 has he only last year - his department - refurbished 14 floors with new flooring and paint in Convent Court and at the same time, Sir, his department are asking residents if they would like a community room for coffee mornings?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Can I say, Sir, that we have to continue redecoration and whatever. People have to live in these places and we just cannot let them go. So, there is an ongoing maintenance cost and I am not prepared to see people - because there may be some future plans for redevelopment or otherwise... People have still got to live in these places and we have an ongoing duty to continue to maintain some of these properties and paint them up as we go along.

The Bailiff:

I think, Minister, the Deputy also asked you whether your officers would be able to show her the places where concrete degradation has taken place?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, Sir, I have said a few moments ago that if the Deputy or any other member would like to make an appointment to see officers of the department... and that offer is open to any Member, and any Member is entitled to go and talk to my officers at any time on any subject. But some of the issues that some of the Members of this Assembly - one or 2 Members of this Assembly - always feel should be publicly aired and I do not feel that it is in the best interests to publicly air some of these issues.

2.2.8 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I will choose my words very carefully, Sir. I would not want to be accused of being alarmist. There is reference to reports in the *J.E.P. (Jersey Evening Post)* 16th February which allegedly comes from the Housing Minister saying lumps of concrete are falling off the high-rise block and that it must be pulled down within 18 months. I would not want to be called a scaremonger, but blocks of concrete falling off a 12-storey block of flats is quite scary. I wonder if the Minister could confirm absolutely either the building is unsafe and must be evacuated and a perimeter fence put around it, or it has been made absolutely safe and that the residents have nothing to fear?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The building is absolutely safe at the present time and the residents have nothing to fear. The issue is that at the end of the day there is a cost. The financial cost of refurbishing and bringing up to modern-day standards - which we do not believe with the design of the building can be met anyway - will be more than if it was demolished to house virtually the similar amount of people in what would be classed in modern, appropriate conditions. There is an opportunity to have a development that would be a credit to that part of St. Helier and to get rid of this blot on the landscape. I know that the Connétable of St. Helier is very keen to be involved with any future developments and I would make an offer that if anyone is particularly interested in redevelopment of this area then we would be very happy to work with them.

2.2.9 Deputy S.C. Ferguson of St. Brelade:

The Minister has said, Sir, that it will cost a great deal more to refurbish than to redevelop the site. Can I assume from that, therefore, that the Minister has detailed figures on the comparison between refurbishment and redevelopment and will these figures be available to the Scrutiny Panel who are looking at the housing policy?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Can I say, Sir, that the advice I have been given by my department that it would cost more to refurbish and try to bring that building back to modern-day standard, than demolition and providing accommodation on that site on low-rise accommodation. The officers have not given me the figures, but I know that very well. I have written a letter to Deputy Breckon this morning to say that full co-operation will be given by the Housing Department - by its officers - on any issue regarding the property plan which includes Convent Court and Caesarea Court. There is nothing to hide and the Scrutiny Panel will be given free access to our officers' advice, information, *et cetera*.

Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

The Minister has not quite answered my question. Has he got the figures? He said that he has been told, but if he is looking at the project he should have the figures before he starts planning the project.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, I have not got the figures. I presume there are figures. The department has said to us - which includes in the property plan - that it will not be cost effective to refurbish the high-rise block of flats. It would be far more cost effective for demolition and re-create some good high quality low-rise accommodation particularly for elderly people on the site. I have not got figures right in front of me. The officers have advised my Assistant Minister this is the case. It is in the property plan and I presume that the officers have that information. They would not have told me otherwise the figures they would have and if the Deputy would like to go and see the department as well and offer you are more than welcome.

Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Thank you, Sir, I will.