

3. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - Minister for Housing

3.1 Deputy A. Breckon:

I wonder if the Minister could tell the House when the social housing survey that the Minister and assistant Minister and the department were undertaking will be published?

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

Yes, the draft document is now being finalised and is with the officers at the moment, prepared on our behalf by Professor Christine Whitehead and hopefully the Housing Minister will bring it to the Assembly for public consultation early in the New Year, in January. That will give an opportunity for all Members to have an input into the draft and to agree the way forward for the benefit of all.

3.2 Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour:

Would the Housing Minister inform the Assembly when the next tranche of States housing is due to be sold, either outright sale or shared equity?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Currently 93 units have been sold to sitting tenants and/or tenants. Fifteen are ready to go but there have been some delays over conveyancing in areas such as Wilkes Gardens and what have you that have never been conveyed before. We have plenty of tenants waiting to buy but, as I say, this year now, 93 have been sold, 15 are waiting and others are on the go.

3.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

May I thank the Minister first for his quite extensive answer to my written question submitted earlier in the day but point out that he avoided answering 2 particular questions that I asked him, and would he undertake to do so now? The question is, in particular will he undertake to work with the Minister for Treasury and Resources to restore the level of mortgage interest tax relief and to index it to house price inflation and will he further work with the Treasury and Resources Minister to suspend the '20 means 20' implementation phasing-out such relief?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I am always willing to work with the Minister for Treasury and Resources and I am also willing to work with the Deputy and other Members of this Assembly. So the answer to his question, I am willing to work with the Treasury and Resources Minister. I am not sure that at the end of it that I would come to an agreement with the Deputy but certainly I am happy to work with any Member of this Assembly which will improve the lives of ordinary people.

3.3.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, Sir. Does he accept that those 2 solutions would in fact increase the availability and the possibility of young people achieving home ownership in the Island?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

As I say, sir, I am prepared to work with the Treasury and Resources Minister. I would not like to commit myself one way or another at the moment, but if there are any ways of improving the lives of young people or home ownership or otherwise, yes, I am fully in favour.

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

I would like to congratulate the Minister and his department on the consultation process they are going through with regard to the Le Squez Redevelopment next phases. However I would like him to give an undertaking that in actual fact his department will take note of the user requirements and the results of this particular consultation, particularly retention of the football space and sufficient community facilities. I would particularly like to see a multi-purpose

community building. Can he give that undertaking that this consultation will not just be shelved but people and user requirements will be taken into consideration?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I knew the question was going to be asked of me from the Deputy because I have given him an assurance that full consultation will take place for the needs not only of the future residents of Le Squez and Le Marais but also overall of the community and its needs. I have said on many occasions that I am more than prepared to work with all Members and if any Members wish to see the draft consultation plans for phase 2 currently out on display then I am more than happy to share it with them. Also all the new Members of this Assembly that will be joining us in the next week or so, will be having an invitation to come to the Housing Department so that we can explain to them the work we are doing and also the issues in regard to brought up by the Deputy of St. Clement.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Sorry, was that a yes to my requirement?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

A sensible yes, but I am afraid that I cannot accede currently to some of the wishes of some of the people that would like to see on that site because at the end of the day we probably would not have any houses on the site at all.

3.5 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville:

Could the Minister explain why as Minister for Housing he is objecting to the application of 41 units of accommodation on a soon to be redundant glass house site situated on a main road - Rue a Don - in Grouville when he repeatedly tells us there is an urgent need in this Island for first-time buyer and sheltered housing?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The Deputy of Grouville is absolutely incorrect. The Constable and the Minister for Planning and Environment will know that I have written objecting to open market luxury houses on that site and I believe that glass house sites such as this one near Grouville Garages are ideally placed for sheltered homes and first-time buyers. **[Approbation]** I have written to Planning objecting to that and giving my views. I have written to the Connétable as well, and I will not see open green field sites developed for any kind of housing when we have perfectly good sites like that that should be going to first-time buyer and sheltered housing.

3.5.1 The Deputy of Grouville:

Supplementary please, Sir. My proposition debated on 2nd April this year required a policy to be brought forward that required development of over a certain size to supply a percentage of their build for social need. The Minister for Housing voted against this part of my proposition. Would he now like to explain to us why? Because I totally agree with him, this is an ideal site for retirement homes and first-time buyers, as he well knows when we had our debate in the summer.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Let me just say quite clearly, that I have been having ... I am the Minister for Housing, and I cannot produce off any site one home, that is the Minister for Planning and Environment's role to provide the sites. I am relying very much in discussion with the Minister for Planning and Environment and Senator Ozouf in R.U.D (Regulation of Undertakings and Development) that eventually some of the commercial sites being developed around the town and around Jersey will have a percentage of affordable homes off those sites. Discussions are taking place and I am relying very much that the Island Plan which for me it is far too long ... it has been delayed, I do

not know why. As soon as it comes out I am looking forward to being able to see some movements in those areas.

The Deputy of Grouville:

The Housing Minister did not answer my question. Why then did he vote against my proposition in April that required commercial developments of over a certain size to come forward with a need for social housing either first-time buyer or sheltered housing? Why did he vote against?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The reason I voted against because I want full information before I make a decision off the cuff. The Deputy came forward with a proposition which to me was flawed. I need to know the pros and cons before I make a decision. Generally I am trying to work with the Minister for Planning and Environment and Senator Ozouf at R.U.D. so that we eventually will be able to have some kind of agreement, like they are doing in other places - such as London - to have a percentage of commercial sites. But I will not make an off the cuff decision as the Deputy wanted to make on that occasion.

3.6 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Could I ask the Minister who is responsible for valuing properties and what sort of mechanism there is, and in particular is there an appeal mechanism? Because during the course of my canvassing the people in St. Martin I saw would very much like to buy their properties, however on being told the price it is completely out of their reach. Could I ask, who is responsible and what appeal mechanism is in place so people like St. Martin sitting tenants could then appeal against the price?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, the Property Services Department acting on our behalf get in some independent valuers on behalf of the Housing Department. They independently value those properties as social first-time buyer homes. Independently done, certainly not done by the Housing Department or Property Service. 2 independent valuations.

3.6.1 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Could I ask also if there was any appeal mechanism in place for sitting tenants to appeal against the valuation of their properties?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, the Minister for Housing and the Assistant Minister will always accept an appeal in any individual case. It has to be the right surely of any individual who feels aggrieved in any decision made by the Housing Department or other departments, they should be able to appeal. If the Deputy has anybody that wants to appeal I would be very happy to look at it with my Assistant Minister.

3.7 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Given that first-time buyers and young families usually fall into the marginal relief tax band and the “20 means 20” restrictions do not apply to mortgage interest relief within the marginal relief band, will the Minister be supporting efforts to raise the exemption allowances on the marginal relief tax bands?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Although it sounds good, I will listen to the argument on both sides before I make my decision. I am not prepared to say yea or nay at the moment.

3.8 Deputy S. Pitman of St. Helier:

Is the Minister aware of the old windows in Caesarea Convent Court that let wind blow through the flats? If he is aware, would he consider compensating for the heating bills of these residents?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, I am well aware that Convent Court is a high rise block that really needs replacing. I am well aware that some of the residents are having difficulty with the windows. The thing is, it has been put back by 4 or 5 years because of the decanting of Ann Court. My department assist as much as they can with all the tenants. I have not had any complaints recently over the current situation of wind and cold coming in, and the heating problems. I have not had one person who has contacted me. But at the end of the day, sir, we will do all we can to assist our tenants but certainly there is no question of any compensation at this present time.

3.9 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Would the Minister tell the House when it is his department's intention to introduce the tenant's deposit scheme?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The new Tenancy Law is in its final draft. It is being consulted upon but with a very, very poor response from Members of this Assembly. Although we get questions on this on a regular basis I just feel sorry that the questioners have not even responded to the consultation document. But the issue is quite clear that currently on the information that we have gained over a period of time I will be recommending, I am sure ... sorry, the Minister for Housing should be recommending a rental deposit scheme within the new tenancy law that will be coming out and hopefully that will be in the new year some time.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Thank you. I wonder could the Minister say what "some time" is?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The Tenancy Law has finished its consultation, it is all virtually ready to go, but I felt and my Assistant Minister felt because we have a new Assembly coming in this next week or so, it would only be fair and proper that the document and the proposals be put forward to the House for new Members to be able to have an input as well. So, hopefully in January or February.

3.10 Deputy C.J. Scott Warren:

Would the Minister be prepared to re-examine Jersey Home Buy, obviously in consultation with the Minister for Planning and Environment, and would he be prepared to widen the shared equity scheme so that people could purchase, for example, 40 to 80 per cent of the property price, as I believe that is the width of the percentage in Guernsey?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The position is that the homebuyers' scheme is not cast in stone and I am working very closely with the Minister for Planning and Environment and we are looking at all the options presently. The answer to your question, yes, we are prepared to look at it, and we will continue to look at it in this funny market at the moment. We need to make sure that home ownership is a prime target and first-time buyers in particular.