

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

4.1 Deputy S. Power:

The Minister will be aware that he sent an e-mail this morning to all States Members and the Chief Minister copying all ex-officio Members complaining to the Chief Minister about the Chief Minister's intentions to consider referring P.43 to Scrutiny, and specifically to Corporate Affairs. Would the Minister agree with me that he is one of a minority and does not understand the work of Scrutiny or its function?

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

No, Sir, I do not agree with that. Yes, I did send an e-mail this morning, but the facts remain quite clearly that the recent scrutinising of the new Homebuyers' Scheme put up a lot questions that could have easily been answered had the Housing Minister been invited to answer the question at Scrutiny. Scrutiny, I thought, was about getting together the people involved in the process and asking the questions and releasing documents, not doing it the other way round, not inviting them.

4.1.1 Deputy S. Power:

Would the Minister agree with me that the Housing Sub-Panel's response to 2 planning documents were planning discussion documents and not housing documents and he is being territorial about the planning document on homes for the over-55s and first home buyers and home buyers?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I cannot seem to get through to Deputy Power that, in fact, there is a partnership between the Housing Minister and the Planning Minister and some of the questions that came out of the Scrutiny process were direct questions on housing matters and, relating to that, I would have thought it would have been a much better process to have invited and for us to work together instead of excluding our part of being able to input into that process.

4.2 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

The provision of both community facilities and community space within housing developments is of paramount importance. Short term gain of a higher house density will, in the longer term, cost society more. Can the Minister confirm that the principle of long term community sustainability is one his department has been cognisant of within the next stage of the Le Squez redevelopment?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Absolutely, Sir. The issue about Le Squez - and I understand where the Deputy is coming from - we have had 3 church groups already seeking to have premises and new churches or church facilities in Le Squez. It is a luxury, Sir, that the Housing Department cannot afford. The issue is quite clear: there are 3 churches very close by, St. Nicholas, Samares and the Catholic church - St. Patrick's. The issue is that we will work, as I have always said, with the 2 Parish Deputies, with the Connétable and with anybody else who is interested, including these church groups, in being able to provide facilities for all people that are going to be using Le Squez and those surrounding areas. There will be full community facilities provided in the overall plans, and Members such as Deputy Gorst will have the full ability to have an input into these matters. But, Sir, I just cannot afford the luxury of having large tracts of land for any group of users. There will be a community facility for all to use.

4.2.1 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

While the Minister makes great play about church facilities, he is also aware that there are a number of other community facility providers within that area who are struggling to find

accommodation. In actual fact, we find that his answer is no to my question. He is not cognisant of the requirement to have community sustainability within that redevelopment.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I have explained, and the Deputy is well aware, he is due to meet with our department to have his input - as the invitation has gone out, even to Senator Norman if he wishes, and Members that live in the Parish, including the Connétable - on the sustainability of having a community facility that will meet the needs of everyone, but not just one individual group, as some people would like.

4.3 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

In my district of St. Saviour, Sir, I have States housing that is badly in need of maintenance and upgrading. Would the Minister inform Members what his maintenance budget is for this year?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I will have to get up-to-date figures, Sir, but I know that there is a huge amount of work going on at the moment. The current figure of work programme for the next 5 or 10 years, including the Le Squez, Le Marais, Clos de Roncier, La Carrière, and the Cedars is approaching £70 million to £100 million worth. If he wanted a figure over the next few years, Le Squez itself is a £50 million overall job over a period of 10 years.

4.4 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

The Minister will have seen this morning the Ministerial response to my Panel's report on the policing of events in which the Home Affairs Minister accepted every finding and every recommendation. This is not the only example of Scrutiny reports being well accepted by Ministers. Notwithstanding the Housing Minister's comments regarding the Housing Sub-Panel's report, will he accept that the essential function of Scrutiny is proving effective?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Overall, I am sure it has, but I have to say to the Members that I have had 2 experiences where I believe that with the spirit of co-operation which we have offered has not been accepted or has been ignored. I again say to the Scrutiny Sub-Panel looking at housing issues and matters that I would very much like to work with them so they can assist me in making good decisions, and at times I am excluded from their deliberations. I urge them to reconsider their current way of dealing with some of the issues, but generally Scrutiny is a very important part of the process of good government.

4.5 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

The Minister does not seem to understand that Scrutiny holds Ministers to account; it does not run along behind them and show them how to do things. Will he undertake to read the explanatory documents relating to Scrutiny, which explain this extremely clearly?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I would like to remind the Deputy that I am pleading with the Assembly that I would like to be held to account, but I am not being invited to be held to account. [Laughter] That has happened on 2 occasions. Please invite me to the Scrutiny process and I am more than happy to be held to account. I want to be held to account and I want good government decisions made, at the end of the day.

4.5.1 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

Supplementary, Sir. But when the Minister is held to account, and the opinion disagrees with his opinion, he does not seem to like that. Does he not realise, having looked at the other Ministers reading and accepting Scrutiny reports, that sometimes you have to accept criticism?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I well understand that, but when questions are coming back on housing matters that remain unanswered for the simple reason that we have not been questioned so that we were able to assist the Scrutiny process in answering those questions, then it falls down on that basis. Please, I am saying, everyone knows my telephone number, give me a call and I will attend the Scrutiny process in regard to housing questions that often remain unanswered when a Scrutiny process has been completed.

4.6 The Deputy of Grouville:

Of the Minister's Homebuyers Scheme, could he tell this Assembly how many people have taken up the opportunity to buy, how many have not and, of those who have not, how many are over 55 and thus constitute part of his desperate need for retirement homes?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The Homebuyers Scheme has not been approved at the moment. There are 3 schemes being proposed by the Minister for Planning and Environment for 3 sites which will produce 60 or 70 units. Perhaps the Minister will correct me. This Assembly will decide whether the Homebuyers Scheme is something that this Assembly would like to support, and I hope they do. At the moment, the Housing Department are collating names of individual families that would meet the gateway entrance to being able to apply to purchase homes under the Homebuyers Scheme, but at the moment it is only names of families who are on low-ish incomes or who have single earners that would meet the needs of being able to enter this scheme. I have no other information on elderly people or otherwise on the matter. That is the only issue at this current time.

4.7 Deputy S. Pitman:

Within the Housing Property Plan, Convent Court was designated to be demolished within the next 4 years. Could the Minister explain why parts of Convent Court are being refurbished and why people are being moved into the building?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The reason why Convent Court is partly being refurbished is you cannot allow people to continue to live in conditions that are not acceptable. There is an ongoing need to maintain those homes until such time as one finally decides what is going to happen over Covent Court. But I have to say to this Assembly that I have given an assurance to the Members of the Assembly, certainly Deputy Duhamel and Deputy de Faye, that no decisions will be made on the high-rise until we have had a proper, constructive look at it again to see whether there are any other alternatives. So, at the moment there are no real firm plans, although we indicate 4 or 5 years at this present time.

4.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Would the Minister inform Members what difference the transfer of the rent abatement scheme from his own department to income support through Social Security has made to the revenue stream in his department?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I would have to get the figures on that, Sir; I am not quite sure about that. The last understanding I had was that the income stream had increased. I would certainly get the information required if the Deputy would just like to pop me an e-mail of exactly what he would like to know, and other Members, of course; the Housing Department officers are more than willing to answer any questions on it.

4.8.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary if I may. I would like those figures, Sir; I will pop the Minister an e-mail, as he says. Could he further inform Members what conversation has taken place between his department and the Social Security Department over the discretion to pay rent directly to the Housing Department or through the tenants?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, Sir, I will get that information also, but I have not been party to any of that. It is obviously between departments, and I will get that information.

4.9 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisser:

Would the Minister outline, apropos of what Deputy Grouville was asking, how many States houses have been sold under the Property Plan and whether the sales are on target?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Currently, including the low-rise at Le Marais and Le Squez and one or 2 others, approximately 70 have been sold and there are over 300 waiting buyers at the present time.

4.10 Deputy P.N. Troy of St. Brelade:

When the Minister sent an e-mail to all Members saying that referring the bull semen issue to Scrutiny was, I think his words were: "A total waste of time." Does he feel that he was talking a lot of bull and does he feel that he would like to withdraw that statement that he sent to all Members that Scrutiny is a waste of time?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

You have taken it out of context again, Deputy Troy. I have certainly not insinuated. If it felt that way or looked that way, it did not mean to. I do not believe Scrutiny is a waste of time. I think Scrutiny is a very, very good process for holding Ministers to account and providing good policies to come forward for this Assembly. I totally support the process, but it needs some sharpening-up.

4.11 Deputy of St. Martin:

I am delighted that the Minister has dusted the cobwebs off the legislation regarding tenants' deposits. Could he explain to the house, or tell the House, when he is going to take away the dust from the Security of Tenure legislation, and will that be necessary in light of the impending immigration law?

The Bailiff:

In 15 seconds, please, Minister.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I would like to say that the Residency Tenancy Law has gone out for consultation today. In there is a consultation document over 2 months and it has all the issues regarding what the Deputy of St. Martin is calling for. It has tenants; it has all kinds of issues on what we would like people to comment on.

The Bailiff:

That concludes the second period of questions without notice.