

2.3 Deputy D.J. De Sousa of the Minister for Housing regarding steps proposed to secure sites for housing:

Following his recent comments at a scrutiny hearing, will the Minister please inform Members what steps, if any, he proposes to take to eliminate a bidding war with the housing trusts to secure sites for future housing, as in sheltered housing or social?

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

I can advise Members that I have already taken steps to eliminate this problem. I have written to all the housing trusts and the Connétables setting out that I will not support the acquisition of any social rented home by any social housing provider where the price being paid for the unit exceeds that which the current debt redemption model demonstrates is sustainable. I am also currently in discussions with the Attorney General seeking legal advice on ways and means of being able to firm-up the opportunities for the Housing Department to acquiring rezoned sites for sheltered housing. I have sent also a copy of my letter to the chairman of the Scrutiny Panel for their information.

2.3.1 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Does the Minister really feel that this is sufficient to stop such a price war going on to inflate the price of land for building social housing on?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I think that when I mentioned that there was an issue, it could have been an issue; it may not be but I have been worried over one or 2 instances over this and I am confident that the Housing Department will be able to work with the social housing providers. I am rather hopeful that we are going to be able to make sure that the acquisition of homes off rezoned sites will in fact be given where the Housing Department will have a very good opportunity of being able to acquire those that they need urgently. We are the last provider for many people.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Can I encourage Ministers to be concise in their answers.

2.3.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Would the Minister inform Members what instances he is referring to when he said there one or 2 instances that have already occurred which gave rise to his doubt?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, I am not prepared to openly discuss that. All I am saying is that I had one or 2 issues that I was not very happy with and felt that it could have been that the Housing Department would have been left out in the cold had these opportunities been taken up by other social housing providers.

2.3.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Minister state why he is reluctant to speak about this and will he release his information in confidence to the Health, Social Services and Housing Panel?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I am never frightened to speak about anything but there are times when you are in discussions with individuals or trusts or otherwise that one just does not want to

broadcast it all over the media. I have got further discussions to take place and I am not prepared to invite discussion over the media with it.

2.3.4 Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier:

Would the Minister not agree that this goes back to what Deputy Southern was asking earlier? Housing trusts have been allowed to grow, backed by lots of money by the States, and the Minister has been very, very lax in putting any rules and regulations in, and now they have come back to bite him.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, that is not true. Every site that has had a letter of comfort from the Treasury supported by the Minister for Housing have full regulation against that site. It is quite clear that there is nothing untoward happening in the current regulation of the trusts. But what we have been waiting for, and the Deputy knows this very well, we have been waiting for the Whitehead report. We have been waiting for the low income scheme to go into place. I will be coming up this year to this Assembly with recommendations not only on the regulation of housing trusts - regulation of social housing providers - and Members will have a good opportunity then to make amendments to what will be coming forward from the Housing Department.

2.3.5 Deputy J.A. Martin:

In the Whitehead report it says: "All social landlords should have one unified waiting list." How far down the line are we with this one unified waiting list?

[10:15]

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I totally agree with that, but the Member very well knows that the issue is that we are coming back through the Whitehead report, once full consultation is finished on 5th March, I think we have extended it to, and we are going to come forward and I totally support that view that there should be a common waiting list and common waiting lists should have happened years ago, but the issue is that we will be coming forward with that sort of recommendation, I am sure.

2.3.6 The Deputy of St. Mary:

Does the Minister not agree that the background to the problem outlined in the question of the bidding war and the shortage of sites, the background is of course the policy of the Council of Ministers to increase the population year on year for ever and does he not agree there will, therefore, always be a shortage and does he enjoy his keep fit programme of running on a treadmill?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, I do not agree with that at all. The Deputy knows very well that the increase in population has been births over deaths and the issue is that this Island since 1949 has had a chronic shortage of affordable housing, particularly with a changing population with more divorces, more single people with children, and all those issues. Of course, when you have families split-up and they have joint custody now where it seems that both sides, one with 3 days full custody, the other one with 4 days custody, each of them demanding a family home, all these kind of pressures are the pressures that have built up and have been building up over the years.

2.3.7 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire of St. Helier:

This evening Deputies from No. 1 district will be attending upon residents of Berkshire Court to address what has been a never-ending saga of complaints. They have met with no response from the Jersey Homes Trust. This has been going on for 5 years. Will the Minister attend with us this evening to see how futile it is in trying to get basic recommendations through a housing trust that refuses to do anything, unlike the very good housing trusts that exist elsewhere?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I have had no complaints about Berkshire Court, I have to say. I have had no complaints. I have not had one complaint about Berkshire Court and I have not been invited to the meeting this evening and I do not feel at this time that the Minister for Housing should be involved with the Deputies and the arguments with the trust at the present time. I will, if necessary, once they have had their deliberations and discussions, certainly attend to the Deputies if they require me.

2.3.8 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier:

The Minister evaded answering the second part of Deputy Southern's question earlier about whether he would share the information that he is not prepared to reveal to the Chamber and to the media. Would he give that information to the Scrutiny Panel in confidence?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, not at the moment. The issue is quite clear that I have sought and am seeking advice from the Attorney General on various aspects of what could happen to affordable land or rezoned sites. I have also sent out a note and once I have the information then of course I am very happy to share it with the Scrutiny Panel. The Scrutiny Panel is there to assist me and I will do so, but the time is not quite right at the present time.

2.3.9 The Connétable of St. John:

The Minister clearly wants a common waiting list for various social housing. Could the Minister advise the Assembly as to how he would envisage the allocation process to go forward given that Parishes look after their own properties?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The issue is that the allocation process would not involve the Parishes who own their own properties. It is as simple as that. Pre-1975 was the last issue on providing homes within the Parishes by the Connétables, and such as St. Martin and Trinity and issues like that, that they have their existing stock, the States would not want to be involved in the allocation.

2.3.10 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Does the Minister not consider that it is the lack of regulation upon the housing trusts that has caused him to worry about this matter?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The answer to that is no.