

3. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Housing

The Bailiff:

Very well then that concludes Questions on Notice. We come then to Questions to Ministers Without Notice and the first period is to the Minister for Housing.

3.1 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Does the Minister propose to increase rents in 2012 and if he does, will he be liaising with the Minister for Social Security before he does so?

Deputy A.K.F. Green of St. Helier (The Minister for Housing):

We will be reviewing our rents as part of the transformation programme. Whether that will translate into an increase or not, I do not know at the moment but naturally, in reviewing that, I will consult the Minister for Social Security and other interested parties.

3.1.1 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

A supplementary on that one. Does the Minister believe that the present system of keeping States rents at some 90 per cent below market or perhaps lower than market is a form of rent control, and does he propose to look at rent control in the private sector as well as the States sector?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I think the whole issue of rents does require looking at and not least the system that we have for supporting people with their rents in the private sector. That needs to be looked at. The whole system needs to be reviewed and I am not sure whether increases will bring about the desired effect in terms of income. So I think the whole thing needs to be looked at, and I am keeping my mind open on that but it is a stream of work that I am currently undertaking.

3.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may, a point of clarification from the Minister. The Minister has said that he will be looking at rents in the transformation programme. My understanding is the transformation programme will be a White Paper some time later this year and no decisions will be made about what is happening with that for at least 2 years. In the meantime, is he going to be putting up his rents outside of the transformation programme, which is a far longer time scale? Is that what the Minister is saying? Is he saying he is not going to put up the rents until the transformation programme has been signed-off?

The Bailiff:

Deputy, I am counting that as your question.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

No, Sir, it is a point of clarification.

The Bailiff:

No, it is a question. It is question time.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

No, I am not saying that. What I am saying is that obviously rent review will be part of the transformation programme. We will be looking at it in the short term. What is clear to me in my short time in office is that the current system is unsustainable and this is a personal view, not the view of the department, I have to add, and I am not sure that we have done the best by people in the private rental sector, inasmuch as I think that we may have inflated rents rather than supporting people that we need to support with the current system. So it needs to be looked at.

It will be part of the transformation programme. Whether I will do something in the interim will depend on what I find.

The Bailiff:

Do you want your supplementary, then?

3.2.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister for Housing see any signs of recovery in the housing market which might enable him to sell off any more of his social rented stock in order to carry on with the planned projected maintenance and refurbishment schemes that he has in-plan?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Regretfully, I do not see any signs in that inasmuch as we will be able to sell off more houses to enable us to get on with the work. I think we will hopefully see an upturn fairly soon but at the moment there is no evidence to support that. But I do need to find other ways of getting the work done, but £45 million of outstanding work or £47 million depending on who you speak to, we need to get that. I can say that Clos Gosset will be starting at the end of April.

[11:30]

So we are undertaking it. Pomme d'Or Farm will happen later on this year; as people know, something I have a particular interest in. But in sale of houses generally as a policy, it is not something I subscribe to but I accept that we have to be pragmatic, we have to realign our stock and we have to find the money from various different sources to carry out the work, so that we can be proud of the accommodation that we give our social housing sector.

3.3 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

In recent times, Housing have moved many of their tenants away from oil-fired central heating to electrical central heating. Many seniors reported to me that their electricity bills have increased dramatically and in some cases more than doubled. Is the Minister aware and will he undertake to investigate?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I have already heard these concerns. I am told that sometimes people are not comparing like with like and they are forgetting that, for example, the massive costs in oil and gas that other consumers are having to put up with. The thing that I am advised is that electrical heating needs to be undertaken with significant improvements in installation. If you get that right then the overall costs are reduced. That said, I have not seen the evidence to support that. So I have a meeting with the Managing Director of the J.E.C. (Jersey Electricity Company) planned for next week, when I can start to look into this.

3.4 The Deputy of St. Mary:

I just want to start by saying that the current population policy is to increase the population of the Island by 150 households every year. I just want to ask the Minister whether his job of providing sufficient housing on a very small land mass, in the light of an ever-increasing population, is basically an impossible task and how he relishes running to a standstill when he is a marathon runner. Will he be pressing in the Council of Ministers for a more sensible approach?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

That is quite a wide question to which I am going to give a concise answer to say that this is another stream of work that I am looking at at the moment. People will know that I have only had the post a short while. The danger is - and I will come to the point in a minute - if I try to do everything I will achieve nothing. So I am going to concentrate on the transformation programme particularly. I will be reviewing the policy in terms of migration. We have a

migration policy debate coming up. There is lots of work to be done there. So the answer is; I am keeping my options open for what is best for the Island.

3.5 Senator T.J. Le Main:

Will the Minister be placing amendments to the Island Plan on sites, such as Samarès Nurseries and Le Quesne's Nurseries in St. Clement, to enable his department to develop and provide affordable and social rented homes for the elderly, for which they - the Housing Department - are in desperate need and in fact a much-increasing need to have local people in affordable rental homes?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I have received the Draft Island Plan today. I will be looking at it. Whether I will be bringing amendments to it, I do not know yet. But what I will say is that there are a vast numbers of sites that we can develop today if we can find the money without asking the Minister for Planning and Environment to find more. So I am keeping my options open on the St. Clement one. I want to get on with the job, but we need to find the money to do it. The sites exist. The Senator knows we need the money to do the job.

3.5.1 Senator T.J. Le Main:

Could I ask; in response to that question, will the Minister confirm that these sites could be developed right away by funding which could be had as a private company of the Housing Department and if the Housing Department was allowed to borrow money against these sites? The other site he is talking about, of course, is different. This is a totally new concept.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The Senator is right. If we had the funding we could do it. That is what the transformation programme will be exploring.

3.6 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Is the Minister happy with the performance of housing trusts, such as Brunel Management who threaten their tenants with eviction without following procedures which incorporate natural justice or Voisin-Hunter who, in one case, will not ensure their tenants have clean, as opposed to dirty, tap water?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I cannot be happy at all with what the Deputy describes. If he brings the individual cases to me I will deal with it. His question in response to housing trusts; housing trusts make a valuable contribution to this Island, without which our social housing sector would be far worse off. I think we should acknowledge that. That said, I think part of the transformation programme is to regulate housing trusts and to regulate housing, because we are not much better. We have 20 per cent of our own accommodation we should be ashamed of. So we need regulation, but a regulation should apply to all social housing providers.

3.7 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Mine was along the lines of Senator Le Main. I am quite disappointed to hear the new Minister for Housing, who is not going to fight his corner because of Samarès. But the question is; he also said the money ... we would have money, could have money to develop and he needs to find another funding stream. How far along the line is he? Has he considered bringing back the States Loan Scheme, even if it is in a different guise, because this will help and it will enable people to buy and developments to continue very quickly?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I was a recipient of the supplementary States Loan Scheme, so I know how good it can be. I think last year only one States loan was made. That is not surprising when you consider, and I cannot remember the figure, but it is something like £140,000 is the maximum loan, which is going to go nowhere. I do want to look at this. I have a view and I am quite happy to share it with Members - although I have to say it is my own view, it is uninformed, I have not discussed it with anyone - that tying-up millions of pounds of States money is not something that would work today. However, we could look at whether we could support people in terms of guaranteeing interest rates above a certain level. In other words, the banks have comfort knowing that if they support somebody that, if interest rates rise, that then we will be able to help them. But it is just an idea, something I am exploring. So the quick answer to the Deputy is; yes I am going to explore States Loans.

3.8 Deputy A.E. Jeune:

Would the Minister please confirm that any of the sites he is looking to build on do not include green fields?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Absolutely.

3.9 Deputy S. Pitman:

Just to carry on from what Deputy Higgins was talking about. I would just like to ask the Minister where his department is in regulating housing trusts, because we have had a talk about it and nothing has seemingly been done. I brought a case to him. He is aware that a trust... there is serious damp problems with some of their housing. We know that if ... some of these people need protecting and that is through regulations.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

As I said before, the regulation of all social housing, in my view, will be part of the transformation programme. I am not just talking about it. I met with all the chairs of the Housing Associations, including a couple of the smaller ones, recently and they very kindly sent their Chief Executive over from the U.K. in one of the charities. We had a very frank and useful discussion the Friday before last, when I laid out the requirements, as I see it, in the transformation programme and in the regulation. Regulations should apply to all social housing. If there are individual cases, certainly the good Deputy has brought me a couple of cases which I have helped deal with, if there are individual cases where there are problems, bring them to me and I will deal with them on an individual basis.

3.9.1 Deputy S. Pitman:

Supplementary, please? In the interim before this transformation programme is complete and the regulations are finalised, and the Minister is aware of one particular trust which has serious damp issues, what preliminary measures can he take or will he take to alleviate his problem?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I can only say that on each individual case, I will do what I can. Members must bring them to the department and to me and we will investigate them and take whatever action is needed.

3.10 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Would the Minister agree that there is just not enough social housing provision at the moment within the States remit to house people in Jersey? The housing waiting list that has been published on the website recently is a great advance. I thank him for that. But I would like to also put out this morning, if I can, 10 people or at least 3 families on that list are deemed to be homeless. There is nothing the Department for Housing can do because it does not have any

stock. The housing trusts should be investing more in new housing provision and it is just not happening.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

To take the latter point first, that will be part of again my transformation programme, that there are surpluses being built-up by trusts. We will be looking for appropriate reinvestment. In terms of the current waiting lists they are unacceptable. We do not have enough social housing. We need to do something about that. I am working on it.

3.11 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Could the Minister tell us what has been the most surprising thing he has found since he became Minister?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

That you cannot do anything right. No. I think the breadth of the job, in as much as I naively thought it was only about social housing, the role is much, much wider, including migration. I am enjoying the role terrifically. I am going to absolutely prioritise my workstream. I have about 6 or 7 months left. If I try and do everything I will achieve nothing. I will try and bring this transformation programme to a point where it is ready to go after the next Assembly has been elected.

3.12 Deputy A.T. Dupré of St. Clement:

Will the Minister just agree that once you have your new sites at Le Squez and the ones opposite the Co-op, it will make a big difference to your waiting list?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, particularly Salisbury Crescent (opposite the Co-op) will make a difference, because what that will do is allow us to move people who want to move. We are not forcing people to move. People who want to downsize, who want to be in town. That will enable us to offer much needed suitable family accommodation as people move along through the system. We have about 34 new units from memory coming on line fairly soon and that will help. Le Squez will help as well. So it is not all negative, but there is a lot of work to do.