

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

The Deputy Bailiff:

We come to the beginning of the next question period for the Minister for Housing.

4.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

The policy of housing teenage mums is, in my opinion, a questionable one because it can lead to various problems, including isolation, which can, in turn, lead to poor outcomes for the children. Has the Minister considered whether this policy should be revisited, not least to stop some individuals who see getting pregnant as a means to access social housing?

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

I could answer that in one word and say: "Yes" but what I will say to the Deputy is it is something that really concerns me and, to that end, I am starting work on it. In fact, I have arranged to speak fairly soon to the Y.M.C.A. Now, the Y.M.C.A. is the Young Men's Christian Association, but they are experts in providing sheltered housing, supported housing, independent living and medium-term housing for all young people, not just young men. It is something I want to talk to them about because I know there is a gap in our provision and the last thing I want is to reward, if you like, irresponsible behaviour. I would like to reward responsible behaviour.

4.2 The Deputy of Grouville:

Earlier today the Assistant Minister to the Chief Minister responded to my question about the names and address register, stating that the housing laws, along with the register, acts as our migration control. I cannot see this. Perhaps the Minister for Housing can explain how the housing laws act as our migration control?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

What I will say, and I think the Deputy knows that I was going to say this, is we will be much better informed with this new law and we will have up-to-date information as to who is in Jersey. It will be reliable. It will be traceable. If there are gaps in information coming back from different departments, we will pick it up. So for the first time we will know exactly who is in Jersey. The decisions that come from that are what will bring in the control. The actual policy and the law does not bring in the control.

4.2.1 The Deputy of Grouville:

Would the Minister not agree that being better informed is not the same as a migration control and we desperately need controls and we desperately need them urgently?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, I do agree that we need controls but all good decisions are based on accurate information and we have to get that accurate information first.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Can I say the question is at the very edges of the Minister's responsibility? He is not responsible for migration.

4.3 Deputy S. Power:

The Minister would be aware that his responsibility for the issuing of (j) and (k) licences is, in my opinion and I am sure the Minister's opinion, an effective system. Does he think that that system could be extended to the area of migration that now concerns many Members of this Assembly and that there could be a licensing system under his control?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I am sure that we can do all sorts of things to change it. The (j)s and the (k)s system does work very well, as the Deputy says. Should it be extended? The last thing I think we need to do is to put in yet another layer of administration. Personally, I would like to see how the new law works, the information we get back and how accurate that is in determining the policies of the Council of Ministers and the Chief Minister's Department, informed by myself and the Minister for Economic Development. We need to get accurate information before we go into knee-jerk reactions.

4.3.1 Deputy S. Power:

May I ask a supplementary on that? The Minister will be aware that there is an effective control mechanism within the Population Office to control (j)s and (k)s and, indeed, the issuing of (g)s. Does he not think it is possible that that system could be extended to the sector of migration that we are now talking about without much effort?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I would not say "without much effort." It is possible, but I would want to be sure that that is the right tool to use at this time.

4.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Can the Minister confirm that the vast majority of people in social housing are in there because they cannot afford or would not necessarily be able to afford rents in the open market?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, I can confirm that. We are the social housing landlord and many of our people are in there because they need subsidy or because they needed subsidy when they first entered our accommodation. So, yes, that is true.

4.4.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

The supplementary, in that case, is we often hear about this hidden subsidy that is given to the Housing Department from the Treasury via Social Security. Does the Minister for Housing, therefore, think that it is completely regressive for the subsidy being reimbursed to the Treasury via tenants who themselves are poor, let us put that simply, because they cannot afford rents in the public sector, which, incidentally, goes to private landlords who may own multiple homes that are being paid for supposedly by the taxpayer? Does he not think it would be preferable that it should come from either general taxation or from Social Security contributions because, after all, it is that department that is making a component payment?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Let me make one thing quite clear. I am clearly of the view, and I hope to convince this House to be of the same view, that the rents in the private sector should not be on the same scheme as the rents in the social sector. In fact, we have done a lot of work on this and there is no other system in the world - not just in Europe, there is no other system in the world - that links the rent rebate scheme in the private sector to its social rented sector. So we need to decouple, we need to delink - whatever you want to call it. Now, with regard to the money coming from Housing to the Minister for Treasury and Resources, just take a step back and look at the way we used to do it. What we used to do - and some people might say that is the way we should do it - is we used to charge very low rents and the subsidy then went to everybody. It was not in the least targeted. The current system is that everybody is charged the appropriate rent, although that has slipped, I have to say, in some areas, and if they cannot afford to pay that rent then they rightly receive the right support from Social Security and all the benefits and support comes from Social Security and not hidden in the Housing Department. So I think that is right as well and I think that that should continue. With regard to the hidden subsidy, as I refer, I want to ensure that any subsidy is targeted where it is needed and those whose situations change, of course I am not going to

make them homeless, but if their situation has changed ... let us take the husband and wife that come into Housing with a couple of children. The children grow up and leave home, the wife starts to work as well. The situation has completely changed. Should those people continue to receive a subsidy? No, they should pay their way. As part of that, though, I would like them to have a choice and that is where part of the work for the Strategic Housing Unit comes in. Would they be able to buy, either on some sort of subsidised or Homebuy-type scheme, because they are now in a position to be able to do so? Those are the things that we need to be working on. We need to be investing in independence not dependence.

Deputy M. Tadier:

I was just going to say that did not answer the question and I will be asking for a written answer that is perhaps shorter than that.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That may be a better way of going about it.

4.5 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I hope I get a shorter answer to this one. What assurances, if any, can the Minister give to residents of Clos De L'Ecluse about concerns arising about asbestos in the construction of the building?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I am not aware of any problems there with asbestos but what I will say is that all our contractors who carry out work are completely trained, certified and all the rest of it in handling asbestos and, if there is a problem there, if the Deputy speaks to me I will look into it straight away.

4.5.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Is the Minister not aware that residents were sent a letter about this?

[12:00]

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

If the residents were sent a letter that means it is well in control and it is an operational matter I would not normally be involved in.

4.6 Deputy R.J. Rondel:

The Minister has and is being very active and committed to deliver around £27 million of social housing. What is the Minister doing to deliver affordable housing for young local couples desperately trying to get on the housing ladder by working hard in order to purchase their own homes with their own savings? Presently this is only a dream. These are the very people we need to encourage to stay in the Island for our future.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I totally agree with the Deputy. This is work that needs to be done. It is work that sits in 3 areas currently. It sits partly with the Chief Minister's office in terms of States loans; it sits partly with the Minister for Planning and Environment and partly with myself. My plan is that the Strategic Housing Unit will provide a cross-tenure review and a strategy for all housing; not just social housing but all housing because, otherwise, if we carry on the way we are, it will only be a dream.

4.6.1 Deputy R.J. Rondel:

Just as a supplementary if I may, does the Minister support the Minister for Planning and Environment with his proposals for delivery of affordable housing and sooner rather than later?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I support anybody with any proposals that come up with schemes for affordable housing that can be implemented quickly and are workable.

4.7 The Connétable of St. John:

How many disabled homes are managed by the Housing Department and is there are a waiting list for this accommodation?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I take it by “disabled homes” the Constable means homes which people have access to. I have to say that I do not know the answer to that at the moment and I am happy to look into that. However, we are increasing access to homes all the time. Some of the homes that we have been talking about recently in the department that have no lifts we intend to put lifts in and provide access to homes so that people in wheelchairs or with mobility problems can access their homes. This is what really lifelong homes are. I do not know the answer to how many - I am happy to provide that information - but we do intend to increase it and have access to as many homes as possible for people that cannot move very easily.

The Connétable of St. John:

Unfortunately I was hoping to put a supplementary, but ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

No, I am sorry. I have got 4 Members still wanting to ask questions and time is running out.

4.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister revisit with his colleague, the Minister for Social Security, the policies on social rented housing for under-25s?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Definitely, it is under my review at the moment. It is something I am very concerned about. I have to say, though, I do not want to mislead the Deputy. It is something I am very concerned about, but I am in danger of trying to do everything and achieve nothing. I need to get the White Paper in, I need to increase the supply of homes and then I can alter the criteria for getting into those homes, because I am extremely concerned about under-25s.

4.9 Deputy J.H. Young:

Would the Minister confirm that he is actively working on a plan to improve the availability of affordable housing for the over-55s and, in particular, whether he agrees that the over-55s are best accommodated in the communities in which they have spent their working lives? Could he advise the Assembly whether he is working with the Minister for Planning and Environment and the Constable to plan for the future increasing needs, particularly in the country areas?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I totally agree with the Deputy that people in their ageing years would generally - there may be exceptions in which case they can ask to change - want to be in the community in which they have lived for many years. They have built-up support structures and the like. It is another one of my concerns that I am working and this is partly the role of the Strategic Housing Unit. I would like to see things coming into place such as people being able to buy lifetime tenures and releasing into the housing market their 3 and 4-bedroom homes, but to do that we need a complete housing strategy. That is what is missing. That is what I am going to provide with the Strategic Housing Unit.

4.10 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Would the Minister not concede that, despite the regulatory role that his department has, the amount of information needed from the population database will simply not be available for many, many years, because we have to wait for that to fill, and it is simply not good enough to wait for this in order to fulfil ongoing housing and immigration policy?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

In a word, no, I do not agree because I know the database is almost complete and up and running. So, no, I do not agree.

4.11 Senator L.J. Farnham:

Is the Minister in favour of aligning the 5-year rule with the housing qualification period?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I think I am going to duck that one in a way because I think one needs to be very careful not to make knee-jerk reactions, populous reactions that have an adverse effect on the very thing that we are trying to prevent. What I will say is I am happy to look at it and we are discussing it. I am not sure whether I agree that we should do it, but I think it is right to look at it.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings questions without notice to an end. I have allowed an urgent oral question to be asked by the Connétable of St. John of the Minister for Economic Development.