

4. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Planning and Environment

The Bailiff:

Does any Member wish to ask any questions? Very well, we will bring questions to the Minister for Housing to an end, so we will move to the second period which is questions to the Minister for Planning and Environment. Deputy of St. Mary.

4.1 The Deputy of St. Mary:

I will recycle my question. The term affordable housing is not realistic with current property starting in the region of £450,000. What is the Minister doing to achieve realistically affordable housing for the low income sector to purchase, which we both know is achievable at about £250,000?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel (The Minister for Planning and Environment):

What the Minister is doing is attempting to bring forward a policy whereby the definition of affordability will be redefined in those terms. We have already had some statistical surveys that have lent weight to the definition that I endorse and uphold, in that 80 per cent of those on medium wages could well afford a property of £200,000.

[12:00]

I have had discussions with some local banks that are prepared to put up funding to pay for 150 mortgages at £200,000. I am also suggesting that the affordable units be built as far as possible on States-owned sites, which would include the sites that the Minister for Housing was referring indirectly to. These policies cannot be brought into being before they have been discussed fully and openly in this House and before that happens there has to be a period of consultation, not only with the public but with the Council of Ministers who I will be seeking their support. These things are in hand and they will happen shortly in the New Year.

4.1.1 The Deputy of St. Mary:

When is the timescale likely to happen?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I have already referred to that. There is a meeting. I have been through a number of discussions with the building construction companies, in particular the Jersey Construction Council. There is a further meeting tomorrow to discuss revisions to the previous plans that were being put forward in terms of affordability in order to secure their support. As I mentioned to this House on a previous occasion in relation to a question, in respect of 4 questions, they were supportive of 3 of those issues. I am hoping to secure their support for the fourth part of the policy at which point it is available to me and open to me to bring the discussions to the Council of Ministers in the early part of the New Year.

4.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

I wonder if the Minister could tell us, without breaching confidence, what progress has been made on resolving the impasse over the La Masurier site, including whether or not he would be amenable to an independent personal group analysing what has gone on and then perhaps further amenable to the use of mediation so that we can move this thing forward.

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

The Deputy should read the very comprehensive written reply to the question put forward to me - I think it was by Deputy Higgins - in respect of the discussions that have taken place with this particular company. In particular, I think he should read the very last entry which suggests that the company themselves have agreed to meet with me and that decision was taken on 5th

December. A meeting is being arranged for 20th December which was the earliest opportunity at which any final points in dispute will be resolved and the situation will move to the next phase.

4.2.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

A supplementary: is the Minister hopeful of a resolution?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

Absolutely. That is why I have made my statement prior to getting the agreements from the company that they would meet me at a future date on 5th December. I think a lot of these things that were being spoken about in the media were storms in a teacup and, indeed, I have resolved to meet and I think we can have a successful resolution.

4.3 Deputy J.H. Young:

Following his Minister's answer to the excellent question from the Deputy of St. Mary regarding affordable housing, could the Minister confirm that he and the Minister for Housing are working together closely on producing this new policy and when will the point be reached in his discussions where he will look at the sites kept in reserve in the Island Plan, in the event of an impasse in this matter?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I am unable to do that in part. I do not think that the Minister for Housing is necessarily in full agreement with the position that I would wish to be discussed by the Council of Ministers and, indeed, by this House. I think there is a substantial difference of opinion as to what is meant by "affordability". I think the Minister for Housing, without trying to put words in his mouth, is suggesting that his affordability criteria is generally for affordable houses for social renting, whereas I am looking at affordability for purchase. I do not necessarily agree that his definition of £250,000 for houses to purchase in part or in whole represents the best terms that could be understood and agreed by the majority of those persons in a position to purchase as being definitely affordable. My definition, as I have said on previous occasions, is one that is tied into a person's ability to pay the market rentals on a 3-bedroom house in the States sector which corresponds to round about the £275/£280 a week mark, which would give a person the ability to have 5 per cent, 25-year mortgages to acquire a mortgage for £200,000. The key has always been the difficulty in the local market as to whether or not you would get anything sensible for that £200,000 and this is the thing that needs to be discussed. There are a whole host of building technologies that have been mentioned by myself and other Members which could radically bring down the cost of the provision of housing to those levels to make it, in my view, truly affordable to a whole load of people who are not able to participate in the earning market at the moment.

4.3.1 Deputy J.H. Young:

Notwithstanding the Minister's very comprehensive analysis on the subject, would he not agree that members of the public listening to that answer would be astonished that we seem to be in a position where there is not joined up working to try and resolve this? Would he not agree that in that situation, it is imperative that this matter is brought to a head to prevent the problem getting worse? Then we start to get some affordable homes for our young people as the Island Plan seeks us to do.

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I would agree but not at the expense of not discussing alternative points of view or coming forward with a course of action that only looked at half of the problem and sought a solution that really was not a solution for the majority of those who could have a solution.

4.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

I will ask a similar question which I asked the Minister for Housing with regard to Plémont and the land swap. Does the Minister know what type of land would be used and would it be land which could potentially be used for social housing or affordable housing?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

In me and my department's analysis of the potential sites that are available for the provision of affordable housing, what we are looking at, at the moment, is the opportunity for States-owned sites to provide a large quota of that type of housing. Certainly with some sites, with potential redevelopment, there is an opportunity to increase the density. It is not by packing people into rabbit hutches but by giving them proper, up-to-date facilities and amenities to increase some of the density of these particular sites by, in some cases, as much as 100 per cent.

4.4.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

Can I thank the Minister for that answer? I think it did not address my question which was to do with the land swap that would take place with Plémont. Does he have any idea what land is being proposed in that and what impact it would have on the objectives for strategic affordable homes, both social and buying?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I do not but again, this is part and parcel of perhaps a difference of opinion in terms of what States Members might wish and what the public might wish in terms of what happens with the States-owned properties. There is no doubt that some sites could be offloaded at a very high price in order to put back the sizeable sum of monies which would allow those monies to be reinvested in Plémont. Whether or not that represents the best use of the States portfolio and assets, in particular housing assets, that we have, I am not at all convinced at this point in time.

4.5 Deputy E.J. Noel of St. Lawrence:

The Minister spoke about the discussions he has apparently had on affordable housing on States-owned land. Has he discussed this with other Ministers, and in particular with the Minister for Treasury and Resources and the Minister for Housing, and if not, why not?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

There were early discussions last year but we got ourselves into a bit of a mix in that there were behind the door suggestions by the Jersey Construction Forum that they would wish to have the early release of other greenfield sites or brownfield sites. That has derailed the process for a period of time. I think the process is almost back on board and these documents and discussions will be coming back to the Council of Ministers for proper discussion as, indeed, should have taken place at an earlier stage but for those reasons, was not able to be done.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Is that a "no"?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

No, that is not a "no". I said there are documented meetings that have taken place with the States working party groups that were set up to consider this question when I was first given the job. Those meetings have taken place and they are documented.

4.5.1 Deputy E.J. Noel:

Could the Minister enlighten the Assembly as to when the last meeting of that body took place?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

The last meeting of that group took place prior to the summer recess when a lot of the flames were being fanned by the construction industry in order to bring about a revision of the Island

Plan before it had properly bedded in and before we had settled the question of whether or not long-term urban regeneration is a sensible way forward to provide affordable units or whether or not we should be releasing wholesale greenfield or brownfield sites in order to build expensive units for the few.

4.6 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

When will the Minister be bringing forward his recommendations for amendments to the third party planning process?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

The process at the moment is with the Crown Officers. Letters have been written asking for their opinion and I am awaiting a reply.

4.6.1 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Will there be consultation with the members of the public who have suffered this process?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I think I probably need a little advice on that.

4.7 Connétable S.W. Pallett of St. Brelade:

What procedures will the Minister for Planning and Environment consider to ensure any affordable housing that is built remains affordable in perpetuity and is not sold for profit at a later date?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

This indeed is part of the proposals that are coming forward from my department to suggest that a new body be set up whereby people will be offered affordable homes and those homes will be ring-fenced in terms of ownership and have to be offered back to a holding company, which will be in a position to keep the price at the affordable level in the future. That is not to say that people will be disadvantaged in terms of the normal capital speculation that they get from owning an asset. The monies will be dynamised by the ordinary cost of living but we will not have the situation which has pertained in the past potentially if we go down this route whereby houses that have been discounted are sold in a very short period of time back on to the open market and people pocket the difference.

4.8 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

In the battle between thermal efficient windows and drafty historic windows, is the Minister able to inform the Assembly in his opinion which one should take precedent?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I certainly know which ones take precedent in my house and that is the historic ones. There is an absolute benefit in the old building techniques in terms of having external shutters, internal shutters and curtains as opposed to having the double glazed windows which do not encourage people to open windows in the summer and indeed, kind of move a lot of houses into mechanical ventilation systems which are expensive in energy terms. I personally think that there is room for both and I attended the Bingham(?) Centre earlier during the year where a new Pilkington glass offering was on the market which would enable the same type of thermal properties which could be achieved through double glazing to be achieved by a lightweight glass, which was accepted by heritage bodies as being acceptable to be fitted into the wooden frames. So I think it is not a case of which one is the best although I do have my preferences. I think there is room for both.

4.9 The Connétable of St. John:

Could the Minister give us an update, please, on the 3 historical church applications: the Sion being one of them; one at St. Aubin's or St. Brelade; and one out east? Given that we would like to get this put to bed once and for all, it seems to be dragging on and on. Could the Minister update Members please?

[12:15]

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

In relation to church applications, there are a number of church applications that are going through our books at the moment, all with differing requirements in terms of the element of the historic fabric within some of these listed buildings that should, as far as possible, be retained. I have had further meetings with Deputy Young over Sion and I am awaiting a further application by the owners of that building as to whatever they have decided upon in terms of making an application.

4.9.1 The Connétable of St. John:

Will the Minister give us an undertaking that this will be sorted out within the next 6 months because this has been going on for years and years and is going to be an embarrassment to my Parish if the building concerned gets into total disrepair. I am aware the trustees have not got the funds which are required to do everything, even to keep it maintained, so in fairness, I do not want to see a dilapidated church in my Parish. Would you please give us an undertaking it will be sorted?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I think I have done and I have indicated to this House just now that I had meetings with Deputy Young and the historic officer to reconsider, with Deputy Young, who was liaising for the owners, as to what may or may not be possible for that building. As I say, that happened a number of weeks ago and I am awaiting a further application from the owners as to which direction they would like to go in. It has been quite clearly explained, as it is to all historic building owners, that the law as it stands does not stop things from being rebuilt, knocked down, refurbished or whatever, but in the case of historic buildings, you have to make a special case for the benefits in doing so. That, in some instances, is quite easy to be made as I have reported to this House on previous occasions. The town church managed to put in an application to remove its old wooden pews in favour of modern seating and that just gives you an indication as to what might be available if you have the right architects and advisers working for you in order to submit your application.

The Connétable of St. John:

Will the Minister agree that the law is an ass?

PUBLIC BUSINESS

The Bailiff:

That brings the period for questions to an end, I am sorry.