

6. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Chief Minister

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings the 15 minute period for the first question period to an end. We now come to questions of the Chief Minister. Deputy Power.

6.1 Deputy S. Power:

The Chief Minister may or may not be aware of the recent publication of the Housing Assessment Survey which stated that the Statistics Unit has estimated a shortage of 1,471 houses, 420 of them being H1. What role will his office have in meeting the demand to the proposed strategic housing unit?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

I am not sure whether the Deputy overlaid the affordability criteria on that number because I do not have that information with me but when one does overlay that criteria then the demand reduces considerably. The Deputy is absolutely right. This is one of the issues that we in the past have not necessarily considered in a strategic manner and that is exactly what the creation of the Strategic Housing Unit will allow for. The States will, very shortly I hope, after the Council of Ministers meeting on the 27th, be in a position to approve the creation of that unit and that unit will then be able to deliver on the issues that the Deputy is referring to which are absolutely critical.

6.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisser:

In my answer to the question of granting of bulk licences for labour it is said that there are still 7,346 non-locally qualified licences out there, which is an enormous number. Would the Chief Minister, from a population perspective, tell us to what extent the withdrawal of licences - which appears to be going very slowly - is focused on the low paid end of the economy or to what extent does it spread throughout the economy?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not believe that the withdrawal of licences is going slowly at all. Licences come up for 3-year renewal and the Migration Advisory Group are considering them very carefully and making some very difficult decisions. Those Members that have had time to read the Scrutiny Panel's report on the regulations will obviously see that it is a similar theme that they are suggesting there that we must continue with that work, and perhaps slightly speed it up, but they are difficult decisions. But it is right that we make the decisions - as we have said and as I have said on a number of occasions before - to protect jobs in our community for those individuals who are already here and those individuals who are out of work. Currently, as I say, it is on the 3-year basis but with the new law it will allow speedier consideration of removal of those licences.

6.2.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisser:

Clarification. Could the Chief Minister clarify, is his group or is he focusing at the lower paid end of the economy when one looks at the vast number of licences still around, for example, in wholesale and retail, hotels, restaurants and bars?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That is the difficulty of the population and migration issue. He is right. Those sectors are where the largest number of unqualified licences lie and therefore that is where there is most latitude and scope to deliver jobs for people who are already in our community. At the same time there are policies of this Assembly which wish to support the tourism, the agriculture and the retail sector and that is the difficult balancing act that my department and Senator Routier and his colleagues on the Migration Advisory Group have to make.

6.3 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

The Chief Minister recently gave an interview to the *Jersey Evening Post* and in that interview he spoke about immigration matters. The Chief Minister said that the matter would be prioritised and a major public consultation would take place. Can the Chief Minister tell us when the consultation is going to take place and when he is going to bring a policy on population to the Assembly?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Yes, it was not that recent. Obviously I am just a filler of newspaper pages because it was a number of weeks ago that I undertook that interview. **[Laughter]** Having said that, the Deputy is absolutely right. The Strategic Plan commits us to bringing forward a population policy. I spoke with officers and Senator Routier last week - I think it was now - around a timescale for that public consultation. It will involve the difficult issues which Deputy Le Hérisser has just raised and we need to get to grips with those and we need to broaden the conversation about the Island that we want to see in the future. I will provide the timescale to the Deputy and to Members once it has been finalised, which I do not believe it has yet.

6.3.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

A supplementary. Does the Chief Minister accept that with the possibility of 20 million-plus Bulgarians - and I forgot the other nationality - joining the common market at the end of this year, that it is of utmost importance that a policy is brought to this House and that we can put measures in place that do limit the immigration that is taking place?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As I have already said in answers to questions this morning, we are already tightening up those licences, which is our best method of controlling immigration on the laws agreed by this Assembly so we are already doing that. I do recognise that those enlargement issues are coming up on us in the very near future and we are working to deliver the population policy and consultation in the shortest possible order. Having said that, of course, those countries where there will be the ability for residents to now move without any caps in place across Europe we understand that immigration tends to follow existing flows and therefore we might not expect to be further inundated from those areas.

6.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

As a supporter of closer working with our fellow Crown Dependencies will the Minister state why Guernsey and the Isle of Man, having signed up to automatic exchange of tax information with the U.K., he has not?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure what it is that he is referring to. Is he referring to the European Savings Directive?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

No, he is referring to the fact that Guernsey and the Isle of Man have signed up with the U.K. to automatic exchange of tax information.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

He is not clear under what process he is saying that they have agreed. Obviously if he is talking about a U.K. F.A.T.C.A. (Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act) agreement then we know because in December last year the Isle of Man said that it was their intention to sign. We have been working together with Guernsey, with the United Kingdom, as I have said on many other occasions, but it is not my understanding that Guernsey have yet said that they would agree to sign such an agreement.

6.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Minister will be aware of the joint union rally which is taking place at 6.00 p.m. at Fort Regent today. I will not ask the Minister if he is attending although I may see him there. I will ask him whether he would be willing - if there is something that could persuade him - to reopen the negotiations for a pay deal with States employees who up until now seem to have had a pay deal forced upon them in spite and trampling the process of negotiations. Could there be something that would persuade the Chief Minister to reopen those negotiations, sit round a table and come up with a better deal for our workers?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I have to be absolutely clear that my staff do continue to negotiate and have conversations with public sector unions with regard to modernisation so that flow of information and conversation continues. The Deputy is well aware of the difficult situation that the States Employment Board found itself in, built upon the difficult economic environment not only in Jersey but across Europe, and we had to perform a balance of providing pay restraint, protecting public sector jobs and we believe that the proposal that we put to our employees is fair and appropriate and manages that balance well. In December the States Employment Board took the decision, as the Deputy well knows, that the division between our position - which has been approved, the money has been approved by this Assembly on more than 2 occasions - and what the Union representatives wanted was so great that we had to implement the pay deal and that is exactly what we have done.

6.5.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

A supplementary. The Minister has talked about a willingness to sit around the table and discuss modernisation. The question is about the actual cost of living adjustment which should be seen as separate from modernisation. Does the Chief Minister agree that negotiations should continue on the actual cost of living adjustment that workers will receive and that modernisation, which I believe Unions are more than willing to discuss, should come subsequently?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Obviously the Deputy and I have argued about this point before and I do not agree with him. The Deputy also refers to cost of living adjustments as though that were happening elsewhere in our community and elsewhere across Europe. We have got to understand the difficult economic situation that we find ourselves in and trying to protect our workforce together with this pay deal which we implemented. We also said that there would be no compulsory redundancies. We have been criticised for that. We have also been criticised for the 4 per cent that is on the table and been as part of this deal for 2014. What we are trying to do is provide a workforce which is fit for the future, which is modernised and will be able to provide the public services that this community wants, and that has been difficult, but what we believe we proposed and implemented is fair.

6.6 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Chief Minister confirm that there are in fact no powers to stop immigration into the Island even under the new law and will he be following David Cameron's Government in discouraging migration from Bulgaria and Romania into Jersey by placing adverts in those countries that it is not all milk and honey in Jersey for middle and low paid workers?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I have no plans to be placing adverts in periodicals in those jurisdictions. The Deputy makes an interesting point but, as he well knows, we do control immigration indirectly by the control of jobs licences and the control of housing and they are decisions that this Assembly has agreed and they are appropriate ways to control flows of immigration. Of course, outside of the European Union then the responsibility for controlling immigration through work permits lies with Home Affairs.

6.7 The Deputy of St. Martin:

In reply to questions this morning the Chief Minister's Minister for Planning and Environment said that he would not rezone greenhouse sites because he would be bringing forward, or he indicated that he would be passing, Category A homes on States-owned sites in places like Summerland. Given the urgent need for these types of homes and the obvious time delay in building anything in Summerland does the Chief Minister agree with that?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Obviously everything is in the person's hearing because that is not quite what I heard the Minister for Planning and Environment say. He laid out what the position of the Island Plan was and, as I have said previously in this Assembly, and I believe the Minister for Planning and Environment supports that, we are going to need to bring forward the rezoning of sites. The Island Plan was premised on bringing forward an H3 proposal to deliver affordable homes in the medium and longer time. It was also premised on rezoning of sites. The States decided that those rezoning of sites, it was not going to approve. As we know the development of an H3 policy has been extremely difficult and those in the industry have said that it is not going to work exactly as they said when the Island Plan was debated. We have therefore been left with no reasonable amount of supply and therefore we have to go back and consider the rezoning of sites, difficult as that may be. I think that the Minister for Planning and Environment supports that approach.

[12:15]

6.8 Deputy J.H. Young:

In the reports of the food scandal in the U.K. one of the factors that seems to have emerged is that in the United Kingdom there is no one body for food standards regulation. Will the Chief Minister be looking at that with the Council of Ministers to ensure that Jersey does not become a target for all the various food items that nobody wants in the U.K.?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure how that would be possible for us to become the target of food items not wanted in the United Kingdom because we have largely a United Kingdom supply chain when it comes to supermarket foods and therefore they will have a common approach across there. The Deputy makes an interesting point and I will ensure that we do continue to have a joined up approach to these issues. Obviously I have got reports from various providers of food across States and Government departments and I am satisfied with those. We have a strict demarcation and separate sites between the abattoir and the knackers yard - I am not sure if that is a parliamentary term but it is the one I have been provided with - and therefore I think that Members and the public can be satisfied that there is appropriate division between those operators and therefore you cannot have cross-contamination as it were.