

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

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings question time for the Minister for Economic Development to an end. We now open with questions for the Minister for Housing. Are there no questions for the Minister for Housing? **[Laughter]**

[12:00]

5.1 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would like to ask the Minister whether he is planning to respond to the issues raised by the independent planning inspectors following the recent public inquiry on proposed changes to the Island Plan. If so, when does he plan to respond and will it be published?

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

The quick answer to that is yes, I do intend to respond. This is very important work that has been carried out and I am very grateful to the inspectors. The recommendations on the sites that they have suggested are sites that are suitable for affordable housing and rental equate to about 500 new units of accommodation and this fits in with the strategy to provide more affordable homes and more social rented homes. I will be responding shortly.

5.1.1 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

A supplementary: does the Minister accept the comments made by the planning inspectors that challenge some of the figures and positioning and the comments that he has made prior to the public inquiry being held?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

What I do accept is what the inspectors put in their report: that these sites should come forward, that they should not have been withdrawn last time, and that robust evidence of need was provided by my department. Also, the inspectors were pleased to see a much greater working together between the Planning Department and the Housing Department.

5.1.2 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

One final supplementary: the Minister for Housing seems to be a little bit selective in that his comments seem to be directed to the 3 greenhouse sites rather than the Island Plan as a whole. Perhaps he would like to comment on the findings of the report and express his view on the remainder of the report rather than just focus on the 3 housing sites.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

It is not for me to comment on why the inspectors made comments that they did. Suffice to say that they brought forward those 3 sites as the most suitable sites for homes in Jersey. They rejected a number of other sites for very good reasons and that is entirely a matter for them.

5.2 Deputy S. Pinel of St. Clement:

I think my question follows on from Deputy Reed's. I understand the urgent requirement for more social housing but, as the Minister is very much aware, I am strongly opposed to any further large developments in St. Clement. Could the Minister give an update as to the status of consideration of the disused greenhouse sites being developed for social housing in St. Clement?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

It is still very early days. As you know, the inquiry in public and the inspector's report recommended the particular site that the Deputy is talking about in Samarès as the most suitable site for redevelopment in Jersey. This will have to come to the Assembly for debate and that is the time to get into the nitty-gritty. I will say, however, that we are talking to the landowners and looking at options that may be available to us should these sites be rezoned.

5.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Having had very constructive meetings recently with the Minister, could he confirm in public that it is his intention to ensure that the standards in the unqualified sector will meet the best of the standards in the qualified sector? If so, can he say when he intends to implement the imposition of those standards?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The Deputy asks a very important question. When we debated P.33 as part of the transformation of housing, I agreed to bring back suitable regulation for social housing. I have since been looking at it in detail and it does seem to me that we need suitable regulation for the quality of all housing in Jersey, be that unqualified, be that private rental, be that social. That is the route that I am exploring at the moment with my officers. It is more work than what we intended. I think that the way that I would like to go is that the standard of housing be determined by one set of regulations and that the other things such as customer interface and softer issues that need to be dealt with by social housing be dealt with by way of a charter. That is work under progress and I do sincerely hope that I can get it to this Assembly before the end of the life of this Assembly.

5.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister update Members on the progress towards a rental deposit protection scheme, which has been I think 3 years in gestation so far?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, it has and I regret that and I have said to the Deputy several times we are close to doing it. We have a report and proposition nearly ready and I do not want to be able to say that to him anymore, so to that end we recently employed on a temporary contract an officer that is an expert in this area. She started yesterday and I hope very shortly - the last time I will say it - that I will bring it back to this Assembly ready for final debate.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can I just say I am expecting an elephant after 3 years?

5.5 Deputy J.H. Young:

The planning inspector in his report has clearly relied on the Minister's commitment which he gave to give priority to over-55s in Parish developments within the housing gateway. The inspector refers to the Minister as being the light at the end of the tunnel as a result of the debate. Can he give a commitment that he will publish his proposals so that we can avoid having to have unnecessary debate and amendments if he puts that commitment into detail for us before the expiry of amendments for the Island Plan?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The cart is somewhat before the horse here. First of all, the Minister for Planning and Environment needs to bring his report and proposition based on the inspector's report. Then I will publish my comments and bring it forward for debate, but the Minister for Planning and

Environment needs first of all to bring back to the States the draft Island Plan so that we all know what we are discussing.

5.6 Deputy R.J. Rondel:

Could the Minister advise Members whether he is satisfied with the number of units of social housing and affordable housing being proposed on States-owned sites?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, I am satisfied but what frustrates me is getting on to those sites. I am very pleased to hear that progress is going ahead now with the new Police Station because the quicker that is done, the quicker we can get on to the Rouge Bouillon site, which is the one that is going to give the most significant yield in terms of social housing.

5.6.1 Deputy R.J. Rondel:

Just a supplementary on that: is the Minister fully satisfied that on examples such as J.C.G. (Jersey College for Girls) they are being maximised, the numbers of social and affordable housing, on those sites?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I thought that was the real question. **[Laughter]** J.C.G. has doubled in the number of social housing provision to just over 70. What I want to do is instead of keep arguing about it get on with it, deliver those 70 units, deliver the other Category B homes. Let us get on with it rather than keep redrawing the plans and ending up with nothing year after year after year.

5.7 Deputy J.M. Le Bailly of St. Mary:

Is any legislation being worked on which will allow low income couples the opportunity to purchase their own homes at a price which is realistically affordable to them, in the region of £200,000, something that we both know is possible on States-owned land?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The quick answer to that is yes, we are working on that. Legislation will be coming forward. I am not quite sure if it is my department, the S.H.U. (Strategic Housing Unit) or the Minister for Planning and Environment, but legislation will be coming forward defining what affordable is and also making it affordable for the rest of the building's existence. For example, we have seen in the past where someone has bought a heavily subsidised home and then sold it on on the open market, and that cannot be right. If a home is sold as affordable it must remain affordable. So there is work with that, but the S.H.U. is carrying out a complete review of housing availability, not just social housing but housing need. Professor Whitehead is carrying out that work for us and very close to producing that report. I have in mind that we have a number of different schemes. We need to have a strategy for people to exit social housing when they no longer need it, when their situation has improved. For example, when they join us they are in need and they very often have families. The children grow up, get good jobs. The parents sometimes gain qualifications and get better jobs, but at 50 there is no exit strategy. They are stuck in social housing. So I would like to see schemes as we have, the deferred payment scheme, but I would also like to see schemes for young couples coming in such as rent to buy, where the rent becomes part of the deposit and they get a mortgage and pay the rest off in 5 years. There is a whole raft of stuff that we are working on in the Strategic Housing Unit. It is an exciting time and I look forward to bringing some of these things forward to the Assembly.

5.8 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Minister advise what the policy is of his department on refunding rents for properties which are deemed to be either wholly or partly uninhabitable?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

We do not rent out properties that are wholly uninhabitable. We have some properties that are in better condition than others and, as you know, part of the £250 million that this Assembly has agreed is to refurbish the 40 per cent of homes that do need refurbishment. But they are habitable. There are plenty of people living in their own homes in the private sector that would like to have the opportunity to insulate up to modern standards and rewire and plumb. [Approbation] I have no policy of refunding rent.

5.8.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

That is contrary to what I know as I believe that I dealt with a case where a property had become partly uninhabitable and rent was refunded duly. Does the Minister acknowledge that the law says if a property becomes uninhabitable ... it does not mean, of course, for building and renting out of properties with the express purpose of them being uninhabitable, but does he accept that this can occur and when it does occur what are the mechanisms that his tenants have in order to report this and to safeguard their statutory rights to their rents being refunded in this case?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I have an excellent team working at Housing who work very hard. Tenants who have problems with their housing only have to contact the department for it to be dealt with. In a customer satisfaction survey carried out recently, in the returns that came back 97 per cent of customers were happy with the service provided in terms of responding to work that needs to be done. There has been one case where a structural fault was found after the tenant started to decorate, having just moved in. One case, and that was dealt with by the department appropriately.

5.9 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville:

Could the Minister confirm if it is still the case that exiting tenants are required to rip out all carpets and flooring regardless of quality before leaving States accommodation?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

No, that is not the case anymore. That used to be the case. However, we do have a problem with wooden flooring and that is because of the noise that it makes and wooden flooring generally is not allowed on anything other than the first floor. But when a tenant now leaves a carpet in good repair, then the incoming tenant is asked if they wish to have that carpet, and if they wish to have it then that is a matter for them and the tenant leaving the building. If they do not wish to have it, then it will be taken up. That is at the time when the home is allocated.

5.9.1 The Deputy of Grouville:

Could he just confirm when that practice was changed? I have had recent experience of tenants having been made to rip up very good quality carpeting.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I need to talk to the Deputy to get an idea of the case that she is referring to, but as far as I am concerned this policy has been in place now for a couple of years.

5.10 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

As the Minister responsible for the Strategic Housing Unit, what actions is the Minister taking to address the needs of all Island residents and, in particular, the needs of those new to the Island and, indeed, the elderly?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I have just said that the Strategic Housing Unit is carrying out a review on all the housing needs, not just the social housing needs but a review across all tenures. Professor Christine Whitehead has almost completed that report and we will be looking at it and studying it and drawing up appropriate action plans.

5.10.1 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Is he not concerned that we are in the process of reviewing the Island Plan and yet a review is being undertaken to deal with housing needs, which could end up falling outside of the Island Plan process?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The problem is we are reviewing the Island Plan not long after agreeing the Island Plan because we did not follow through with the recommendations made last time. I hope that Members will learn from that and accept the inspector's report and not make the mistake of removing sites just because it looks good but does not solve the housing business.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Last question, Deputy Power.

5.11 Deputy S. Power:

The Minister will be aware of the excellent work that his department does in the provision of hostel accommodation across the Island. He will also be aware there is a survey going on on homelessness in Jersey by the Chief Minister's Department. Does he think that his new restructured organisation, Andium Homes, will have an expanded role in the provision of further community living across the Island?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I think the quick answer to that would be yes, there may be an expanded role but we need to understand the extent of the problem. A lot of Jersey's homeless are hidden homeless. They are sleeping on friends' sofas and floors and we need to understand the extent of that problem. The best thing we can do for Islanders, which will result in getting people housed adequately, is to increase the supply. That will also improve the rental situation as well.

[12:15]

I urge Members to support the draft Island Plan when it comes forward. We also need to look at other areas such as the provision of housing for people who are elderly who need support but do not yet need to go into nursing homes, and that is work that this department is carrying out as well.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Thank you. That brings question time to an end. Can I announce for the benefit of Members and the public the Public Lotteries: report for 2013 - R.23 - presented by the Minister for Economic Development; the States of Jersey Law 2005: delegation of functions - Treasury and Resources - revised delegations - R.24 - presented by the Minister for Treasury and Resources; and the Land Transactions under Standing Order 168(3) - R.25 - also presented by the Minister for Treasury and Resources.