

3.6 Deputy A.D. Lewis of the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the use of States' property assets:

If I could change tack slightly. The Minister is a popular man for different reasons today. I would like to ask the Minister, can he advise why States property assets such as Fort Regent Swimming Pool, Piquet House, La Folie Inn and St. Martin's School, to name but a few, have not either been refurbished, leased, sold, disposed of or put to alternative use? Can he reassure the public that not capitalising on such assets is in the best interests of the public purse and in full compliance with Property Holdings' remit?

Deputy E.J. Noel (The Minister for Infrastructure):

Firstly, may I sincerely thank Deputy Andrew Lewis for his question?

[10:45]

It gives me something different to think about for 5 to 10 minutes. I agree with the Deputy that this is important; that the public realises best value from its property assets. This may be by maximising their financial value or using them in the most effective way in delivering services. The Deputy provides some interesting examples and I would like to address them one by one if I may. Fort Regent Swimming Pool: this building has been boarded up since its closure and is a blot on the landscape. The Deputy may recall that as chair of the Fort Regent Steering Group I brought forward proposals to redevelop the Fort including the pool. The necessary funding was not supported for inclusion in the current M.T.F.P.2's capital programme. My department does have funds to demolish the pool but without a planning application for an alternative development to do so we would risk losing the site. I look to the current Fort Regent Steering Group to develop proposals and to enable this to be moved forward and can confirm to them that we currently do have the funds to be able to demolish the swimming pool. Piquet House: I agree that this property should be sold and it almost was until this Assembly decided otherwise. But never daunted we are in discussions with the Royal British Legion and I hope to bring forward a proposal in the near future in this regard. With regards to La Folie Inn, again I would love to see the site redeveloped. This site has never come under the administration of Property Holdings and I am sure that the Ports of Jersey, as the owners, will come forward with proposals in due course. As regard to St. Martin's School, I can only assume that the Deputy means the former school and not the excellent replacement which has recently been constructed. I would suggest that the Deputy raises this matter with the Constable of St. Martin as the building belongs to the Parish.

3.6.1 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

I guess my main concern here is that when a project begins, such as new school, a new police station, a new swimming pool, there does not seem to be a plan to deal with the asset that you are leaving. So is it within the remit of Property Holdings to properly manage our biggest asset, our £3 billion asset of our property portfolio, because this, to me, does not look like good management. You have a plan and within that plan surely there must be a plan to reuse the property that is being vacated. So, for example, with the police station is there a plan already in place before you even got planning permission for the new police station to do something with the old site? That is what concerns me, is managing the assets well and it does not appear to me that that is happening.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

The short answer to that is yes. We have the Long Term Capital Programme and we have a policy within Property Holdings to do exactly what Deputy Andrew Lewis is suggesting. For us it is business as usual. With regard to the Police Headquarters site, the old site, from day one we had the vision of the Summerland and the Ambulance Station becoming part of social housing. We had a vision. On the other side of the road for consolidation of the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service with the freeing up of the Old Rouge Bouillon School site, which I have already indicated this morning. I would see that being used as a temporary car park to see if that helps the traffic situation in that part of town and if it did then perhaps we could invest in a more substantial car park in the future. So, yes, we do look at the use of a site before it becomes vacant, working with the incumbent department that has that property. We only can react when we are advised by departments that they are thinking of leaving a particular facility or wish to move on to another one and that is when we start the process of finding alternative uses.

3.6.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I spoke to Deputy Lewis before and we agreed that one building that could very easily have been on this list but was not was the Le Seilleur Building by the Town Park. Given that Property Holdings has demonstrated itself to be an incredibly poor custodian of some of these potential assets on behalf of the public would he agree with me that in the case of the Le Seilleur Building, when so much opinion among not just the elected representatives but of the residents are in favour of handing that building to the Parish of St. Helier so that it can be turned into a community centre to complement the wonderful town park and serve the most densely populated part of the Island? Now that is a scheme that should be considered rather than his, frankly, bizarre scheme to turn it into upside-down flats there with the sleeping quarters down at the bottom in an area where there is potentially anti-social behaviour. Would he accept that that would be a good policy to pursue and, more generally, that these sorts of scheme should be considered in other Parishes where it is appropriate?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

If that building was truly owned by the States in terms of our normal operation of buildings I would tend to agree with Deputy Mézec. Unfortunately that building is owned by a trust of which Health and Social Services are the trustees. We have an obligation. We administer that building on behalf of the trust and they have an obligation to achieve best value out of that building. So the current planning application that is in the planning application process currently is to agree a baseline valuation on that so the site can be sold. It may be sold to the Parish but the Parish will have to buy it at market rate because there is an underlying trust and the trust has to get best value for its trust assets. We have tried to sell that building a number of times before and again this Assembly has blocked it. The most recent time that we tested the market, because of the planning restrictions on it and because there was no actual underlying planning consent, the offers that were being received were substantially below £100,000. By getting a planning application approved on that building we can probably increase the value of that site 5-fold and that is something that we have to do on behalf of the trustees of that particular building.

3.6.3 Connétable M.P.S. Le Troquer of St. Martin:

Despite the new St. Martin's School opening its doors to pupils in September 2015 would the Minister confirm that the former St. Martin's complex was only returned by Property Holdings to its owners, the Parish of St Martin, on 15th January this year and that the Parish had to immediately, within 3 weeks, commence considerable refurbishment work on the school house in order to make it habitable for a new tenant by the end of April 2016 when it is proposed to be occupied?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I cannot disagree with the Constable there. That is factually correct. We took back those properties from Education on completion of the new school and then vacating that building and the old schoolhouse which had not been occupied in a way that perhaps one would have hoped, meant that it needed modernisation. It had not been modernised for a substantial time including replacement kitchens and bathrooms.

3.6.4 The Connétable of St. Martin:

Can I have a supplementary? I hope it is not too remote - and I hope not - from certain aspects from the question from Deputy Lewis, but can the Minister confirm he is aware that the Parish undertook a full public consultation with every parishioner in the Parish of St. Martin during the summer of 2015 seeking the parishioners' aspirations for the use of the complex and that we are now going forward with the propositions as a result of what the public wanted.

The Bailiff:

Well, that is a very good speech for what St. Martin is up to but not a matter for the Minister.

3.6.5 Deputy J.A.N. Le Fondré of St. Lawrence:

I would like to pick up on 2 points made by the Minister all on the theme of efficiency. The Minister made reference to the Royal British Legion expressing an interest in Piquet House. If my understanding is correct, they were expressing an interest one or 2 years ago. So the question, part 1 on that, is how come it has taken so long? The second part is all linked; the Minister, in an earlier question, said that the departmental business plan was around, was available, but it would take 3 months to put it online. How do both these examples, which should all be run-of-the-mill, demonstrate efficient government?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Piquet House; yes, we were approached by the Royal British Legion a number of years ago. They were in the original ... they inspected this when we originally tried to sell the property to another body. Since then we have been approached by a number of States departments to see if they had a desire to use the building as well, hence the delay, because our first remit is, if there is an in-house States use for a property; we look at that first. We have had a number of iterations with other departments, including what was the former Tourism when it became Visit Jersey, and that was quite a long drawn out process too because of the change from department to Visit Jersey. We also had other States and non-States departments' uses for that building which we had to look at. I am happy to confirm that we have a really good working relationship with the Royal British Legion and hopefully I will be able to bring forward a proposition in due course to this Assembly to get the Assembly's approval to dispose of that building to the Royal British Legion.

Deputy J.A.N. Le Fondré:

So I will follow up? The Minister did not answer the second part, which is why has it taken 3 months to put something that already exists online?

The Bailiff:

He answered that earlier. He said it is changing.

3.6.6 Deputy R. Labey of St. Helier:

Are there any imminent plans for an alternative use for the vast amount of empty space at Howard Davis Farm and would he agree that a sensible alternative use for the vast amount of empty space at Warwick Farm would be the new hospital?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Howard Davis Farm is being used currently by the Environment Department and we are working with the Environment Department to see whether or not they could get the whole of their department up at Howard Davis Farm and vacate South Hill for redevelopment. That is an ongoing process. The rest of Howard Davis Farm is let out to third parties to some extent but we are restricted on that site about what activities can take place there because there is a covenant. With regard to Warwick Farm, that was one of the 40 sites we looked at for the new hospital and it is something that I am sure that may continue to be looked at in the near future.

3.6.7 Deputy D. Johnson of St. Mary:

As Members are aware, Jersey Property Holdings has only recently been transferred to the Minister for Infrastructure and correspondingly this Scrutiny Panel has not had the opportunity to investigate things as fully as they might; not helped by the changes in the panel itself. At the recent public hearing the Minister did agree that we should have, very shortly, a presentation related solely to Jersey Property Holdings. Would he please confirm that in advance of that hearing he will provide to the panel details of all properties, including and especially those currently unoccupied, and any plans in connection therewith?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Yes, I am happy to do that. It is information that in the past we have distributed to all States Members but I am certainly willing to do that for the Scrutiny Panel.

3.6.8 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

It would appear that maybe the Parish of St. Martin might do a slightly better job than Property Holdings. I am quite concerned as to how often there are significant delays in the completion of or letting or doing something with our buildings. The Minister mentioned South Hill. How many years have been spoken about vacating the South Hill site? How many years has the Fort Regent site been talked about and not had anything done to it?

The Bailiff:

Two questions are enough.

Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Okay. Does he believe ...

The Bailiff:

Deputy, you have already had 2.

Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Can I finish? Does he believe that Property Holdings is fit for purpose in managing our significant property assets?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

In one word, absolutely.