

2018.11.20

**10 Deputy J.H. Perchard of St. Saviour of the Minister for Children and Housing regarding States policy on tackling homelessness; [OQ.199/2018]**

Would the Minister inform Members whether there is a States policy on tackling homelessness and, if not, what plans does the Minister have to draw up and implement one?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec (The Minister for Children and Housing):**

I thank the Deputy for this question. This is something that I am particularly concerned about in Jersey, the issue of homelessness, and by that I do not just mean rough sleeping, I mean all forms of insecure tenure which can have a detrimental impact on people's lives, particularly young people. Since becoming Minister I have personally encountered individuals and families who, for a variety of reasons, have experienced homelessness or been placed at risk of homelessness. Frankly, I have found it very upsetting to see this because this is a prosperous society and I do not think it is right that we should be in a situation where there is a lack of provision or support for people who face that. I have made it one of my priorities to tackle the issue of homelessness and I can say that we have had an initial meeting with the Minister for Health and Social Services and the Minister for Social Security to talk about moving forward with a homelessness strategy. I can now reveal that there will be a stakeholder workshop on 13th December to explore the issues, including accommodation and support provision, from which Ministers will develop actions, including a homelessness strategy. I think that it is important to say that there are third sector organisations out there who do immensely good work, but there is more that can be done to support them and those people in housing need. I am absolutely confident that moving forward we will address this issue.

**3.10.1 Deputy J.H. Perchard:**

The Minister did allude to this already in his answer but I would just like a slightly more developed response. The Shelter Trust recorded 364 homeless cases last year, one in 6 of which were individuals aged between 16 and 25 years old, but only 2 to 3 cases were deemed as people who are rough sleeping. I know you did allude to this already, but could we just confirm that in any upcoming homelessness strategy that we will include definitions much broader than rough sleeping, including anyone who does not have a permanent residence, who may be staying in a refuge, for example, and so on? Could you just elaborate on that point, please?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I 100 per cent agree with the Deputy. This is much more than just about people sleeping rough. This is about sofa surfing. This is about people not having secure tenure or, even if they do acquire tenure, it is for such a short period of time that they are not enabled to begin living life and being secure and everything that goes with that. I can assure her that that absolutely will be part of the discussion, and the groups that we have invited to the stakeholder workshop in December are quite a wide variety of groups that deal with different types of people. So I am sure that there will be a lot that will come out of that discussion.

**3.10.2 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:**

The Minister referred to stakeholders in his first answer and he has just referred to the groups who have contact and are involved with those who are sofa surfing, those who do not have a roof over their heads. My concern is how he reaches out to those who do not have a roof over their heads, who are sleeping rough and who do not have any connection with a shelter, and particularly the sofa

surfers, the couch surfers, who I think are probably in the younger age group and very often are care leavers. How does he reach those people to get them involved in the discussions to formulate a strategy that will work for them?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

That is a very good question and the difficulty with this is that there are some people who are incredibly difficult to reach. When it comes to those that are sleeping rough, this is a very small number of people and the agencies that are looking after these people are always aware of them and sometimes it can be incredibly difficult to find solutions for them. Of the groups that have been invited to the stakeholder workshop in December, there are various charities, including Barnardo's, who I know work specifically with care leavers and have been leading on some work on providing care leavers with a voice and speaking to Government when they are coming up with policies that will affect them. So I am hoping that that will be very useful to hear directly from those people who have that experience.

**3.10.3 Senator S.W. Pallett:**

As much as I agree with the Minister that homelessness means many things, I do not agree that they are relatively small numbers. I think there are more people affected by this than we may think, as a trustee of one organisation that provides such accommodation. Has the Minister visited all those organisations who provide accommodation and support for homeless people so that he can get a real feeling for the damage homelessness causes? I do agree homelessness is very damaging.

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I thank the Senator for his question. I have not visited every single organisation but it is my intention to do so certainly over the next year. I know that Sanctuary Trust have an open day coming up that I will be attending and I am looking forward to meeting people who benefit from those services and speaking to them directly.

**3.10.4 The Connétable of St. Helier:**

I absolutely agree with the Minister that it is a testimony to the work of the charities that we have relatively few people sleeping rough, certainly in St. Helier, when you compare us with towns in the U.K., even similar size towns, where you will see people in doorways under blankets. Clearly, that is not good for them and it is not good for the towns either. Could the Minister confirm that the Parish of St. Helier will be invited to be involved in his discussions? I note from my diary that we have not been as yet, as far as I can see... and I would obviously appreciate the chance to be involved in this working group.

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I am grateful for the Constable saying that and if he believes that the Parish of St. Helier would add value to this stakeholder workshop, then I am more than happy to see that he gets an invite to it.

**3.10.5 The Very Reverend M.R. Keirle, B.A., Dean of Jersey:**

I think we all recognise that the third sector contribute enormously to alleviating the homelessness problem and I do note the States work in partnership with some of those groups; for example, Shelter Trust. I think the reality is, though, that due to cuts that in real terms that figure financially is decreasing while the number of people homeless is increasing, particularly, as you mentioned, Minister, the number of young people. Does the Minister recognise a need to review the financial support given and will that be part of the discussion taking place on 13th December?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I absolutely could not agree more with the Dean on this issue. In the last 4 years when I was speaking as a Back-Bencher I spoke very much about this issue. It was something that caused me a great deal of concern and distress in the last term and the directions we went there. That is why I am very pleased that this Government has made reducing income inequality one of its top priorities. I will certainly be one voice around the table that argues very strongly for increased support for the poor and vulnerable in our community, not just to be reactive when they face crisis but to make sure that there is early intervention to stop people falling into those situations in the first place. I welcome the Dean's intervention on that.

**3.10.6 Deputy J.H. Perchard:**

Of course, the final supplementary is: by when? When can we expect to see a homelessness strategy come together?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

That is a good question, unfortunately not with an answer that I am sure the Deputy will be that satisfied by simply because when we have this stakeholder event in December this is not going to be an exercise of the Government imposing some sort of strategy. We genuinely want to take all of these agencies with us and have them contribute to what form that strategy will take. That does make it difficult to have a timeline for when a finalised strategy will be because at this point I am not dictating the terms of what that strategy will include. I genuinely want to listen to what they think is necessary and they may make wonderful suggestions that enable us to do this quickly or they may make valued suggestions that mean we have to put a lot of time and effort into it. So I cannot give her that guarantee at the moment but I am confident that the approach we are taking is the right one.