

2019.03.26

**1 Deputy J.H. Perchard of the Minister for Children and Housing regarding the actions he had taken to reduce homelessness in the Island: [OQ.76/2019]**

Further to the response to Oral Question 199/2018, what actions has the Minister taken towards reducing homelessness in the Island, since the stakeholder workshop on 13th December 2018?

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

Can I thank the Deputy for her question and for keeping this important issue on the agenda? As she mentions, we held a stakeholder workshop in December, which was attended by around 40 representatives from government, housing providers and the voluntary and community sector. I believe that everybody who attended would have found it a very worthwhile event. I want to express my gratitude to them for taking part. We had an open and honest discussion about what we thought the levels and nature of homelessness in Jersey were, the things that we are good at and perhaps not so good at, and what we saw as the priorities going forward, and I think there is a lot of enthusiasm to tackle homelessness. I am conscious of the need to maintain that momentum. I regret that I cannot be as thorough in providing a more direct answer to her at this point simply because of the timing in that we have opted to take a collaborative approach with stakeholders in moving forward on a homelessness strategy. I have not had the opportunity to speak to all stakeholders before I make formal announcements on what the next steps are. In fact, there were due to be 2 meetings last week, which unfortunately had to be cancelled, just out of bad luck. But, what I can say is that there are a number of actions that we have to work to deliver. One that I hope to progress very shortly is on establishing a homelessness forum, so that those agencies are round a table regularly, able to find solutions for some of those more complex cases. But we also need to do more work in terms of understanding the level of homelessness in the Island and putting an actual homelessness strategy together. I want to reassure the Assembly that this work is very much on my agenda and I hope to make a positive announcement soon about the next steps.

**3.1.1 Deputy J.H. Perchard:**

When can we expect a draft of the homelessness strategy to be produced?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

We have, I think, 2 options before us at the moment about how we proceed on producing an actual document that will constitute a homelessness strategy. In terms of a first draft, we were looking at later this year. We could be potentially looking at the end of this year for having a homelessness strategy approved.

**3.1.2 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of St. Saviour:**

During our latest review into mental health service on our Scrutiny Panel, we heard personal testimony which heard examples of people with mental health problems, who were known to the mental health services, living in substandard accommodation. We heard from the mental health users using Shelter and how they told us this was not an ideal place for this sort of service. Will the Minister respond and can he assure us he is acting on these matters urgently?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I agree wholeheartedly, not least because we had representatives from the mental health service at our workshop, who relayed those exact concerns to us. One thing that I am concerned about is there is often not a joined-up approach in identifying people, who are either in need at that

moment, in terms of their housing requirements, or who could potentially be in need in the future. We need to work better to get people around a table to find those solutions at an earlier stage. I hope that a homelessness forum will be the first steps in that, but that is absolutely something that will be featured in the wider strategy.

### **3.1.3 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier:**

May I ask the Minister to include in that forum a real consideration of those people who are homeless and the numbers who die while homeless? I attended a service this Christmas to remember those who had died who are homeless in Jersey over the year. It is a very serious issue and awareness needs to be raised significantly on our Island.

### **Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

Could the Deputy rephrase the question, I am not sure which point he wanted?

### **Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I just wanted to ensure that whatever forum you create takes account of the reality that people do die while homeless and we do not have accurate statistics on that, which emphasises the real seriousness of the problem.

### **Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

That is right, and when we held our initial workshop, I do think it is fair to say that there was a very wide variety of agencies that were represented there, not just from housing providers, but people who provide other services as well. We are very aware of this issue.

### **3.1.4 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:**

Will the Minister state whether he thinks there is a particular issue in ascertaining the homeless status of those perhaps without entitled status, or those who have not been in the Island for 5 or 10 years? Is there a risk that sometimes they can fall through the cracks in our system and will they be catered for in any homeless strategy?

### **Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

One of the problems we have is that, for a start, we do not have a clear definition of what constitutes homelessness in Jersey. That is obviously one piece of work that would have to be done. We do not have decent data to work out what the levels of what we would anticipate are classed as homelessness. What I do know is that many of the agencies, who we have been working with, operate in a way which is blind to whether somebody is entitled, or not entitled. The only thing they are interested in is who needs help. So that would obviously feed through in whatever we do.

### **3.1.5 Senator S.C. Ferguson:**

If we have such a homelessness problem, with so many homeless people, is it appropriate to allocate social rented housing to H.S.S.D. (Health and Social Services Department) rather than to those people who are homeless?

### **Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

Yes, because as has often been the case when the Senator has raised questions on the subject with me, I think she has missed points. The fact is that there are a huge number of new social housing units, which are coming online. In the next year we have enough units coming online, which would theoretically eradicate those who are on the waiting list for 3-bedroomed properties. So, there is a

huge amount of progress that has been going on in terms of providing that supply. We also have to bear in mind that we need well-qualified professionals working in these essential services and we have to improve the offer that is available to them to get those people working in those services, many of whom will be working with people in our community who are very vulnerable and they will help provide solutions for those people when they face difficulties.

**3.1.6 Senator S.C. Ferguson:**

Yes, but we could follow the Guernsey model on this, dare I say it, where Guernsey are buying hotels which are going out of the market and converting them into flats for imported medical staff.

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

Hotels being converted into flats is obviously completely unheard of in Jersey. There are potentially lots of options that we could look at. If that is one that she considers a viable one, happy to consider it.

**3.1.7 Deputy S.M. Wickenden of St. Helier:**

It has been 15 months since the stakeholder workshop. In those 15 months what has the Minister being doing to categorise, as he says, what homelessness actually is, and to get the statistics to help him inform on the work that he is doing?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

They say a week is a long time in politics, but it certainly has not been 15 months. This happened at the end of December last year, so it has been a lot shorter period of time than he has alluded to.

**3.1.8 Deputy S.M. Wickenden:**

In the time, what has he done to get the information?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

In the time, we have been firstly taking stock from what happened at that workshop. There was a large amount of issues that were considered there. We have been working with the agency that facilitated that workshop who thus far have produced 2 reports for us. We are in the process now of going back to some of those stakeholders, who we engaged with, to get the meat on the bones, in a sense, of what those next steps are.

**3.1.9 Deputy J.H. Perchard:**

Given that the draft strategy is due at the end of this year, which would be a year since the workshop, and also a time where the weather does get colder, does the Minister not think it would be more appropriate to expedite this process and aim for, say, the end of summer?

**Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

I did not say that a draft strategy would be looking towards the end of the year. I said one would come before that. It would be in draft form, so would not be approved until potentially towards the end of the year. So, people would have sight of something before the end of the year. I will say honestly to the Deputy, I have several options I could go down at this road, some of which are quicker than others, but some of the quicker options are potentially not as thorough. That is my concern, is do we want to get progress that is not necessarily as holistic as it could be just to get something quicker, or do we take a bit of extra time to get something that is potentially more comprehensive? At this point, I am leaning towards a more comprehensive option, but that is not a

decision that I have made yet at this point. But I am more than happy to continue communications with the Deputy, if this is something that interests her.