

2020.06.16

17 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of St. Saviour of the Minister for Children and Housing regarding the number of people who were homeless or using emergency housing (OQ.155/2020):

Following comments from the Jersey Shelter Trust last week about the current unprecedented demand for its services, will the Minister provide an update of the number of people who are homeless or currently using emergency housing?

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

With reference to Shelter Trust itself, I can let Members know that last night the Trust slept 114 persons and they have got a capacity level of 125 spaces. Throughout the pandemic, alongside the emergency housing team, the Trust has been supported to open 2 new sites to provide them with greater capacity, so they are now operating across 8 sites. There are a further 42 people who are being supported by Shelter Trust's outreach service and the Jersey Homeless Outreach Group. Of those 42 people, there are 2 that we are aware of who could be said to be sleeping rough who have declined an offer of bed space. From the perspective of the emergency housing team, which was set up at the beginning of the pandemic, they have received 196 enquiries to that service. I can provide Members with a full breakdown of that if they wish, but some of the headlines from that has involved assisting 66 individuals to be placed in some form of temporary accommodation, which can be hotel rooms, guesthouses or accommodation that has been temporarily made available to use; 27 have been able to be assisted into permanent social housing accommodation and there are still some cases that are outstanding that the team are working on.

3.17.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I thank the Minister for the answer. It is going to be, obviously, a complicated answer, but does he also have numbers for other such providers like Women's Refuge, Sanctuary Trust, the J.Y.S. (Jersey Youth Service) about the combined number currently, right now, across this Island of people who are living in temporary accommodation? Equally, what will the plan be to help these Islanders when the guesthouses and other emergency accommodation are suddenly not available again?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

In terms of the exact number of all of the homelessness provision in the Island, I would have to find that out for him because it has changed throughout the pandemic, not just because of Shelter Trust being assisted to have extra capacity. I know the Women's Refuge has some support from outside government to be able to increase the number of people that they are able to help as well. Looking to the future as we hopefully leave the risk crisis, from our side in Government we have to manage that very carefully, bearing in mind that there are plenty of people out there who are facing precarious housing positions that are not anything to do with the pandemic itself. There are other things that are causing difficulty with their housing situations. At this point, we have recently moved to returning to deal with band 1 cases on the Housing Gateway, which were suspended for a period of time while the focus was on purely COVID-related emergency moves. As time goes on, we will have to look at returning to supporting those in other bandings as well, but that has to be done in a careful way that tries to mitigate homelessness as much as possible.

3.17.2 Deputy I. Gardiner:

Would the Minister advise if he has data detailing the residential status and ethnic background of people seeking emergency help for housing? If he has, can this information be shared with the Assembly, please?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

In terms of ethnic background, I do not know but that is, of course, a very good question. For residential status, if I can find that out and let the Deputy know, but I do know, and this is something that Deputy Gardiner and I have discussed before, that it has been very, very difficult, unfortunately, finding homes for those without residential qualifications. That is something that our Island will need to take a good long look at in the future. Given the extra barrier that those people face and other vulnerabilities they have as well, it was not an ideal situation to be in.

3.17.3 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Would the Minister please advise as to what actions he has taken to reduce homelessness in Jersey since he became Minister for Children and Housing in 2018?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

There is a combination of things that still need to be done and that have been going on over the last 2 years. One of the most important things we can do is to improve the supply of homes in the Island. For years now there have been long waiting lists on the Housing Gateway and that causes people real anxieties while they are on those lists, knowing that they are either living somewhere that is just unsuitable for them or at risk of homelessness. Throughout this crisis we have been able to increase capacity for the charities that are assisting people who are facing homelessness. About 1½ years ago, I and others initiated the homelessness review. We were hoping to have published that by now but that has had to be delayed because of the crisis, so we are probably looking at about September for that. But in the meantime we did set up a homelessness cluster group, we were calling it, where we brought different agencies around the table so that they could work to try to provide solutions for particularly complex cases as they arose. I know that they have had some success because of the communication streams that were open to them before that were previously unco-ordinated and probably meant some cases taking far too long to have solutions provided for them.

3.17.4 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Since he was elected Minister for Children and Housing 2 years ago, could the Minister please advise the Assembly as to how much the numbers of homeless people in Jersey have fallen?

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

No, I cannot do that because the numbers have previously never been kept and because there is no agreed definition of what constitutes homelessness. That is part of what the homelessness review is trying to tackle, because homelessness is not just about people sleeping on the streets. It can be anything up to people who are sofa surfing and it is very difficult to get those sorts of statistics, but it can include people who do live in a home but it is unsuitable for them for whatever reason, whether that is because of extreme overcrowding or they are facing domestic violence there and that is affecting their ability to move to somewhere safer for them and everything that goes with that. There have not been statistics that have been gathered before and the lack of a definition makes that difficult but part of the homelessness review, which I initiated, was about trying to deal with that and get a clearer picture of what the state of these affairs is in the Island so that they can be dealt with more effectively.