

2020.06.30

3 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier of the Minister for the Environment regarding the planning applications process: (OQ.178/2020)

Is it the Minister's assessment that the time taken to process planning applications is acceptable, and if not, what plans does he have to improve this service?

Deputy J.H. Young of St. Brelade (The Minister for the Environment):

Our target turnaround times for planning applications is 8 weeks for minor applications and 13 weeks for major applications and 6 weeks for pre-application advice. I am comfortable that these timescales are appropriate. Members will of course understand that the planning process is an open and transparent consultative one and Islanders need the time to be able to properly engage with developments, which can affect their homes and their neighbourhoods. We have had a situation where during the current COVID pandemic planning officers were retasked to other areas of government work, particularly contact tracing, which has resulted in a backlog building, which I hope is temporary. This is being tackled as staff return to contact tracing when the recruitment programme enables that and they can get back to their normal roles. That is a progressive change at the moment.

4.3.1 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I asked the question about whether the time taken is acceptable, not whether it is appropriate. I entirely agree with the Minister that the times that he has given are appropriate but he has not really said whether he believes the level of service being offered to people who have planning applications is acceptable. I am aware of many, both small and large applications, which have gone considerably over the timetable that the Minister has indicated and these are from well before the coronavirus pandemic. Will the Minister therefore undertake to provide a list of all applications which have currently not met the timetable that he has set so that we can assess just how behind the department is?

Deputy J.H. Young:

That is a good question. I am hopeful that I will not need to do a list because I can give the Constable the numbers. He will remember the Planning Society officers report that we published in the autumn, which gave comparative performance figures from 2014 to 2018, and it is true to say that there has been a decline. A decline occurred in 2018, which personally I associate with the disruption caused by the disbandment of the then Environment Department and the huge amount of change and uncertainty, which has affected their team. Performance went down from 98 per cent to 70 per cent. Currently the numbers are that we did seem to improve because January to March we were up to 89 per cent, again which was good news. But that now has fallen to 68 per cent as a result of the COVID situation. I am not so sure whether I need to divert people away to do a full list. I can do that but I am not sure it is going to help. I think the issue, and there is no question, is about this service is results dependent and what we have seen is policies over the years that I inherited that have reduced that staff, increased the pressure and what that has done is it has resulted in less performance. What we need to do, this is a very skilled job, we need to be able to recruit more planning officers to do this and of course nothing I have said relates to the issue of enforcement, where I am getting a very high level of complaint because the backlog there for this is more significant.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Connétable, are you content with your answer or do you still want the number of applications that are out of time, as it were?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Certainly I would appreciate seeing a list of the larger applications. That is the ones that have the 13-week deadline.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Are you content to provide that list, Minister?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Yes, I will but I think the fact that I have not brought in, during this kind of situation it has also been difficult for the Planning Application Committee to deal with major planning applications, which normally attract very large numbers of members of the public and the people are unable at the present time to attend in those large gatherings. So that has been difficult and therefore that has restricted the number of major applications that we can handle at the moment. I think that is going to continue for some time and it is the same thing for planning appeals where at the moment I am not able to get inspectors into the Island and so third party appeals effectively put those applications completely on hold. I am sorry that is the case. I am absolutely working on this and I will do my best to do it but if the Member wants a list okay, but I am not sure that entirely helps. But I will do it.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Can I refine my request for a list to those applications which were overdue before the onset of the pandemic in the first week of March?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Yes, I will do that.

4.3.2 Deputy S.G. Luce of St. Martin:

I thank the Minister for his answers, I probably understand the challenges he faces. But the construction industry is worth hundreds of millions of pounds every year. Can I press the Minister to speak to the powers that be to encourage them as quickly as possible to get the Minister a full team back on board at the time when we are trying to encourage our local economy back into production again? What we cannot have is an industry that is ready to go but held back by delays in planning applications because officers are off doing other work within government. Can I ask the Minister, please ask as hard as you can to get your officers and a full team back at the Planning Department?

Deputy J.H. Young:

The Deputy and I are entirely in agreement. What I have found difficult throughout, and it is even more difficult now, is to go through our corporate processes that we now have in place under this target operating model and it is impenetrable. I am really getting to the point where I may have to bring a proposition to the States. I hope that is not necessary. At the moment we seem to be going in reverse direction, processes to review spending and reduce costs. But thankfully I have got an undertaking that there would be no more loss of staff. So I will do exactly as the Member says and I hope those that have control of our H.R. (human resources) matters are listening. I know our director general feels exactly the same as I.

4.3.3 The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is in 2 parts, if may. First, does the Minister agree with me that nothing in my question is intended to detract from the fantastic job that his officers do in determining applications in these current circumstances, in particular. Secondly, does he agree with me that the impatience of some applicants to have their proposals determined is indicative of the tremendous confidence that local developers and builders and businesses have in Jersey's economy and that confidence is something we need to encourage and facilitate as a States?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Yes, there is no question the planning applications are a crucial part of our economic system.

[10:00]

What we have seen ironically during the pandemic is we have seen an increase in the number of applications because obviously many professional officers are deskbound at home and are therefore concentrating on pushing those into the system. As I say, that has contributed to that backlog. The difficulty I think, the major applications issue is really a struggle and is something that the planning officers and I are discussing with the chairman of the Planning Applications Committee and Members to try and find a way in which we can get through this issue of not being able to hold major meetings, open public meetings on the public applications. So we do our best and it is really important. I do not know what more I can add. This is such a difficult area and we have to deliver and it is my responsibility and I will keep at it to deliver.