

2021.10.05

1 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier of the Minister for Housing and Communities regarding the number of Islanders classed as homeless and without temporary accommodation (OQ.202/2021):

Will the Minister advise how many people, to the best of his knowledge, are currently classed as homeless and without temporary accommodation; and what action is being taken to find these people suitable accommodation urgently?

Deputy R. Labey of St. Helier (The Minister for Housing and Communities):

I assume the Deputy is referring to those who are roofless or sleeping rough? Those figures are in low single figures, meaning that they are readily identifiable, so I will talk in general terms. As it stands at the moment, we currently do have capacity in the refuge if somebody presents with emergency housing issues. They will not be turned away without the offer of accommodation. Unfortunately for a small number of people the simple offer of accommodation is not for them; it is not enough for various reasons, which we must respect, various circumstances. All of those that are sleeping rough we are in touch with. The critical support team, the occupational support team, know the whereabouts of them all; are in constant contact with them. Are organising with agencies consultations, including with G.P.s (general practitioners), and the aim with all our homeless - those who are in temporary accommodation with a roof over their head in the refuges or in the Sanctuary Trust, or where have you - what we are aiming to do is put them on a pathway out of homelessness.

4.1.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I was referring, as much as anything, to those hidden homeless who could very quickly become without a roof over their head. But I would ask the Minister to make a commitment here and now to ensure that people this winter will not be left homeless or sleeping in vehicles, for example, sleeping in their vans, sleeping in their car, and there are many hidden homeless on this Island, sofa-surfing, for example. Can I ask the Minister to ensure that on a wealthy Island such as Jersey we will not leave people in this situation of homelessness this winter?

Deputy R. Labey:

The Deputy is right. Those who are sofa-surfing are classified as homeless. It is not appropriate and while it might sound like a good idea at the time, we encourage people not to embark on that.

[10:15]

Also those who are living in unsafe accommodation, possibly in a dangerous situation with whom they are living, they are classified as homeless too. We do our best to identify everybody. We now have the Housing Advice Service, which is busy, and people are approaching it. With that - it has been operational since 22 July - we are able to collect data on the trends of who is seeking help. I just want to reiterate that we do have capacity at the moment in the shelter and at the refuges. We are increasing capacity with the money Government has provided to Shelter Trust. There is a new women's only refuge coming online this year. That is with 20 beds. That frees up 20 beds elsewhere. We are also going to, with the help of Andium Homes, move the Women's Refuge to new premises, double its size, so there is increasing capacity. But, yes, everybody who presents to us with emergency housing issues will be found accommodation. If the shelter is full we have other ways and means with some very helpful landlords.

4.1.2 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

When I have attempted to help a constituent recently who I was put in touch with, who is currently sleeping in their vehicle and is on band one of the Housing Gateway, when I got in touch with Gateway I appeared to discover that there is such high demand for band one, one-bedroom properties, right now that urgent cases are not even being able to be presented with a timeline for when those people will be housed. Can the Minister confirm what attention he and his team are giving to those urgent cases to make sure that nobody in this very affluent Island is sleeping in their vehicles with no idea for when they will one day get a roof put above their head?

Deputy R. Labey:

I do know of 2 instances currently with people sleeping in their vehicles. Those people will have been offered accommodation in one of our facilities. But, as I say, sometimes these issues are highly complex, of course always very individual, and we keep a tight hold of those that we know are sleeping rough, are roofless, and the critical support team is in constant contact with them.

4.1.3 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Can I ask the Minister that as winter approaches if there are cases where they are unable to provide accommodation for, even if it is purely on a temporary basis, would he be prepared to ask the Minister for Treasury and Resources to make financial assistance available to ensure that people have a roof above their head throughout winter? Further to that, would he be prepared to use his Ministerial discretion, in those instances where temporary accommodation is provided to those people, that it does not disrupt their position on the Housing Gateway so that they do not become a lower priority for receiving permanent accommodation? Can he very specifically give me those guarantees?

Deputy R. Labey:

Yes, I am happy to do that. Can I just say that in the winter time more potential beds become available to us in some B. and B.s (bed and breakfasts) and some hotels. We have in the winter greater availability and we are in touch with a lot of those landlords. I pay tribute to them because they are extremely helpful for us.

4.1.4 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:

I have a question about a very specific type of homelessness. The Minister might know that there was a fire very recently following a lightning strike in St. Brelade where a number of homes around the Portelet area were affected. Has the Minister or anyone from his department been in contact with those individuals? When this kind of thing happens does he think it is appropriate for his department to be in contact with those to see what help can be given?

Deputy R. Labey:

I do not want to talk about individual cases in this forum. I have a feeling that we have been in touch and my officers have been helping in that instance. I will check on that and get back to the Deputy. I know that this is a concern of his. He is absolutely right. We must try to ensure that this does not happen again. That one party or the other is insured against such a thing happening and people being made instantly homeless.

The Bailiff:

Deputy Southern, I am not calling upon you yet but did you want to ask a question?

Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

I did, Sir, but I do not have the correct equipment with me.

The Bailiff:

In which case, if you could ask through a colleague in future and I will certainly call you for this question. I realise you have but I just wanted to make sure what the position was.

Deputy M. Tadier:

Just to clarify, I do not need a supplementary. I am happy to give the time to someone else.

The Bailiff:

Thank you very much, Deputy Tadier. I have Deputy Doublet, then Deputy Southern.

4.1.5 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

I wanted to ask the Minister about another category that he mentioned of those who are in temporary accommodation because I am certainly aware of a number of families who are affected by our housing crisis, for example, that have one family in a bedroom, perhaps at their parents' house while they are waiting for homes to come up for sale. Is the Minister aware of the scale of this issue? Does he have any figures on that please?

Deputy R. Labey:

As part of the homelessness strategy, which was published earlier this year, we have partnered up with U.K. (United Kingdom) Homeless Link to benefit from their experience. They have been doing extensive workshops and consultations with everyone in the industry; charities, agencies, are all trying to assist with the homelessness issue. Their report and recommendations are going to be with us very soon. They have also been collecting I believe the sort of data that the Deputy is talking about. I await their recommendations. I think the Deputy might be interested to know that we are talking about ... it is in its infancy but I think the next big piece of work we are going to do in relation to this sort of thing is especially to target long-term vulnerable women, trying to finally find a solution for their issues, and try to nip it in the bud with vulnerabilities that have sprung up in the short term for some women. That is being formed now. We have seed sponsorship interest from the private sector and then Government would have to take that forward. That is probably coming down the track I think next year.

4.1.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

The Minister mentioned vulnerable women and funding from the private sector. Will there be any change to the funding currently supplied to the Women's Refuge please?

Deputy R. Labey:

As I say, the Women's Refuge is going to double in size. It is going to move premises. Andium Homes is taking care of this; so that is good news. Obviously if it is twice as big it might cost more to run, and we will have to facilitate that of course.

4.1.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Would the Minister inform Members what timescale he has for the new beds coming online? He has mentioned some time next year but could he be more specific please? When are we going to see these new beds to meet demand?

Deputy R. Labey:

Yes, the new women's only shelter - 20 beds - will come online this year. The moving of the Women's Refuge will take place in 2022. We get 2 bites of the cherry with a new women's only shelter because that releases capacity elsewhere.

4.1.8 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank the Minister for his commitment to ensure that nobody is left homeless this winter but can I ask him to just clarify that that extends to the age groups that are below the age of social security, i.e. below 25? In particular, those young people who are care leavers who can easily slip through the net - there are so many questions - and those who perhaps may be evicted due to rent arrears caused by COVID because I believe that that law is now being ended; that protection is being ended. Can he commit to extending it to those people as well?

Deputy R. Labey:

Yes, it is universal. The critical support team, Housing Advice Service, is for everybody and the sooner people can identify issues that might be coming down the line, my advice is get in touch with the Housing Advice Service so that we can try and get the problem sorted, so that that person does not become homeless. Can I repeat, because I am afraid last night's *Evening Post* was full of factual errors, and there is confusion between what is the Sanctuary Trust, a charity, a long-term focus with what is the Shelter, with what is the Refuge, and other charities. If people present in an emergency to us at Shelter we will find them accommodation. We will find them a roof over their head.