

21.11.02

7 Senator S.Y. Mézec of the Minister for the Environment regarding Provision of Affordable Housing (OQ.224/2021)

Following the publication of “Plan B” sites for the bridging Island Plan, to provide contingency to protect the level of supply for affordable housing if some “Plan A” sites were removed, will the Minister explain whether he will support P.96/2021 and the 25th and 41st amendments to the bridging Island Plan which would, if adopted, protect the overall supply of affordable housing without needing to rezone more greenfields??

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

A very important question which highlights the big choice that is available to States Members in the Island Plan and going to be dealt with at the planning inquiry. Of course the plan seeks to provide not only that we get an adequate supply of new homes during the bridging plan bid for the short-term plan but also that we meet certain needs. There are 2 key things in terms of the States zones proposed in the plan, whether they be the Plan A or the Plan B, they help to ensure a supply of family homes, which will be provided as houses, as opposed to flats, which, as we know, is a predominant development at the moment. Also, secondly, to help maintain and grow the rural suburban communities to support Parish life and community facilities in the future, so it is key 2 important objectives, as well as supply. The Senator asked about P.96, which is going to be debated, I think, in 3 weeks’ time and of course what I have been informed is that the P.96 deals with the waterfront sites and affordable homes on them. I am advised that the development of those sites has not been included within the numbers or anticipated during the planned period because it is thought that they will not be delivered during that time. Therefore, to sort of see them as a substitute for the other sites is not inconsistent. But, nonetheless, I will be quite clear, my personal view is I do support the premise that underlies the Senator’s proposition P.96. But when and during the planned period that we develop those waterfront sites as many as we can do should be affordable homes. At the moment we are going to have that debate in 3 weeks. I will wait until I see the information from S.o.J.D.C. (States of Jersey Development Company) before I decide to vote but certainly, in principle, I am behind that. On the other 2 points of the Senator’s question, amendments 25 and 41, just to simplify, amendment 25 reviews the policy that requires a portion of affordable homes on every single housing site that gets developed and that is an issue that is going before the inspector in a few weeks’ time. The other amendment, amendment 41, is that every States-owned site should have affordable homes. Those are, I have to say, well-researched amendments, very well-documented. Where we stand on that, I have published some comments on them for the inspectors. The inspectors will judge and hear the evidence and I will make my conclusions after having heard the inspector’s report. There we are, my additional view is a response but, in principle, I am in favour of both, however, past tense to introduce the first one has just simply failed.

4.7.1 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

I want to ask the Minister if he will go further than in principle because, if I may say so, that is a copout which is regularly used by Ministers to sound good but to not vote for the change that would tangibly improve the situation. I would like to ask the Minister for the Environment, rather than telling me he supports what I am trying to do in principle, will he commit to establishing rules which will provide an increased supply of affordable housing, which enables him to protect our open green space, which is so valued in this Island, by voting in support of propositions which are on the table,

which, if adopted, will lead to more affordable housing in the Island, rather than luxury investment apartments for which there is no demonstrated need to resolve this housing crisis?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I think I tried to say that I 100 per cent want to achieve as many affordable homes as we can. The Senator, I think, is not clear whether he wants me to commit now to how I am going to vote in 3 weeks' time on P.96 or what I am going to do about the 2 amendments. I think, hopefully, that Members will understand that that would be wrong, it would be prejudging. I have got to listen to the evidence. The judgment that I, as Minister, have to make is that the final plan that comes to this Assembly in March I have got to make sure that it has got enough provision in it for affordable homes. If it is not, then, trust me, I shall be absolutely expecting that. The Senator says in principle that is too weak. For me, it is a real commitment. There are so many, we have got 60 amendments; there are numerous, numerous choices of this site, that site, that site. We have got to let that inquiry work in a couple of weeks' time and then we will be having this debate. I think this is a big debate. I see the Senator shaking his head. I have set out the best position I can do and we will be having this debate again, which we need to have.

4.7.2 Connétable R.A. Buchanan of St. Ouen:

I just wanted the Minister to confirm, notwithstanding the propositions put in by Senator Mézec, which I have to say I also support, is he totally behind rezoning green fields, as set out in the interim Island Plan?

[11:00]

Because in my mind part of our failure on this Island has been the lack of courage in looking at appropriate greenfield sites which need to be rehoused for family homes and which we have allowance for a few and we have seen the consequences in terms of the price rising. I just want him to give me a commitment that he is committed to the A and B sites in the interim Island Plan and will do his best to get those through.

Deputy J.H. Young:

Before I got elected I indicated 2 things; I wanted to see adequate affordable home supply and I saw the need for the village communities to be allowed a modest degree of growth to allow them to be sustainable in the future. Those are the principles which I started this approach. But what we have been faced with is a housing crisis where we are having to propose more greenfields than I would wish to do. It is not something I could avoid. It is not something I wanted to do. But I feel it is my duty to at least bring proposals through to let Members make that choice. What I have tried to do with the officers is to make sure the sites that are put forward on the Plan A list are the most sustainable and the ones that cause the least damage to our Island environments. I have to face the fact that the amendments we got from States Members have the potential basically - I will be frank - to destroy that strategy. I hope that Members will make those choices. There are some sites on the B list I do not personally want to see. We have to make these choices. As we stand here today, it is really important we let the planning inquiry process work, where every one of those sites on the Plan A and the Plan B sites will be aired before the inspector and those that have objected ... I have had hundreds of objections on the Plan B sites, got a huge amount of objections on Plan A sites. The choice is simple: what can we do? We can do nothing and not meet the supply. We can have a sustainable supply on the right sites or we can have it completely unsustainable and spoil the countryside; that is the amendment.

4.7.3 The Connétable of St. Ouen:

Can I just ask the Minister - and I am sort of asking him to agree with me really - is he satisfied that the process used to decide on the sites that are going to be rezoned in the green zone is robust? Because certainly in my view, having looked very carefully at the process that is being used to achieve the new sites, I think it is very robust and we should defend it. Is he satisfied that that process is robust and can he defend it?

Deputy J.H. Young:

If I was not I would not have agreed to sign off the draft plan. I have relied upon professional judgments and that is really important. I have confidence in the Plan A sites. Plan B, I have had to put those forward because what if some of those Plan A sites do not run, as the Senator's questions highlights, what do we do then? I think the issue raised by Senator Mézec, the question is right: what is the contribution from the States for other sites for affordable homes?

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

The Minister has just said that when he came into this Assembly he wanted to see adequate affordable housing supply. He has also just said that he wants to build as many as we can, and he used those words. But does the Minister agree with me that in order to address this crisis and in order to see off the very many objections he has to Plan A and Plan B, that when it comes to States-owned sites, and I mean to include with that the S.o.J.D.C. sites and the sites owned by Ports, that where we develop them for housing that they should be 100 per cent affordable housing?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Where I am is if we develop single States-owned sites and they are viewed as a single site I think my answer is, yes; where we develop the single sites. But in the case of the S.o.J.D.C. and the waterfront, what we have done is we have asked that body to develop that whole area and, by the way, not just give us housing, give us all the other things we want. We have a choice again, we can have affordable housing and nothing else in the waterfront, and that would be the case if we had 100 per cent affordable housing or we can have the other things we want or we can put our hands in our pockets and fund it; that is the preference I have got. I have told the Chief Minister, I do not really care when we make the choice of affordable housing on the waterfront what the money numbers are. Because at the moment the argument that will run - and I know it will come when we have that debate - well, if we have 50 per cent affordable housing on the waterfront you are going to lose £49 million. No. What it means is the £49 million we thought that we are going to get is surplus, we are not going to get it; that is another ... I have been as strong as I can and being where I am but it is the majority, it is the Assembly decision and not mine.

4.7.5 The Deputy of St. Martin:

I just want to take the Minister back to the halcyon days of 2011; he and I sat on the Environment Scrutiny Panel and he chaired it and I vice-chaired it and there was a planning policy called H3, which brought forward proposals to build affordable land, social and private open-market housing on the same site and it did not succeed. Two or 3 years later we had delivered nothing. I ask the Minister why he thinks it is going to work now.

Deputy J.H. Young:

I think the Deputy has a good question but I think a slight misunderstanding in my answer perhaps and maybe I am not clear enough. The Senator's question to me at the start of this discussion was about the amendments. Amendment number 25 of Senator Mézec that he asked me to commit to

brings back H3 policy, resurrects it; it is virtually the same. The inspector will have to judge that. Why did it not work? It is because the industry in the private sector refused to play ball and did not co-operate. It works everywhere else; it works in the U.K., it works in cities. It was in the A.E.C.O.M. (Architecture, Engineering, Construction, Operations and Management) housing report. I supported it. But past efforts to get such proposals through this Assembly have failed. Members have backed off taking a percentage of value out of developments time and time again.

4.7.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister think there is a risk that his legacy will be that he will be known as the Minister for the Environment who concreted over the countryside?

Deputy J.H. Young:

No, because if that is where we end up then I shall probably be out the door. No, I am not prepared to stand in this Assembly ... I have got a final Island Plan due for approval that does what the Deputy said.

4.7.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Minister mentioned past attempts to introduce a land transaction tax, I think, but does he accept that until we have taken other measures to try and, effectively, use current housing stock, which is out of commission, i.e. dilapidated houses that are unoccupied for whatever reason, also to address the fact that many units that are being sold off-Island, often in the dozens, if not hundreds, to people who do not live here, that until we address those issues it is pointless to try and build new housing stock and that we should first address the former issues I mentioned before trying to concrete over the countryside? Does the Minister agree with that?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Despite my personal sympathies, this issue is going to be discussed and aired at the planning inquiry. I am sure the Minister for Housing and Communities is going before that because the Deputy raises a wider issue about the relationship between the use of existing properties and ownership of existing properties. What the Island Plan seeks to do, which is propose for policies for future development.

4.7.8 Connétable S.A. Le Sueur-Rennard of St. Saviour:

I was really intrigued in his speech because the Minister says that he is trying to retain Parish life and I find that if it was not so sad it would be laughable. Because the Five Oaks area in my Parish was a Parish life but now he is overcrowding it with all sorts of things. Does the Minister not feel we would have been much better to have an immigration policy and then do the housing and not, like the Deputy from St. Brelade was just saying, concrete over the green areas? I have already had this conversation with the Minister to say that he is leaving a concrete jungle. We will be an airport and a finance industry but if you want to see the countryside you can take a ferry or take a smaller plane to the other islands but we will not have it here. Somebody has got to take the bull by the horns and say: "I am sorry, an immigration policy has to be forwarded because we cannot keep doing this." Does the Minister not feel that he is not retaining Parish life, at least not in St. Saviour?

Deputy J.H. Young:

My reference to Parish life was about accepting the fact that we have got an ageing demographic in the Parish communities. The Parish communities generally were developed with young families probably, I do not know, I was not there in the 1960s or early 1970s and now I get reports from just about every Connétable that we have got people in those Parishes that are looking to right-size, that

provides opportunities for people what used to be called downsizing, we now call it rightsizing and that will be part and parcel of those affordable housing sites. My view would be is that people in the countryside who have lived their life in those areas, their friends, their families, their whole social life, they work in those areas, are not likely to want to come and right-size in the middle of town. I think that is an important objective. The other thing is to just provide enough life blood of ordinary working families to help those Parishes, and that is what I meant. On the other issue, obviously the Connétable is very, very passionate and it is absolutely right she is opposing the proposal for fields in St. Saviour. The problem is, is that the strategic policies that we are working with try and put our predominantly housing within this built-up area; so strategic expansions. That is the policy choice before us and we have got the inquiry and the final decisions, again, will not be mine; they will be the Assembly's in March.

4.7.9 The Connétable of St. Saviour:

I may be wrong but the Minister has just said that is to keep families and things together. But according to Senator Mézec, he does not think ... and I am not having a go at him, I am just quoting something he has said. Senator Mézec has said that everybody should be entitled to live anywhere on this Island, so that contradicts that. He is not trying to hold families together who have lived in Parishes, he is just trying to find homes for people. I am sorry, he is dead right, I am sorry that I am quitting because I would love to continue this fight because this is going to be a fight. In Plan B we have got small fields right on a route to school that I have just made safe and he is going to load it up with cars and people again. No, I am sorry, the Minister is completely wrong, unless I have got it wrong. Are you saying now that in St. Saviour when the homes are built they are going to be for St. Saviour's parishioners?

Deputy J.H. Young:

There is another amendment, I think, on the Island Plan about the proportion of homes allocated to Parish communities and to all Island, I think. I know that the Minister for Housing and Communities has this actively under study at the moment. I have asked the Minister for Housing and Communities and the Minister for Housing and Communities has agreed to ensure that by the time we make the final decisions on those sites we have clarity about what the rules are there.

4.7.10 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I think some are at pains but just to ask a very simple question: is it not the simple fact that in order to have affordable homes you build affordable homes? Every time in a States of Jersey development site or any site owned by Jersey that we do anything other than provide affordable homes, we put fuel to the fire of all the problems that you have been talking about for the last, I do not know how long, in this question session. Is it not the case, Minister, that it is simple; let us have affordable homes on States-owned sites and that will address the issue quicker than any other solution you can come up with?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I hope the Deputy has got his name down for the planning inquiry and will go and make his case. Because there is an amendment in there to do exactly that and the planning inspector will judge. From my point of view, I want to see holistic communities and have a site-by-site choice, rather than just a blanket this is what we do. I cannot go further in saying in principle. I absolutely support the Senator and I support the intentions behind to achieve at least a minimum site proportionate of affordable homes on those sites.

[11:15]

There will be a level which is just not enough and I will not go along with but we have got to do that on a case-by-case basis.

4.7.11 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

The Minister has spoken of his intention with the bridging Island Plan to meet the necessary supply for affordable housing in Jersey. But does he recognise that his plan as it currently stands fails to do that because his own projections for affordable housing in the bridging Island Plan are for 1,500, which is half the number of applications there currently are on the Affordable Housing Gateway? Does he not accept the point that Deputy Tadier made, that his political legacy will be a legacy of failure if he does not take a stronger position of leadership on this and commit himself to supporting policies which will increase the supply of affordable housing in Jersey and that saying he agrees to something in principle is not good enough? Will he commit here and now to take that leadership and say whatever failures that have been in the past, whatever mistakes there have been, that he will not put his name to them, he will be on the right side of history and vote in support of a position which will tangibly increase the supply of affordable housing, rather than just give us words? Because it is the families of this Island that will suffer if all they get is words from their leaders.

Deputy J.H. Young:

Legacy, the right side of history, would that not be nice? I am going to make my judgments after I hear what the inspectors say, what the outcome of this is. I have told the Assembly that there is a line in the sand that I will not go beyond. An adequate level of affordable houses on States-owned sites and personally I want to see a contribution from privately-owned sites as well. I want to see that and that is why the comments I have published to the inspector are supportive in principle, but I cannot prejudge here today. We are now 5 months away from that decision. There is a lot of water to go under the bridge in this and to stand here now and prejudge is not what I am prepared to do.