

21.02.09

3 The Connétable of St. Helier of the Minister for the Environment regarding the provision of new homes in St. Helier (OQ.35/2021)

Will the Minister advise the States Assembly how many new homes are expected to be provided in St. Helier within the current decade and whether it is his assessment that there is sufficient critical infrastructure already in place in the town area to support such an increase?

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

The question I think requires me to refer to the Island Plan review which is in process and of course the next Island Plan will not cover the 10 years, it will be for a shorter 3-year plan, but in question of the housing supply, the planning horizon adopted is a 5-year housing supply. Of course I have already published the preferred strategy report last October which set out the numbers the plan is being based on and the parameters and the majority of the homes will be proposed in the existing built-up areas.

[11:00]

St. Helier will not be the sole focus but it is expected to accommodate between 700 and 1,600 homes in the 5-year period. On the second part of his question, the short answer is no, there is not enough community infrastructure provision in St. Helier now and there desperately needs to be in the future because town residents do not enjoy the same level of access to community infrastructures. All the figures show a serious problem. There is a challenge there, the Island Plan will make provision but that on its own will not do the job and it needs to have more consideration of Government and the use of public land and acquiring land for investment and community facilities at the same time. That cannot be done through planning, it needs other policies.

6.3.1 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. He gives a relatively modest figure. Is it not the case that with the thousands of units that are being predicted on the south-west masterplan alone, the waterfront next phase, and all of the other private sector developments going on around the town and Andium and the Jersey Development Company's construction, we must be looking at something towards 10,000 units in the current decade?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Obviously I have not addressed the decade issue. The Connétable will know that the target for housing units throughout the Island for the 5-year period is 4,000 homes. So I do not know where his 10,000 will come from but I am prepared to look at it. The truth is, is that what is happening at the moment is we are seeing a spate of hotel developments. I think there are between 10 and 15 hotels already, either on the stocks as a planning application, or expected to come very quickly with dwelling units. I think that presents us with a challenge which is the community facilities to go with it because I certainly do not want to see town cramming, so I cannot give credence to the 10,000 figures. We are going to have a debate later on the waterfront. There are lots of choices there I think still before us. I am afraid I do not want to support that figure of 10,000 now but it will likely change for the numbers I gave, 700 to 1,600.

6.3.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In terms of critical infrastructure around the town, will the Minister be supporting the building of a youth and community centre in the north of town?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Absolutely, I am immensely frustrated that that has not happened. I certainly am looking at the current level of planning applications we have got because I think there will need to be at least one planning inquiry focusing on the issue of whether or not there is enough community provision around in the town to be able to provide a reasonable environment for those new town residences. So absolutely, and I think it is within the gift of our States machinery to allocate a site. They should be doing it as soon as possible because the money is there in the budget. I think we cannot go around and around and around searching for a site, it has got to be found.

6.3.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Thank you, Deputy Southern, for asking the question I was thinking of asking. Let me ask another one of the Minister. Can I ask him what his definition of sustainability is for the area of the centre of St. Helier with 1,600 homes being built in such a built-up area already?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I hope the draft Island Plan will give detailed guidance on this. There is taking place a sustainability review looking at all the elements. What does that mean? Well, one could speak for a half an hour but I am not going to. It means there are enough community facilities in the area, it means that the traffic is managed and we have the facilities to service that community that lives there to enable life to go on in a harmonious way. I think we know, we only have to look at successful cities where that has worked and contrast that with areas where that does not. We clearly know if you do not have sustainable communities, then you are going to get social problems that the community will pay the price for.

6.3.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank the Minister for the recognition of that but I make it clear that those things are simply not happening. In part, when I asked the Minister, does he feel it is because of the piecemeal nature of development in that area of private sector development, public sector development and things that are not joined up? That is what has happened before and if we are not careful will happen again. Does the Minister agree and what would he do about that?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Well the tool that we have to do that is the Island Plan, which is why it is so crucial. That law is there and the whole objective of it is to ensure that land is developed in the best interests of our community. I think that is true, our government processes have become very fragmented in recent years and that is a disappointment. But I think the planning policies have to join up with the work of the Housing Policy Group where we heard from Deputy Labey this morning about the direction there. Also, I believe the Regeneration Steering Group, which as the Minister I am not on, who make the decisions on the allocations and use of public sites. These 3 things need to co-ordinate.

6.3.5 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I am very grateful to Deputy Ward for his excellent supplementary question which leads to my final supplementary question to the Minister who was chief officer at Planning when I was asked as a young Deputy to chair the Urban Renewal Subcommittee. He will remember that the previous Planning Committee had an urban taskforce. Does the Minister believe that we have the right political structure in place to achieve the coherent and holistic planning for town that is necessary or are we in danger of being fragmented and seeing the money that is being generated by projects

being spent on a variety of “nice to have” projects rather than on the central matters that we have been discussing this morning?

Deputy J.H. Young:

It seems a lifetime ago when I was a civil servant and there was indeed division of an Urban Renewal Committee, I think it was called, and there were very substantial public funds allocated to it. The States also had available money to buy land, which I think was anything up to £100 million, and sites were acquired and developed in accordance with that work, so it was very progressive, ahead of its time. Sadly, a lot of that, in fact nearly all of it, has withered on the vine. I think now with the Island Plan, and I think with Deputy Labey’s energy and the support of the Connétable, there is every chance that in the future we can try and retain some of that in new structures. But realistically, we have only got just over a year to go and I think we are unlikely to get that full machinery in place at the moment but certainly the Island Plan will provide the model for the way forward.

The Bailiff:

I apologise, Deputy Doublet, I think I missed your point of order that you raised earlier. I am sorry, sometimes things get lost in the flurry of comment on the chat. You have a point of order?

Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Yes, thank you, and other Members did allude to it, but I just wanted to know what Standing Orders say about when the Assembly seeks legal advice. What other avenues are there if the A.G. (Attorney General) is not able to answer? Can the question perhaps be answered by the S.G. (Solicitor General) and what would be the normal procedure if the A.G. feels he cannot answer?

The Bailiff:

Well I would need to give that some consideration, Deputy. It is not something that I need to make a ruling on immediately but you may be aware that there is a request for an urgent oral question in the same terms to be directed to the Solicitor General. I will be giving consideration to that over the luncheon adjournment and perhaps that will deal with this particular matter.