

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT
BY DEPUTY K.F. MOREL OF ST. LAWRENCE
QUESTION SUBMITTED ON MONDAY 25th JANUARY 2021
ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON MONDAY 1st FEBRUARY 2021**

Question

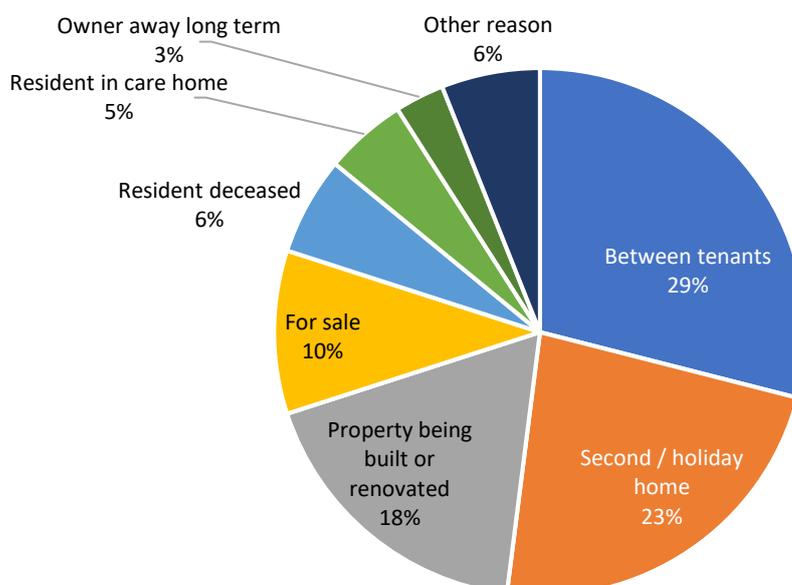
In terms of informing the Bridging Island Plan, will the Minister advise what studies, if any, have been undertaken to assess the number of vacant units within the Island's existing housing stock and, furthermore, what studies have been undertaken to assess the flexibility of the Island's existing housing stock in terms of its capability to accommodate more people; and if any such studies have been undertaken, will the Minister provide them to the Assembly?

Answer

The planning policy framework provided by an island plan relates to the development of land and buildings and, as such, cannot directly affect levels of occupation and vacancy within the island's housing stock.

It is, however, recognised that the better use of existing homes can help to reduce the number of new homes that are required to be provided to meet the island's housing needs. Because of this, the Minister for the Environment is keen to better understand and work to develop integrated policy across government that helps to ensure optimal use of new and existing homes.

The 2011 Census revealed that one in fourteen (7%) of all private dwellings were vacant on census day – a total of 3,103 dwellings.¹ Although there was no requirement for householders to give reasons for properties being vacant, some reasons were provided for around half of properties listed as vacant. Where data was provided: over a quarter (29%) were vacant due to being between tenants, and nearly a quarter (23%) were second or holiday homes. Around one in five were in the process of being built or renovated.



¹

Figure 1: Vacant dwellings by reason (2011 Census)

Information about the level of vacancy within the Island's housing stock will be updated by the 2021 Census to provide a more up-to-date picture of this issue.

In the meantime, work is being undertaken, with one of the Island's utility providers in the Island, to explore the possibility of additional data being provided about vacancy levels within the existing housing stock based on the use of utility supplies.

As well as providing information about vacancy, the census also provides valuable information about levels of overcrowding and under-occupation in the island’s homes by analysing the number of people that live in a household relative to the number of bedrooms required relative to the ‘Bedroom Standard’². This revealed, amongst other things, that around a quarter (26%) of island households were under-occupying their accommodation: that is, they had at least **two** bedrooms more than they needed as measured by the Bedroom Standard. The rate of under-occupation was highest for owner-occupied households (42%).

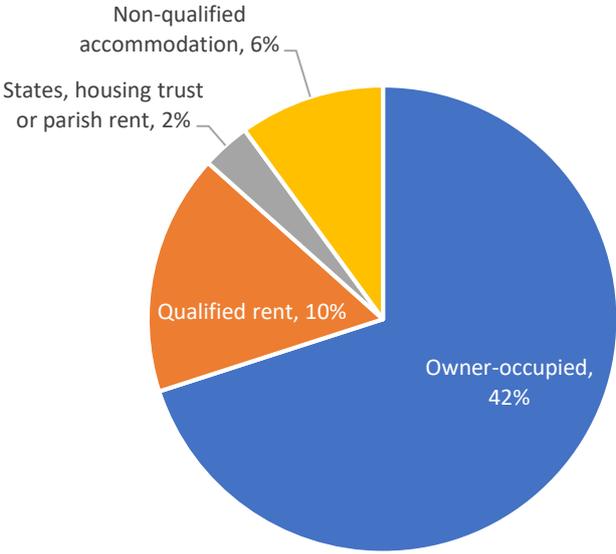


Figure 2: Under-occupation by tenure (2011 Census)

Information about the levels of under-occupation within the island’s housing stock will be updated by the 2021 Census; and work is being undertaken with Statistics Jersey to determine if any meanwhile information about this issue can be gleaned from other sample data, such as Jersey Opinions and Lifestyle or Household Needs surveys.

That the supply of homes in the island can be increased through the efficient management and use of existing housing stock has been explicitly recognised by the Housing Strategy³. This was adopted and published by then Housing Minister in March 2016, and set, as a specific objective, to make best use of the existing and future housing, by:

1. reviewing Housing Gateway eligibility criteria and allocation policies, which will be more equitable and responsive to demand and supply.
2. reviewing transfer incentives for households in affordable housing to downsize to more appropriate accommodation.

² The ‘Bedroom Standard’ (UK Housing Overcrowding Bill, 2003) defines the number of bedrooms that would be required by the household, where a separate bedroom is allowed for each married or cohabiting couple, any adults aged 21 or over, pairs of adolescents aged 10-20 of the same sex and pairs of children under 10 years. Unpaired persons of 10-20 years are notionally paired with a child under 10 of the same sex.

³ <https://www.gov.je/SiteCollectionDocuments/Government%20and%20administration/R%20Housing%20Strategy%2020160324%20VP.pdf>

3. ensuring we have an efficient and flexible allocation process to swiftly re-let homes that become vacant in the affordable rental sector.
4. ensure that the needs of vulnerable groups are met by all housing providers, where appropriate.
5. investigating ways to incentivise the development of undeveloped land with existing planning permission.
6. investigating ways to make more vacant properties available to the market.

A number of these initiatives have been progressed directly and through working with affordable housing providers; and others have formed part of the work that has been undertaken by the Housing Policy Development Board, and which will serve to inform new housing policy.

In seeking to make provision for homes in the island, whilst recognising the potential contribution that greater flexibility in the use of the existing stock can make in serving to reduce the overall requirement for new homes, the Preferred Strategy for the new Island Plan has concluded that, as a minimum, 5% of the identified housing requirement (rounded to 200 units) will be provided through non-development policies over the bridging Island Plan period. This is considered a reasonable target given the time necessary both to develop and begin to implement the necessary policy actions plans.

With specific regard to the content and role of the draft Island Plan itself to support greater efficiency in the use of the existing housing stock, the Minister for the Environment is actively working with the Minister for Children and Housing to explore the introduction of an initiative to enable and encourage greater flexibility in the use of the existing housing stock, and specifically to facilitate and incentivise downsizing. This will seek to encourage and enable islanders who are currently under-occupying property to move to a new property – to be developed and provided under the auspices of the new Island Plan - that better suits their needs, whilst releasing an existing house that might better suit the housing needs of other islanders, particularly family homes.