

2024.07.16

2.14 Deputy K.M. Wilson of the Minister for Housing regarding his plans for increasing the number of homes on the Island (OQ.148/2024)

Will the Minister explain his plans for increasing the number of homes on the Island and what importance he places in those plans on shaping the wider development of the community?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec of St. Helier South (The Minister for Housing):

I thank Deputy Wilson for this question. The broad answer to the first part of the question is the plan is the Bridging Island Plan which itself contains lots of policies that tackle different elements in how and where we go about producing new homes, from how standards have to be met in the built-up urban environment to the sites that are specifically allocated for brand-new homes to be built in more rural areas. It has got policies on things like splitting up larger dwellings into multiple smaller dwellings. I obviously have a close relationship with the States delivery partners on new homes; Andium Homes and the States of Jersey Development Company, for example. Andium itself is currently on site delivering hundreds of new homes and is working up its plans to build even more of those in accordance with the Bridging Island Plan policies and the sites that have been rezoned for that very purpose. In terms of the second part of her question, which is quite an open question, I could give just a short answer by saying it is very important that we make sure the homes that are built are more than just bricks, they are places in which people will live their lives, want to be safe and happy. That means it is not just about the bricks and the design of the home itself, but everything around it: the amenity space, the play space, the access to school spaces, easy transport access and all the rest of it. Within the Island Plan there are lots of policies that interact with those wider considerations than just the buildings themselves. I am frequently approached to provide comment as Minister for Housing when these planning applications are made for new developments and I make sure I pay close attention to what is proposed. If we spot any issues in proposals that might affect people's quality of life and how the community can enjoy themselves there, then I make sure that I point that out in those comments and hope that they will then get resolved in the other parts of the processes that do not necessarily fall to my portfolio.

2.14.1 Deputy K.M. Wilson:

I thank the Minister for his response there. One of the things that we are experiencing, particularly in my Parish, is the lack of access to open space and there is quite a lot going on in relation to developing initiatives for children. Can the Minister outline what specific community development he is driving with regards to the kind of space that he has just talked to us about and how he is informing himself as to how to create the notion and the nature of community as part of the developments that he is responsible for?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Well obviously the built-up area in St. Helier is a place where there is very dense building of new homes in that area; I live there as well so I understand on a day-to-day basis how these kind of things are affected. I know that, as well as building those new homes there, it is absolutely vital that we get a good mix of people living in those homes, so a mix of first-home buyers, social rental, et cetera, and rightsizing, of course, a new policy I have produced that will hopefully play a key role in building those communities too. Also we know particularly in that area that there is a desperate need for a new school, and I am absolutely staunch in my support for that being delivered. I am also extremely keen to see that there is better walking and cycling access between those sites so people can safely get to where they need to get to; youth service provision, obviously a key part of that as well. I know that there are various discussions and plans that go on; some of that is delivered directly by Andium themselves and they have my support when they are doing their public realm improvements. We have seen the new, quite large, open space in front of Cyril Le Marquand Court that I think has got a lot of potential and we have got to work with them to make sure that can be delivered on. Other areas of Government as well will have their part to play in that too. I was pleased to go to the St. Helier Rates Assembly recently to support their neighbourhood improvements plans initiative, which is something I would like to see a

lot more of. I will certainly be pressuring the Constable of St. Helier to make sure that those areas in town where there is dense population will get those public realm improvements as well so those will feel like nicer neighbourhoods to live in.

2.14.2 Deputy J. Renouf:

New homes can of course be delivered in all buildings as well as on greenfield sites and in new places. The Minister dropped the Empty Homes Service, would he say whether he has any plans to replace it with any actions in his term of office to deal with the empty houses that could have become homes?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Deputy is right that I scrapped the Empty Homes Service and I did that for the reason that it was providing no tangible benefit that I could ascertain whatsoever. It was clear to me that if we are to make better use of the empty homes that exist in the Island, then a more tangible policy approach is preferable there. Part of that is to support where possible the actual acquisition of those homes so that they can be brought back into use, and I was pleased to support the Receiver General doing so with a home just metres outside of my constituency recently. Beyond that, I think we need to look at policy initiatives like empty dwelling management orders which exist to different extents in the U.K. but I would be conscious, in delivering that kind of thing in Jersey, that could not be done overnight. It would have to be a bespoke Jersey version of that, not just a copy and paste from somewhere else. I have had brief discussions with policy officers about how we might go about doing that, so I do not have a firm plan in place for pursuing that. When and if I did, it would not be an overnight thing. That is the kind of policy initiative that would probably take a couple of years to get embedded and working. I think that is a better thing to focus on than a service that, when push came to shove, was just a spreadsheet with data on and not something that led to tangible change.

2.14.3 Deputy J. Renouf:

I think the Minister has previously spoken about how significant a problem he thinks this is. Will he state whether he intends to bring anything forward in this term of office in this space?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

No, I will not state that because at this point I do not know specifically what I would bring and if it in fact would be the option that I have just discussed. I need to do a bit more thinking about what is possible in this term of office and what resourcing would be required to deliver that. I have made it clear that, right at this very moment, my top policy objective is getting a new Residential Tenancy Law in place so that people who are living in private sector rental homes get the security of tenure that they deserve. When you are living in a home that you know you have got greater security of tenure, you can establish yourself more firmly in that community, going back to the original question from Deputy Wilson there. That has been my priority at this point in time. If I come to a position where I think it is deliverable to get something over the line in this term of office, or frankly even just starting it in this term of office, then I will absolutely be open and transparent about that and get the Assembly's approval for that. At this moment in time, I am not settled on exactly what the timeline for that ought to be.

2.14.4 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I echo the Minister's response about the school and community spaces within St. Helier, including the upgrade for the playground at Parade Gardens. The Minister is aware, and we have discussed, according to the audit in St. Helier, you have 39 per cent places making the benchmark for the playgrounds; so we are missing almost 60 per cent to meet the national benchmark for the playgrounds. Last week we had an improvement application approved for Romerils for 53 flats. I am not sure - I have not seen it, I might have missed it - I do not think there is a playground. I am not sure if investment in proximity playground has been done. I know that is within the Minister for Infrastructure; would the Minister for Housing ensure that for any further development the decision of the States Assembly for investment into playgrounds will be met?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

That is a very good question. There are processes in place through the planning system that ought to be taking that into account from the outset. I can say that I have had one or 2 planning applications that I have been asked to make a comment on from the private sector that did include some play facilities within them, including some that even I was surprised to see because at my first glance I wondered where you would fit them in and whether the development was big enough to justify it on site. I did at least see a proposed development taking into account that policy and including it as part of their plans, which is really good, and hopefully shows that the idea is permeating out there for developers for them to consider in part of that. The planning processes themselves ought to be recognising that that is a policy and that those who are coming to them to seek planning permission should be abiding by that policy one way or another.

[11:45]

Whether it is them directly providing those facilities or providing a contribution to the investment for that, I would hope that the Planning Applications Committee is firm on that as well when applications reach them.

2.14.5 Deputy S.M. Ahier:

How many additional new homes will be required if the Minister removes the need for housing qualifications as is his intention?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

None, because that is not how the policy would work. Just to be clear, based on what I said at the Chamber of Commerce lunch recently, which is not a proposal that is actively on the table imminently coming to an Assembly, I was asked for my opinion - and I stand by this opinion - that it is wrong to ask people to come and work in Jersey and not give them adequate housing rights for them to live a decent life here. That has economic impacts as well. I have said nothing that would suggest enabling more people than would otherwise be the case to come to Jersey, just that those who would be coming to Jersey would have decent rights when they arrive here, so that is not a numbers issue.

2.14.6 Deputy S.M. Ahier:

Is it his opinion that any changes would not affect the ability to purchase a property? Because obviously that would be detrimental to local people in the housing market.

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Yes, that was something I made clear in the Chamber of Commerce speech, that my thoughts were only applicable to rental homes there, not purchase homes. If I may say, I think I have made that comment several times in question time in the Assembly, and I was clear about it in my election manifesto as well. It is not an easy thing to achieve and would require a lot of thinking and lots of number crunching to make sure however that kind of thing was implemented was transitioned sensibly, so that is not an overnight thing. I was asked for my opinion on a subject and my opinion is that the current restrictions on renting for those who come to Jersey to work lead to hardship that we should be prepared to accept.

2.14.7 Deputy P.F.C. Ozouf:

I wonder whether or not the Minister, in considering this whole question which he has asked about increasing the number of homes, has learnt anything from the incoming Labour Government in the United Kingdom, the importance of building homes and the important linkage with economic growth, and whether or not he agrees with the policies of Rachel Reeves and the Labour Cabinet. If he does so, will he be bringing such an enthusiasm to his job in Jersey?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Well I am very much looking forward to engaging with my U.K. counterpart in September this year at the British-Irish Council Housing Ministers' meeting where I will be asking my counterpart there how that policy exactly is working. It is a different context in the U.K. because they have got a lot more land than we do, and that is a big part of the discussion there about how towns expand what kind of land you expand into. It is different to a small Island - I believe it is anyway - because we do not have

the huge swathes of land to creep into for a development there and all of the flexibility you have with the size of the sites that you pick. It forces us to be more creative, a restriction that they do not have up there, but the change in policy that the U.K. Government has announced since the election is certainly well-intentioned. I want to learn more from them and I am looking forward to having that direct conversation with them later this year.

2.14.8 Deputy P.F.C. Ozouf:

I notice that the Labour Government is setting out numbers of target homes which underline the question of the original questioner of the number of homes and a mandatory amount. While I understand the Deputy says that we are different, we are not that different; in some areas of the United Kingdom the same issues of planning arise. Perhaps when he does meet his counterparts, would he consider whether or not bringing to his Council of Ministers the mandatory amount of housing, because that is obviously the thing that eludes everybody. There are not enough homes; they are promised but they are not delivered. Would he consider mandating numbers?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Bridging Island Plan does have numbers in it and it looks at those sites. They are not mandatory and of course it is theoretically possible that they may not be delivered if sites are not pursued quickly enough. I believe that there are options in the Island Plan for what we could do several years into it and Government taking control of that and driving that forward if they are not naturally coming about through the private sector, so that is a key difference there. The question in the U.K. over whether numbers and official targets were right or not has been settled by the fact a new Government has come in and changed that policy. I think our Island Plan processes are probably a bit more robust in that regard than what you have previously seen in the U.K.

2.14.9 Deputy K.M. Wilson:

I thank the Minister for all of those responses. Given what he stated in relation to the development of communities in the public realm, can he tell us what steps he will take next to ensure a home or a school in the community is more than just bricks and mortar? Would he agree with the idea that community development would benefit from a much broader perspective to improve people's lives and inform his policy and plans going forward?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Well she asked what we would do next. The discussion of the new school in St. Helier is one that I have been actively involved in and I am absolutely staunchly pursuing. Obviously it is the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning that leads on that but he has my support in doing it. I think it is vital that if we are building new homes in St. Helier, it is wrong to not provide the school places for the children who will end up living in there because they will end up not being able to go to their local school. Their parents will have to spend 45 minutes in the car every morning to get stuck in traffic, polluting the air, while they drive them to a school outside of the town. The difference to quality of life that you have by not having to worry about 45 minutes being stuck in traffic, but being able to walk your child to school, to talk and play along the way, and not worrying about the stress of then getting back and missing the start of work, et cetera, that is a key area there. I have not yet attended a Regeneration Steering Group meeting but I anticipate that that is on the agenda for me. I believe that the Minister for Infrastructure has also recently said something about bringing Ministers together for some of that town public realm improvements, and inevitably what that will mean for communities. I am looking forward to getting involved in those as well.