

Environment, Housing and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel

Quarterly Hearing

Witness: Minister for Children and Housing

Thursday, 4th June 2020

Panel:

Connétable M.K. Jackson of St. Brelade (Chair)

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

Deputy K.F. Morel of St. Lawrence

Connétable J.E. Le Maistre of Grouville

Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier

Witnesses:

Senator S.Y. Mézec, The Minister for Children and Housing

Mr. A. Scate, Group Director for Regulation, Growth, Housing and Environment

Mr. J. Norris, Policy Principal, Strategic Policy, Performance and Population

Mr. T. Daniels

[11:30]

Connétable M.K. Jackson of St. Brelade (Chair):

I will launch into welcoming the Minister for Children and Housing and his team to the quarterly hearing with the Environment, Housing and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel and kick off with questions regarding the Government Plan 2023, which we understand will be revised in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and, of course, now is likely to become a recovery plan. The impact on Jersey's public finances will require consideration of how available public resources should best be prioritised, allocated and used. What steps, Minister, are you taking to reprioritise the available public resources for allocation and use within the department under your remit? You have got your department's

individual budget and its feasibility, which includes the viability and deliverability of projects within your department. What are your thoughts on that?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

You are absolutely right in that the Government Plan, which will be presented towards the end of this year, will probably look reasonably different to what we were anticipating had this crisis not occurred. Having a focus in it on recovery, economic stimulus, getting the Island back on its feet into a position of strength for our community will obviously be a significant theme in that Government Plan, so the discussions on exactly what that is going to look like have not really begun as of yet. I think the focus on the discussions so far has been more about the process of how we are going to put that Government Plan together, timelines, et cetera. I know Scrutiny have been consulted on some of that as well. Some of the nitty gritty in terms of what is going to happen to this project, which was determined by the last part of the Government Plan - will things have to be moved, will some of the costings have to change, will some stuff be scrapped altogether - are obviously the big questions that Ministers will be arguing over the coming months. I use the word "arguing" because there probably will be some arguing over prioritisation of some of these things. From a political perspective I have no hesitation in making the point that the States Assembly agreed that reducing income inequality and improving the standard of living for Islanders was going to be one of our key priorities for this term of office. I do not believe that enough progress was made on that priority before this crisis hit and, therefore, after this crisis I think it must be put up the agenda a bit more and housing as a fundamental part of that. So I am not willing to shift ground on certain parts of our programme that I think will be fundamental to that recovery and I will be making the case to other Ministers for that.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

It is all a question of making perhaps a revised plan fit whatever budget we may have, I suspect, and I would not disagree. In fact, leading into the Island Plan could be delayed due to COVID-19 and I wonder how that affects plans to fulfil the findings in the *Objective Assessment of Housing Need Report*, establishing the number, size and tenure of new homes required in Jersey from 2021 to 2030. It would be interesting to hear, and maybe Andy would tell us, what the thinking is with regard to changes that might be necessary in terms of the standard of housing that we have perhaps learnt in the last 2 months, which maybe will alter the direction of travel in the Island Plan.

Group Director for Regulation, Growth, Housing and Environment:

In terms of the Island Plan as a whole, the Island Plan will, I believe, still be a Government Plan priority moving forward. The current Island Plan effectively comes to the end of its life at the end of 2021 and in reality was based on work that was approved by the Assembly in 2011 and started in 2009. Some of the thinking behind the Island Plan is arguably out of date now, so it does need

refreshing. I think the challenge on that plan is exactly the same as the challenge on the Government Plan, that we need to refresh it within a timescale of this Government and this Assembly but also now deal with recovery within that as well. I think housing delivery still is a very important part for the Island Plan to deal with. The housing pressures the Island is facing have not gone away and if anything have magnified in certain areas. So housing delivery is certainly still a very key part of that. We certainly do anticipate the Island Plan continuing, albeit with a refocus on its own timescale and what that now has to look like between now and then the next general election. I think it is important for the Island Plan still to be there. It is certainly still a Government priority and, as the Minister said, housing delivery is still absolutely critical and how we then tie our public estate and reviews of our public estate into that again is very important work. I do not foresee that there will be any lack of attention to that or any lack of detail in that area. I think it is, I guess, probably now working out administratively how we all go about getting political engagement, public engagement and doing the work to make sure that we have the details ready for approval.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Do you see housing standards as changing in any way as a result of COVID?

Group Director for Regulation, Growth, Housing and Environment:

I think the need to focus on housing standards is still there. In another ministerial debate obviously we have got the standards around private rented dwellings and that is going to be coming back into debate later this year. In my view, I think it is incumbent on us to make sure that the pressure to house persons is not traded off with the standards for those persons to be housed. We still have an underlying need to focus on standards within our housing stock but the critical need is to make sure we have more housing stock at a decent standard, so I think the 2 dovetail together.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I suppose what I am leading to is the fact that people have been compelled to stay locked into their houses, for want of a better word. Should we be looking to a central provision of outside areas, balcony areas and such like, so people have at least got some option to get out?

Group Director for Regulation, Growth, Housing and Environment:

I think the last 2 or so months have really shown a focus not just on internal spaces and how housing is used internally and what those spaces should be in terms of space standards. I think we will see some challenges moving forward around home working and how that is reflected in housing design moving forward, but I think it again just magnifies that in some of our areas of the Island people's access to open space is not as high and as great as we would want it to be. For me, it is really important that we dovetail any housing delivery plan into a public realm and how we use our outdoor spaces plan. It is vital that people have access to public open space and especially in the greater

St. Helier area where the statistics show that we need more focus on green areas and urban quality. So I think the Island Plan has got to answer that really important question as well.

Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier:

I would like to ask the Minister. First of all, I am absolutely behind that housing delivery is critical for the wellbeing of the Island. I would like to ask 2 questions. The first question is I think we should have approximately 700 - I do not remember the exact number and would be happy for you to let me know - new homes within this year, by the end of this year. How has the COVID situation affected the delivery of the new homes?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

I think it has not been too bad, to be perfectly honest, certainly the homes that our States-owned companies were scheduled to deliver. The obvious one that was towards the end of its completion when all of this kicked off was one of the Hue Court blocks, which has been able to go ahead, has been able to have people move into there, which has enabled us to free up capacity for emergency housing elsewhere. I have in front of me a list of all of those projects that are due to be completed over the next few years, the number of homes that includes and when those completion dates are, and I am happy to share that with the panel if the panel are interested in that.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Thank you. That would be helpful.

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

Could I ask a couple of questions, please? Firstly, the new homes that you are going to be building, are the rooms going to be so tiny like they have been on properties that have been built? Are they going to be of a decent size now? People have been living in like little rabbit hutches and it has been grossly unfair. Not only have they not had an outdoor space, which we are hopefully going to recommend and redeem ourselves by having an outdoor space, but they have also had these tiny little rooms. Is there anything you can put with planning to make sure that the rooms are a decent size? We know now that people have been stuck at home. I am lucky, I have got a farm, but a lot of them have been stuck in with nothing, bless their hearts, and they have had their children too, which has not helped. I do not mean that disrespectfully but they have had to ... and it has just been a shame that they are living in rabbit hutches. That is my first question, if I could have an answer to that, please.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

You are absolutely right. That is a seriously important issue. It was important before the crisis but obviously these restrictions that have forced people to spend a lot more time in their homes than

they otherwise might have liked to has highlighted the importance of that. I think there is 2 points I would make to that. The first from our side is that Andium has moved away from producing bedsits and for that part of the market it now focuses on full one-bedroom properties, which is on the basis that when we have single people who need to live in social housing they do require space to live in and enjoy themselves. With one room you cannot even have a friend round for a cup of tea and that sort of thing, which is not good enough and those people are entitled to that support. So as part of Andium's strategy that has been a conscious attempt to improve conditions for people in that situation. But in terms of the future delivery of homes, not just in the social sector but in the private sector as well, the Island Plan will have to have those principles at its core: what is the standard of these homes going to be and are they going to take into account the learning that has happened over these recent months about how people's living conditions affect their wellbeing and their health? From my early discussions with the Minister for the Environment, who ultimately is the one who leads on the Island Plan, I have certainly picked up that he is very conscious of these issues. He has said things to me off the record about things he is considering that I prefer to let him talk about rather than me, but he has privately raised some suggestions with me that show that the issue of size and amenity space is something that is on his list of considerations. So I am hopeful that when the Island Plan comes forward and sets out what those future requirements will be for new homes, that we are building homes that are fit for people to live in and have a decent and happy life, frankly, because I think we owe it to them after going through this very difficult time.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

That is lovely. Thank you very much, Minister. My other question is for you, sorry about this. It is just that you mentioned Hue Court just now and there has been a little bit of controversy about Hue Court and everybody was moved out for medical staff, they thought. You said it is back on line and it is being used and then you also said it has freed up homes. So was it for medical people or have you put non-medical staff in Hue Court at this moment?

[11:45]

The Minister for Children and Housing:

No, it is still for key workers and what we were able to do is we were able to take key workers out of homes that they were already in. For example, there were homes in Convent Court that key workers were living in, very nice homes that were refurbished to a very decent standard. We were able to move those people into Hue Court, which meant that Plaisant Court ... Convent Court is now called Plaisant Court and I keep forgetting as well. We were able to work with the homelessness charities to use some of those homes that then became empty as emergency housing, which has been our focus for the last few months. That gave us capacity, which has been really helpful because if Hue

Court had not been able to be completed and key workers were not able to enter there, we just would not have had that extra number of homes to help vulnerable Islanders.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

That is lovely. Thank you so very, very much for that honest answer.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

Chairman, I had a second question that I did not ask to the Minister. I am going back to the recovery and the Government Plan and, as we know, according to the forecast we will be missing in excess of £100 million. We all know that all departments have been sent to look at where the cuts can be made and I understand that probably your department as well, the department under your remit, has been asked where it can be made or maybe different prioritisation. Maybe something will go into 2021 or 2022, whatever has been planned for 2020. Is there anything in your department under your remit that you think will be delivered at a later date and the delivery will be postponed?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

At this point nothing is set in stone for that but it is the case that throughout the last few months a lot of the policy development work has simply not been able to happen because policy officers were redirected to COVID response measures. That was absolutely right, but it does mean that some work that otherwise would have been done has literally in some cases had nothing done on it.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

Can you please give examples of this policy work that has not been done? It is understandable but to understand which ones we are delaying.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

The biggest one from my part was the Housing Policy Development Board report that was meant to be finalised and published in April. That did not happen, firstly, because that was throughout some of the worst parts of the restrictions, which meant getting people in a room together was really difficult and not conducive to an environment where we would be able to have the important discussions on that finalisation. Also, because we were worried that we might end up producing a piece of work that looked great for the pre-COVID world but not necessarily built for the post-COVID world, because parts of the recommendations that were likely to have come out of that process were going to be on capital projects in terms of building new homes. That has been delayed. I think we are hoping to go for September now and some of those proposals on building homes will just have to be altered to take into account the context, where the Island Plan will be sitting by then, what access to funding that we need for building new homes. So that is a key obvious one that has been delayed because of that.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Going on literally to that, how have Andium and Jersey Homes Trust been affected? Have they had to alter their business plans as a result of COVID-19 in your experience to date?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Business operations have obviously had to be altered, with many staff for both Jersey Homes Trust and Andium having to work from home and do things a little bit differently to how they were before. Obviously that also means that their interaction with their tenants has been different. There has been some stuff that was not able to be continued, like some of the face-to-face meetings that they were having beforehand, stuff where they may have done visits to people's homes to discuss things have had to be done over the phone, et cetera, instead. In terms of maintenance and that sort of thing, they have had to suspend much of their non-essential maintenance works, which is obviously, of course, a concern because you want to keep up your maintenance and make sure your properties are kept in a decent standard. I think there was a bit of a worry that an effect of that could be some homes falling into a standard that we do not consider to be acceptable. But just from experience so far it does not look like that has happened, certainly for Andium anyway, from what they have reported to us. They were allowed to continue to carry on essential maintenance, obviously doing so within safety guidelines, and so they have continued to do that. They also were not able to see homes that they were due to sell during lockdown period, which again they might have worried about cash flow because of that but they are reporting to us that that has not turned out to be too bad. I think the most significant change that certainly I have witnessed from Andium delivering its operations is the fantastic way that they allocated resource and manpower to supporting the emergency housing team, which was put together at the start of this process, where they have been working side by side with my officers, with officers from the housing gateway, as part of one team to try to come up with bespoke solutions for people when they faced emergency situations. Obviously we worked closely with them before this but in that sort of team arrangement not so much, but they absolutely without hesitation were prepared to offer resource and manpower to that, which we are incredibly grateful for.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Thank you. The Affordable Housing Gateway report I presume is linked to the Housing Policy Development Board report and will be delayed. Do you anticipate a long delay on that as well?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

That report itself is not connected to the Housing Policy Development Board in that it was started before that process. It had produced a report, it had made recommendations and I had responded to those recommendations. We had started to look at the development of some of the things that it

was talking about. The gateway itself has more or less been suspended through the last few months where the focus has purely been on emergency housing cases, which does not necessarily correspond with the banding system. The operation of the gateway has been different because of that. There were things in that report, recommendations for changes to the housing gateway that we still anticipate we want to make like, for example, handing over the management of the affordable purchase part of the gateway to Andium, because Andium is the leader on this anyway. They do a really good job and they have got the expertise, but we have not been working on drawing up an agreement with them to do that service because we have been so focused on other things. So that sort of thing will be delayed. They had also recommended in that report establishing a housing advice service. That was something we were in the really, really early stages of in terms of developing before the crisis hit and very little has practically gone on on that while people have been diverted elsewhere, but the experience of running the emergency housing team has presented itself with some opportunities to learn about what that service may look like when it is set up. So at this point I am not 100 per cent sure what the timeline is for that. We had hoped to have that delivered and in place by the end of this year but that may well be unlikely.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Yes, I understand. Moving on to new affordable housing sites, which will need to be identified in the next Island Plan scheme, what additional actions will you take to support affordable home ownership for households who cannot access appropriate housing in the open market?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

One of my perpetual nightmares in this job has been pushing for States-owned sites to be fully handed over to our housing providers, predominantly Andium but not just Andium. I know the trusts are really keen to play their part as well. To get full agreement where we have got a site that we know is perfect for housing, that we are not using to capacity right now or even using at all, to just get that agreement that we can hand it over and then Andium can get on with it or one of our housing trusts can get on with it and deliver homes on there can be extremely difficult sometimes because of the politics. The biggest example of that in this term of office was the Ann Court issue with a perfect site for housing but some people had a different idea of what it could be used for. That is still a problem with some other sites. The obvious one for me is the St. Saviour's Hospital site, which is in my view a terrible location for a hospital but a brilliant location for housing and unfortunately there are people who have the precise opposite view to me on that. So it can be difficult getting the ink on the paper and signed on the dotted line to approve those transfers and I continue to push for that. But hopefully what the next part of the Government Plan will present us with, because of the difficulties there will be with public finances and Government spending on various things, having sites that we know that are costing us money to maintain but which we are not getting best use out of, will hopefully be an extra incentive to get rid of those sites so we are not having to spend money

on the maintenance of them and instead handing it to an agency that is prepared to roll their sleeves up and get some homes for people to live in built on them. So that is what I keep pushing for.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I am sure the Connétable of St. Saviour would like to see something happening at St. Saviour's Hospital.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

Yes, I would, and providing it has a school and shops around there to stop people from having to travel all the way through St. Saviour, I would be absolutely thrilled. Something needs to be done.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Absolutely, Constable, and I give my commitment to you that if the future of that site is to fall within my remit rather than a hospital being built on it then I absolutely commit to consulting with you and your team to make sure that the community's voice is at the heart of that process.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

Well, it might not be me because you will have to push it through in 2 years, because I am not standing again, but as long as there is a school and to stop people from travelling too far, I am sure you will have the backing of whoever comes after me in my seat.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Thank you, Sadie.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

In terms of affording an affordable housing supply, you mentioned you will send us a list of what is going on, but clearly Samarès Nurseries is in build. Where are we with that at the moment? Do you have a timeline on that?

[12:00]

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Phases 1 and 2 have already been delivered. That included 15 for first-time buyers and 86 for rental. I do not know if they are 100 per cent sold and rented at this point but they are certainly close to it and we were very lucky that some of those came on line in the early stages of this crisis, which meant that some of those homes were able to be used for emergency moves, which was very helpful. I know that people have been buying those homes and I have seen some very lovely pictures of families standing outside the front doors with the keys who were really pleased that that

opportunity was there for them. Phase 3 continues, so that is to deliver purely for rental homes as part of that phase, which will largely be 2-bedroom apartments but there will be some 3-bedroom houses and a small number of one-bedroom apartments as well. That is due for completion in August of this year, so looking good at this point but if there are any delays for whatever reason we can make that clear.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Similarly, have we got movement on the Ann Street brewery site, Summerland and Robin Hood sites?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

The Robin Hood site is due for completion at the end of this year. That is for 5 3-bedroom houses, which will all be for rental, which is important because that is an area that we do need more 3-bedroom homes. Summerland is not due for completion until the final quarter of next year and that is a combination of rental and first-time buyers but predominantly for rental. The Ann Street brewery site is still quite a long way off. That is not due for completion until the beginning of 2024. That is a very significant project and when I have been involved in discussions about it there is potential for consideration as to what exactly goes in that plot. We can provide lots of homes on there, which would be great, but there have also been discussions about what green space we can provide on that land. There was some ideas of providing, which is slightly difficult to imagine, some sort of woodland feature there, because we have got open parks nearby but something a little bit different in terms of green space could be there. There have also been some considerations about amenity facilities, community facilities there as well, which are not quite decided at this point but there is still a lot of time before that project requires spades to go in the ground and the current parts of it to be demolished. So there is still a long way to go on that one but it is a significant site so a lot of attention is going to it.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Would you suggest that perhaps in the light of the pandemic and different requirements, specifically with regard to open space within the units, that the plans may need to be revised so that maybe we should be moving away from amenity facilities, which we have not been able to use recently, to more open space within the units themselves? I do not know, Andy, if you have got any thoughts with your planning background on that?

Group Director for Regulation, Growth, Housing and Environment:

Yes, certainly. I think that one of the key bits of guidance we are waiting for via policy at the moment is new residential space standards and parking guidelines. That work was progressing pre-COVID. That talks about space standards, both internally and externally, around residential properties. I do

think it is a very live debate and one of the things we need to do in the wash-up and review of what COVID has meant for us is to look at those sort of standards inside properties and what the future of them should be. I have mentioned home working previously and some people have been able to home work relatively easily because of space within their properties but some have not. I think what we will see is demand for more flexible houses whereby you can have study areas, you can have eating areas, you can have things such as that. That is a key bit but I think the key thing practically is to look at the housing space standards that the Minister for Environment is due to publish.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Moving on to key workers and their access to accommodation that was identified in the report last year, once again with the impact of COVID obviously a factor in attracting or being able to retain these key workers and perhaps in the light of fewer key workers being here at the moment and maybe a change in the future, what are you doing with regard to mitigating that demand for their accommodation?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Some of the practical things that we were getting on with anyway in terms of delivering key worker accommodation - Hue Court I mentioned before being the obvious example there - have not really been affected. But it is the case that the policy development on this has pretty much ground to a halt because of policy officers being diverted to other areas as well. So there were bits of work that were being done alongside the Housing Policy Development Board report work that again have sort of ground to a halt. There were things we needed to do in terms of having a clear statement on what constituted a key worker, because key workers are not always employed directly by the Government. They can be contractors as well. Some of that would have required changes in legislation to deliver the concept of key worker accommodation in a wider housing offer. A working group was working on some of these issues but that has slowed down and it has not recommenced at this point.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Clearly there has been inability for key workers to come into the Island on a regular basis. Is this giving us a chance, shall we say, to take a deep breath on how we approach key workers and if the need is as genuine as originally thought? Do you have any views on key workers?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Within the definition of key worker, that obviously features lots of different types of jobs and the ones that I am most closely connected to are the jobs in children's services, social workers, et cetera. It is the case that people in those sorts of jobs have had to work differently. But my ambition on the children's side for those key worker positions was to reduce our reliance on agency staff and aim to have a more permanent workforce and that is a permanent workforce in Jersey, with Jersey as their

home, Jersey as the community which they know and understand. Part of that work involves on-Island training to support people to get those qualifications to work in those services and those will be Jersey people who may well have no need for key worker accommodation support because they may be young people who were already renting in the private sector and were perfectly happy with that. It might be people who were still living with their families while they saved up for a deposit on the open market and were happy with that or had a local partner as well who they were living with and that was fine. So that can reduce the reliance on a key worker accommodation offer because it is just ordinary Jersey people who are happy with what they have, or to bring people from outside the Island to take on these permanent positions in Jersey, which means establishing a residence in Jersey and so we would have to provide different offers to them in terms of landing accommodation. So, somewhere they have got to be able to move in when they first arrive here and know that they can live there for 6 months or whatever and then find their own housing, and that will be in the private sector and they can do that and be perfectly happy with that, and also thinking about other incentives as well for more permanent housing offers to them. As I said, you can reduce the reliance on a key worker accommodation offer with a more stable workforce and with better on-Island training opportunities, which are all things that we are looking at, but it is always going to be the case that from time to time we will need to bring people from outside the Island and giving them a helping hand with their housing situation is fundamental to making sure we get the best people.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Thank you for that. Going to social housing, the 90 per cent rent policy was adopted by the States in 2013. With the likely effect of private rentals declining, how will that adjust the policy review, do you think?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

As in my policy review that was going on?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Yes.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

My position on that policy is well known in that I am not a supporter of it and want to see an alternative to it. Work was going on with that and the Housing Policy Development Board was due to say something about it. The homelessness review was also due to say something about it. So that remains an agenda item but the delivery of it is still up in the air a little bit because we do not quite know where we sit with the next part of the Government Plan in any event, so some of the policy work there has not gone on recently. You referred to the likely effect of bringing down rental costs. I really hope you are right and that is an effect of this crisis. If that does have an effect on bringing

down rental prices then, hallelujah, I will be pleased with that. Of course, if that then has an impact on reducing average rent levels then it is the case that our social housing providers, the rule they have to abide by, can charge up to 90 per cent of the market rate not above it. So if they undertake their analyses of the rents they are charging and making sure those rents are in line with policy and it turns out the rents are above 90 per cent because the market rate has gone down, then they have to adjust accordingly because that is what the policy is.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

Minister, who would monitor all this? Is it anybody from the Government side will monitor, undertake and just check on them?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Not formally. They have their internal procedures for doing that and I know Andium uses external expertise to help them work out that they are doing the right thing. That system in itself I do not see any problems with. It appears to be okay to me, but what I would undertake to do is if we get signs of what the impact on rental costs are because of the crisis then I would, I think, be very keen to speak to those housing providers and say: "You will have noticed this is going on. I would like you to explain to me how you are responding to it" and provide me with confidence that they are doing what they need to be doing.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Are you expecting an increase in homelessness either now or after the freeze as we presently have until 30th September comes to a conclusion? How far have you got with the greater co-ordination of work between the agencies involved in the provision of accommodation and housing-related support?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

An emergency housing team was set up at the outset of this and they have been working extremely hard trying to support people facing those emergency situations and lots of those are situations ... some of it has been people who have been returning to Jersey from outside the Island and have needed to self-isolate and therefore could not have gone to the accommodation that otherwise they could have gone to when they arrived here. So that is an example of something that would not have been an issue before but has been an issue because of this, people who have presented themselves to us who have been in homes that are unsafe for whatever reason, whether that is to do with the quality of the property or because of living with vulnerable people, having to shelter and that sort of thing.

[12:15]

So a huge amount of work has gone into trying to support those cases and working with other agencies has been a fundamental part of that, the housing providers themselves and also the charities, the Shelter Trust and Women's Refuge in particular. We have been trying to increase capacity for them so that they can provide their support to more people. That has been a real learning curve going through that process because we did not have our homelessness review complete at the beginning of this crisis and it is only very recently that I have had a draft copy of the report that has been produced for that, which I do not think has been signed off yet and is not ready for publication. So we had a review going on and then a crisis thrown into the mix that we were not expecting that has forced us to act and forced us to act without necessarily having a longer-term position ready yet. So that means there are issues we are going to have to think about. As the health crisis starts to diminish and we still have an economic crisis, there are still going to be people for whom homelessness is going to be an issue. At some point courts will be allowed to start processing evictions and those may not be evictions that are anything to do with coronavirus, they may be to do with completely different things. There will be people who have incurred debts during this time and are going to struggle to afford housing. I am particularly concerned about people who do not have 5 years' residency or 10 years' residency who have suffered during this period and for whom that is going to be difficult. So that is why I said in the States debate yesterday and the day before that the whole Government have to continue to provide support to people so they do not face destitution, so they do not face homelessness, because it is difficult providing them with solutions, particularly when supply is an issue. We are keen to not step down that emergency housing team when it is deemed that the health part of this crisis has dissipated. I think we know that at least a version of that service has to continue into the future and we need to start thinking about how we can evolve that into something that will meet the needs of people when some of the protections that are in place now fall away or when people start suffering from the economic crisis or start suffering worse from the economic crisis that we are facing. So it is going to be difficult. I think we have reacted very well up until this point and people have worked very hard to find innovative solutions to difficult cases but it is still going to be a big issue over the coming months and that is why we have got to be vigilant.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

It has been reported that there is an increase of almost 30 per cent of people who use the Shelter Trust services and Shelter Trust indicated that with job loss, marriage breakups, financial issues - eviction you added - we will definitely see an increase in people without homes. In the short term we do not have time to develop the policy. Policy will be postponed because of the reasons that you mentioned. What plans do we have in the short term for the next 2, 3, 6 months to address this issue at a practical level?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

I have mentioned that we had worked to increase capacity for the homelessness charities. So they themselves have got the ability to support more people than they were able to support before and part of that is because of the direct support that Government have been able to facilitate there. One thing we have done, which in some people's eyes is controversial, is that we have not yet restarted ordinary home moves under the housing gateway. So when the health advice came through that it was unsafe for people to move homes, we just suspended the gateway and we were only dealing with emergency cases. The health advice has now changed and it says that home moves are now allowed provided they are done under the safety guidelines, so in the private sector they have returned to allowing people to move home. We have not done that in the social sector yet. It is the case that we are not processing ordinary housing gateway moves even though the health advice says to us that it is theoretically safe to do so. We have chosen to not do that yet so that our focus remains on emergency cases, so we do not end up making a backlog of emergency cases worse because we are simultaneously trying to deal with the day-to-day business. So we have tried to stop that and that will upset some people because there are people who are living in homes at the moment that are not ideal for them, but they are living in a home, they are safe and they will continue to be safe. It just will not necessarily be what is ideal for their situation, so we have had to say sorry, for now we are not going to be focusing on that. It is purely those who are facing homelessness who may be unsafe otherwise, so that is our focus now and it will be until we feel that it is okay and safe to start returning to business as usual.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

I would like to follow the comment that you made about difficulties and challenges to deal with people who lost their homes for various reasons if they are under 5 or even under 10 years. Minister, I am aware of several cases that were very challenging to resolve because a valuable property on the market for unqualified is limited and they do not have access to social housing so they fell somewhere in the middle. What are the plans to address this issue, if any? I understand that it is really, really difficult and it is on different levels but this brought to light the seriousness of the situation.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

You are absolutely right and it is one of the reasons that I hate our housing qualifications system. It just does not sit well on my conscience that people are treated differently based on how long they have lived in the Island. I just think there are moral issues with that system but it is the system we have got and it has caused problems through the last few months. In terms of people who have come to the emergency housing team for support, some without housing qualifications have been more difficult to solve because they do not have housing qualifications than others who may have been able to be housed in social housing and dealt with in a relatively more simple way. We put out

a call for landlords and letting agents who have unqualified accommodation to get in touch with us and we will basically work with them to get tenants to go and live in the homes they have got in these emergency circumstances. I could not tell you off the top of my head what the take-up was like on that but we did try to increase supply but, as I know you are well aware, it is a very, very difficult issue.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

Are there any changes on the policy level that the Minister would suggest or bring forward?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Well, if I had my way then we would not have this discriminatory system in the first place. I am aware of some cases where some leeway was able to be given to get people into homes and there are ways that that can be done through the Population Office but they are not standard and they are not easy to do either. I hope that this experience demonstrates that access to housing is a fundamental human right and we do need a better system than the qualification system, which can make it difficult. It is not an area of work that I am extremely involved in but the Population Policy Development Board looking at alternatives for an immigration system could present us with opportunities where there can be more equality in that housing market for people who live in the Island, but that ultimately falls under other Ministers' remits.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

First of all, Minister, I would like to thank you and your team for operating emergency accommodation because they are extremely helpful in dealing with private cases. The last question is: what lessons have been learned through the 2-month operation of the emergency accommodation team?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

The first lesson is to echo the first point you have made, which is that the people who work here are absolutely brilliant, who really go above and beyond and have a creativity that enables them to come up with innovative solutions sometimes. Also there were agencies outside of government that were very generous in terms of getting in contact with us to try to provide what support they could when they had homes that were able to be used. That was a nice thing to be reminded of through this. I think the primary lesson to learn from it is that to deal with some of these issues you do require a mobilisation of resource to be able to help these people. The business as usual framework we had beforehand of on the government side having a housing gateway and on the charity side having some homelessness shelters is not good enough. There is a requirement for clearer working together and partnerships between different agencies and a dedication of resource to that to make it happen and have somewhere where people who need help can go to get that help. I mentioned the homelessness review that was going on and that I have seen a draft report. I am not exactly

sure what the timescale is at this point but I hope that a report will be able to be presented at some point in the near future that will suggest ways in which that working can be done in the future so that we can help people who need it.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Thank you, Minister. The COVID-19 temporary arrangements for rental tenants, there has been enhanced guidance produced, which is now published on the Government website. While landlords have been pressed to make more concessions in terms of not being able to evict tenants and holding down rent levels, they are also being asked to contribute more in terms of licensing. How will you balance the needs of tenants with the needs of landlords - and I appreciate there are lots of landlords with lots of different background - to make a living?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

If I could sum up my philosophy on this in one sentence - and some people will shriek with horror as they hear this - my philosophical view is that housing is a human right, making a profit out of housing is not a human right. So my focus is on delivering what I think will enable as many people as possible to have decent access to housing so that they can live a happy life and are not particularly concerned about seeing changes on the market and investment side of that, which may well see changes in how housing in the private sector is delivered and there may well be some changes that some people who are currently invested in that market find inconvenient. If I were being glib about it I might suggest that perhaps other investment opportunities may be more appropriate for them, because the primary purpose of our housing market is delivering homes for people not bending over backwards to meet the needs of investors if their interests are diametrically opposed to the interests of people who need homes.

[12:30]

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Would you agree that we need the private sector to produce rental homes to complement what is being produced by Andium and the various other bodies? Would we survive without them and should they be encouraged in any way, notwithstanding a need to cover their costs, if you like? I am not suggesting they need to make an enormous profit but to complement our housing provision offering, do we need to encourage them in the same way?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

To produce homes, absolutely. Of course it is the case that our social housing providers do engage the services of the private sector to deliver the production of those homes, but there is a difference between producing a new home and acquiring a home that already exists and letting it out. They

are very different services and I think sometimes the 2 services get linked together in a way that is inappropriate. There are plenty of different models of rental markets around the world that look very, very different to each other and what we have got here. I personally do not shy away from seeing changes in the letting of private sector properties, which is why I have been a staunch supporter of the licensing scheme, which I think puts us on a better footing for professionalising private sector landlord services and improving the quality of homes. I know some people are resentful of the fact that they may have to pay a fee to be a part of that system, but I think that it is not really too much to ask that landlords who are providing access to homes, which are a fundamental human right, ought to pay a fee to have the right to take part in that market when currently there are greater fees for running an ice cream van than there are for being a landlord.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Thank you. Indeed, I do not think there is much doubt about the fact there is a need for a registration system and the panel is dealing with that in a different place. I think what I am keen to hear is that there is enthusiasm and support for encouraging private landlords to remain in the market provided their profit aspirations are reasonable and acceptable to what Government might expect. Would you agree with that sentiment?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Encouragement is not the word I would use, to be perfectly honest. It is an opportunity that is out there for people to take advantage of if they are able to, if it is appropriate for them, but if an individual chooses to leave the market because they just do not like the outlook of it at a given point, they can very easily be replaced by another investor or housing provider that will be able to do just as good a job. So, to be perfectly honest, I do not think it is my job as Minister for Housing to encourage investors in that way. I think it is my job to encourage a delivery system that meets the needs of people who own homes and that does not necessarily mean coming up with policies to make the investment attractive if I think that there are other ways of doing it that will be just as good at delivering those homes for people. I would not expect a Minister for Health to say it is their job to make private sector healthcare provision an attractive investment. Their focus should be on access to healthcare, which will not necessarily mean encouraging private sector investors who, to be perfectly honest, in most cases do not need the Government to be encouraging them. They will just get on with it and do what is right for them.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Yes. I suppose put in a different way: would you suggest that it is for Government to provide a framework within which private landlords should work to enable them to complement the supply of housing units in our marketplace where there is clearly a shortage?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Yes. I think we have found a form of words we can both agree on. Yes.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

That is good.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

Just a couple of things, because you do have a very difficult job, Senator, and I quite understand. Do you not think that if we had an immigration law that helped stem the population coming into the Island it would be fair for everybody? We seem to have an open door policy to allow everybody in but when the poor souls get here they do not have a job or they do not have a home. A job is always available. I am sorry, there is always work somewhere along the line but the homes are not so easy to come by. Do you not think if we had a proper immigration policy it would help your situation?

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Yes, absolutely. You have made the point here, but also Deputy Gardiner made this point, that there are lots of difficulties within the current framework in terms of making sure there are enough decent homes for everybody to live in and making sure people have got access and at the same time making sure that we have got the right skills we need in Jersey to work in our economy and services. That is why I have always supported moving towards a population policy that makes sure that we do have control over how people are moving to the Island and the terms on which they are moving to the Island to make sure that we can focus on those areas where we do need immigration for particular areas but ensuring that we are able to deliver housing, school places, the size of our healthcare provision, et cetera, everything that means people will have a good quality of life when they are here. In the past I have spoken about some of the virtues of the Guernsey system, which I know is not a fashionable thing for a Jersey politician to do. I think some of the early stuff that the Population Policy Development Board came up with resembled some of the good stuff that they have in Guernsey that has enabled them to not suffer from the housing shortage in the way that we have. Yes, it is a really important area that would make my job a lot easier and, more importantly, make life a lot easier for people out there in our community, but it is an extremely difficult political issue and I hope that those for whom this political responsibility falls in their remit will get back on track as soon as possible so, as the States of Jersey, we can deal with it.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

While you are on about people's remit, do you not think it would be much easier if we trained local people to do some of the jobs that we would not have to import? There are always going to have to be people that we have to import, I am not that cuckoo, but there are jobs that could be done by locals but they just do not have the training or, if they have the training, they are bypassed. When

you are at one of your Council meetings, have a go at whoever the powers that be are and say: "Do you not think we could look local?" Most of them would have homes anyway or some of these youngsters who are locals and cannot get homes would have a chance of being able to stay in the Island where they were born to have a home.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Yes. I mentioned earlier on that there is a couple of areas where we have made some good progress on that in terms of nursing and social work where we do now have on-Island training facilities. I know some of the young people who have been through the nurse training have just been over the moon at having that opportunity and it is great for our Island as well to have people in Jersey have those opportunities for such a vital part of our public service. I think that with the economic recovery programme that will come it is clear that there will have to be a decent emphasis on skills, not just education for young people but also lifelong learning for people who at a certain point in their career may want to change career or may have to change career because the nature of their job has changed or it has become obsolete or something like. It is quite funny how 2 of the biggest problems we face as a society is that, number 1, we have got loads of things that need to be done and, and, number 2, we have got loads of people who are not doing anything. Those are 2 problems that with a bit of creative thinking hopefully could solve themselves and if we can direct people through education and training then we build up those skills on Island. We do not then have to be as reliant on people coming into the Island and us having to make up for that with more homes, more places in schools, more hospitals, et cetera, which can be difficult to do on a small Island.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

Thank you.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Agreed. Inna, anything more from you?

Deputy I. Gardiner:

No, thank you.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Minister and your team, thank you very much for presenting to us today. We appreciate what you have said and I am grateful, Minister, you are always fully abreast of your brief. Thank you very much.

The Connétable of St. Saviour:

Yes, he is, fabulous. Thank you very much.

The Minister for Children and Housing:

Thank you. I appreciate that and thank you for the work you are doing.

[12:41]