



# Environment, Housing and Infrastructure Scrutiny

## Panel

### Quarterly Public Hearing

## Witness: The Minister for Housing and Communities

Tuesday, 9 March 2021

#### **Panel:**

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

Connétable J.E. Le Maistre of Grouville (Deputy Chair)

Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier

Deputy S.G. Luce of St. Martin

Deputy G.J. Truscott of St. Brelade

#### **Witnesses:**

Deputy R. Labey of St. Helier, The Minister for Housing and Communities

Ms. S. Duhamel, Head of Policy, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance

Mr. T. Millar, Senior Policy Officer, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance

Ms. M.C. Hannigan, Private Secretary to the Minister for Housing and Communities

[14:30]

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

Good afternoon, Minister, and welcome to this meeting of the Environment, Housing and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel. The panel consists of myself, Connétable Mike Jackson, Deputy Chair Connétable John Le Maistre, Deputy Inna Gardiner, Deputy Steve Luce and Deputy Truscott. Connétable Le Sueur-Rennard of St. Saviour is unable to attend this afternoon. So, over to you and your team.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Thank you very much, Connétable. So, I am Russell Labey, the new Minister for Housing and Communities, and with me today ... do you want me just to go round the room?

**Senior Policy Officer, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance:**

I am Tim Millar, Policy Officer covering housing and S.P.P.P. (Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance).

**Head of Policy, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance:**

I am Sue Duhamel, Head of Policy at S.P.P.P.

**Private Secretary:**

Marie Claire Hannigan, private secretary to the Minister.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

There we go.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Easily done, thank you very much. Minister, firstly, congratulations on your appointment to the role of Minister for Housing and Communities. As the communities remit is a new facet under the ministerial remit for clarity purposes, how would you define your ministerial role and what aspects would you be held accountable for?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I have asked to be left to concentrate on learning the ropes with the housing part of the portfolio for now. Until I get my head around all of that, I am not ready to move on to the community section. I think it is quite interesting picking up mid-stream from the previous Minister. Obviously, Senator Mézec as Minister was involved with the setting up of the Housing Policy Development Board and will have worked since early 2019 or 2018 on it. It is a very good document. I know that you have seen sight of it. I have to learn the ropes very, very quickly because I was not involved in all the preparation of that policy but I will be involved in the implementation of a lot of those policies. I guess that is how I will be judged at the end of it with how many of those we were able to actually implement and action. We have just over a year left of this term, of course, and some of those policies we want to prepare for and have them ready further down the line. Maybe it will take some policies a couple of years or 3 and some we will try to get through in this term.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Have you identified any particular issues with regard to either housing or communities and have you decided how you might plan to address those issues at this stage?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes. The most I think immediate priorities would be seeing the successful implementation of the new Housing Advisory Service, which I know scrutiny will have been kept abreast of over the last few months. This is an incredibly positive initiative as far as I can see. We know as States Members how often in our inbox we get people asking for help with problems with housing. Even as States Members it is sometimes difficult to know where exactly to direct these complaints or these problems. Since I have become the Minister for Housing and Communities my inbox is regularly filling up with people with their problems and issues and wanting help. So this is going to be a one-stop-shop to get people to the right help. I think it is going to be an advance. I think it is going to be very user friendly. It is soft launched at the moment, initially through a website but that will not be the only portal. You will be able to speak to somebody and hopefully get your problem directed to the right place. I think what is especially important about this in conjunction with my second priority, which is the implementation of the homelessness strategy, the Housing Advisory Service is a way of trying to nip a potential case of homelessness in the bud and get people the right help and support, show them respect and give them hope that they might be able to have their housing issue sorted before it comes to them being roofless or having to sofa surf. So these are twin initiatives. They very much go together. One feeds off the other. I know the Scrutiny Panel will have looked through and been very cognisant of the homelessness strategy. I think that is a very important first for Jersey to recognise what homelessness is - it is not just rooflessness - and to work with all the agencies. Very much the third sector have inputted into that strategy, which I think is why it is such an important document. You can see it is a work of dedication and care on the part of the authors and I commend them for it. So, those are my first 2 immediate priorities, to see those implemented and on their way.

**Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier:**

Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for coming for your first public hearing. I appreciate that it is a new role and the community remit still has not been defined. I would like to ask your views because in my head when I thought about housing, and we have the highly populated area of St. Helier, the balance between housing and community space is required. Is it something you think will be within your remit to find the community space and community hubs which will be built within the housing developments?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes, as far as I can. I think my political career, if you can call it that, from 2014 has been defined by my fights to get amenity space and community space and green space alongside new development. Sometimes we have succeeded; sometimes not so. I think since, for instance, my La Collette battle

Andium perceptively have changed in the way that they now approach a new development in a community by going to the community at the early stage, at the drawing board stage, and having meaningful consultations with the neighbourhood and open days; you will have seen them. I think that is a very, very important step and I think that has improved relations between communities and Andium Homes. So, that is a positive that came out of it. In my own electoral district, from Green Street all the way through to Gas Place, in the pipeline there is maybe over 1,000 new units proposed. I know that the Minister for the Environment is also keen to make sure that all these units have the right amenities. We think about schools and youth centres. We need a youth centre in that part of town. I think on day 2 I was asking what the plans are for this. I very much believe that it is not just for me to push for housing, housing, housing, although that is incredibly important, it is also the balance and the mix with what communities need. I will do my best with my planning background to keep an eye on that as much as possible.

**Deputy I. Gardiner:**

I will follow up with something else. Again, it is in my mind but just because it is a new remit where nobody knows which way it will be going. Again, it is coming back to the community. When we are looking at the care model and when we are talking about delivering care in the community, do you think you will be part of the group who will look into delivering this in the community as the Minister for Housing and Communities?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes, I think that is inevitable. I think there is huge potential here for working in the community, as you say, with the delivery of healthcare, that often talked about model which has not seemed to come on stream as yet. From my earliest time in the States I was convinced of the benefit to as far as possible keeping people in their own homes when they are not so well. I think the parishes have a really important role to play in this as well and some I know are already very much working towards that. There are lots of community initiatives and I just want to be there to champion and perhaps pull things together when that side of my job starts to ... Deputy Martin in Social Security is already doing fantastic work. Deputy Guida is, too. So I do not want to charge in and take over. That is not the idea. I just want to help and encourage and if I can be a champion then be so.

**Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Thank you. I look forward to understanding the remit of the Minister for Housing and Communities.

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

Good afternoon, Minister. Minister, you obviously have a huge amount of experience on the planning panel and you are now in the housing ministry. We are talking about these extra people who are going to be living in St. Helier and the North of Town Master Plan, which you will be hugely

familiar with. Do you agree with me that the way of combining the outdoor amenity space, green open space, and an increased number of people has to be building taller and that we have by and large learnt the lessons of the past when it comes to building high rise but it is a way forward for us in the future in St. Helier?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Well, I remember one of the first meetings I had when I started out on the Planning Committee in 2014, when you were the Minister for Planning, Deputy. I remember you floating the notion of a great big tower block to put lots of people in. On paper, you would think that is a no-brainer, but in reality St. Helier is not a high-rise town. That is why a 5 or 6-storey limit was put in place. I would just say be careful what you wish for in terms of going very high. Skyscrapers, as it were, are often not very nice places to live or be around when you are on ground level. They often cause a lot of wind. They block out a lot of light. So, this has to be approached incredibly carefully. We are straying into the Minister for Planning and Environment's portfolio, but while it seems like a good idea, I think you have to be very, very careful about it. What I think would help, because we can see, can we not, every time Andium have a site in St. Helier they want to put as many units, they want to develop that site to its full potential in terms of the mass and scale and the amount of units that they can put on to there. Of course, that is in the Island Plan. There is guidance there to say we need to exploit these sites to their fullest potential. Then, of course, you get the competing tension of neighbours who are already there, already living there, and there are laws in the Island Plan to help protect their rights, too. So it is the balance of trying to get as many units as possible but also being as polite as possible to your neighbours in terms of what is being erected. I think a really good initiative that will be coming through is to have strategic co-ordination of what is in the pipeline so we can see through all agencies and the private sector as well what is coming through, as well as looking at what is needed in terms of one, 2 and 3-bedroom properties. My feeling is that that will help, but also if that pipeline stretched further into the future it might help take the pressure off a little bit. If I can explain, for example, if we take a site like Les Quennevais School, we know that Health has Les Quennevais School as an overflow for Overdale while the hospital is built and that will be some 5 years. But if Andium or one of the trusts were to know that there was going to be a housing component on that site of the old school ... there might be 80 per cent housing, 20 per cent community stuff. That is, of course, to be decided, it is not my decision. We are pretty safe to say there is going to be a housing component on there. I think it would be a good idea if Andium or whoever it was that was going to develop it had knowledge of that earlier so they can do all the planning. If it goes to appeal they can do all that so that when it is ready in 5 years' time the plans are oven-ready to get building. That is a really preeminent point.

[14:45]

I know things have been held up because of COVID and the hospital, but now we have more certainty on the hospital, now that with COVID we hope we see the light at the end of the tunnel, I feel it is part of my role to push for our affordable housing providers to be given earlier certainty on new sites.

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

If I could just come back to you on that, Minister, you talk about longevity and having plans and moving forward. Does it surprise you when you hear people saying, all these people who are going to have to live in the north of town when the North of Town Master Plan has been in existence for quite some time and the sites that are being developed were identified over a decade ago?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes, and I think we are not doing ourselves any favours with this. We should plan further into the future. The reason I went down that track, Deputy, is because you asked me about building high. I think if we could see further into the future with more certainty about where we were going to put the housing, it might slightly take the pressure off to do something drastic. We might not need to go as high if we knew we had the certainty of sites coming on stream in 5 or 6 years' time.

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

Yes, we have got away from my subject, really. You are painting me a little bit more extremist than I would like to be, or felt to be anyway. The question I was looking to get you to answer was really around building 6, 8 ... not skyscrapers, but the question was around building higher in order to free up more green and open and amenity space for those people who have to live there and around creating space for people in town, creating green open places, creating pedestrian walkways and accesses for bikes without cars and things like that. But I will leave it there for now because we have lots of questions to get through.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Just picking up from your earlier point, Minister, while it might not be possible to fully implement a scheme or project within your Government term and lots of these things are very long term, what steps would you take to ensure that pertinent work could continue for the longer term?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I think the new strategic role there is funding already in the Government Plan for it. It is going to be seen as quite high level, a very high level. So, that is one of my earliest priorities, to get that in place, because I think that is going to help and that is a good first step.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

What will your approach or process be to ensure that these projects you have mentioned will come to fruition within the short term that you have left?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Well, I think, Connétable, having been in this job now for just 3 weeks, I have tried to meet as many of the agencies as possible and just get a feel myself, get a feel for the situation and where I can be most effective and most useful and where I can use, if I have any, powers of persuasion and some greased wheels if I can. I do think that I want to make headway in giving Andium and other providers, the trusts perhaps too, more certainty that they have some sites coming through. I think I am going to be helped by the fact that now we know where the hospital is going to go, that frees up a lot. I do take Deputy Luce's point earlier on. Do not forget the other thing that holds up our developments very often is planning issues. The higher you go, the more planning issues you are likely to encounter. It all knits together, does it not? If we can have more certainty, we might not need to go as high, but the point he makes about the amenities I absolutely and totally agree with 100 per cent.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

So, in light of what you are saying and what you are hoping to achieve, what might you do differently to your predecessor to further progress the work in these various areas?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Senator Mézec. Politics is a funny old game and he has done an incredible amount of work. I think people are going to be very interested when the Policy Development Board housing policy development document is published. That will happen very soon. I can see the areas where Senator Mézec was pushing for and I have picked up the baton and I am going to run with it. I am going to hope to implement them. The Policy Development Board that we talk about so much now because it is going to inform everything the department does, it was a very broad church. Not only Senator Mézec was on it, we, of course, had the former Greffier chairing it. We had Connétable Le Bailly of St. Mary, lots of other States Members and lay members. So it was a very, very broad church, very wide spectrum of views. I think it is a credit to them that they were able to reach unanimity on what is it, 9 or 10 recommendations, complete unanimity in that group of people. That is a real achievement and I think it is a testament to how valuable this document might be.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Good. Affordable housing, Minister, on your appointment to the role you highlighted in your speech to the Assembly the longstanding housing crisis which Jersey is facing. You expressed that resolving the crisis would not solely depend on solving Jersey's housing supply challenges but would require Government assistance as well. In your view, how would you define Jersey's housing crisis?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I was having the very same conversation with the new chairman of Andium Homes just the other day. I do not know if you have had a chance to meet him yet; eminently qualified, was running planning in England during the Gordon Brown Government, I think, and the Blair Government. He is a really exciting appointment for Andium Homes. When that phrase came up, I said: "I would like to move away from the phrase 'housing crisis' because it is so negative." Now, this is not to be unrealistic. In my inbox just now popped up an email from somebody saying: "I am in rented accommodation. I want to buy. I cannot afford to save the deposit because my rent is so high." Now, I am guessing that you will have received those emails. We all have. That is one thing where I really feel we need to listen to those and try to find solutions. As you will remember, in my ignorance in that first speech to get this job I was banging on about not only supply but helping people to buy. Affordability continues to be the preeminent policy challenge of housing across all sectors. What people are earning is not keeping pace with what people are having to fork out for a home. That is a worry. So we are already helping. I do not want anyone to think that I am not completely cognisant of the massive challenges that we have and that people have in this Island in buying their own home. We have policies suggested to us in the new Housing Policy Development Board report and we will be examining all of them. They suggest that perhaps we have different models for assisting people with buying houses. The parish have some very successful schemes of shared ownership. The S.o.J.D.C. (States of Jersey Development Company) had an interesting scheme where you could buy some of those apartments in the Jersey College for Girls off plan and pay for your deposit over 2 years, which helped. We know that Andium have their own affordable schemes, too. This is going to be a massive player, this issue of affordability, and we are all on it. The team are aware of it. There is a sum of money put aside for it. So, it is about how do we help people with deposits and how do we help them get on the housing ladder. It is not for everyone and if they have to rent because they cannot buy, we want to make renting a really positive experience and there is work to be done on that, too.

**Deputy G.J. Truscott of St. Brelade:**

Congratulations, by the way, Deputy Labey, well deserved I might add. Just regarding heritage buildings, they often stand in the way of new developments. You and I were fighting the cause for many a building over 6 years on Planning. What is your view going forward? Should we loosen or tighten the rules with regard to saving or demolishing historic buildings?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I absolutely think that we should not relax the rules on listed buildings. That is my nature and that is in my blood. Once they are gone, they are gone for ever, and it is damaging to our Island identity and our character and we should not be doing it. I think, again, that is an issue that can take a long

time in the planning process if you are wanting to demolish a listed building rather than refurb it, where the Planning Committee has traditionally looked more favourably on schemes which do look after listed buildings. A leopard does not change its spots and I cannot change my spots on that one because I think the Island's heritage is very important. We like to live next to it. It is always more characterful and charming if we can retain our character and charm and that is nice to live next door to. It improves your outlook, does it not?

**Deputy G.J. Truscott:**

There is always a balance to be achieved, like we know, but just going forward, as I say, there is a tension to build more houses. This is the problem. Thank you for that.

**Connétable J.E. Le Maistre of Grouville:**

Minister, you like to avoid using the word "crisis" but how could we describe the situation as otherwise when you will be more aware than I am that the Gateway system has tiered systems? I think it is A to C. A is obviously the priority category for moving people. There are simply too many people on there for the amount of accommodation available, whether it is affordable to buy or to rent. It seems to me we do have a crisis and we should not underestimate it and should not be afraid of using that word.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

No, I take that point, I just wanted to accentuate some of the positives. For example, all our social housing stock now is at decent standard levels, the appropriate levels, and that is a good thing. We have huge difficulties and people are finding it a crisis for themselves in wanting to rent or buy and that is not underestimated in any way. That is a massive part of the challenge. That is the focus of the 18 months' work of the Policy Development Board and their recommendations. That is what it is all about, trying to tackle the affordability issues, access issues, supply issues, both for rental and for buying, yes. It is not underestimated in any way.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Notwithstanding that, in your view, considering the growing demand for affordable housing in Jersey, how would you propose to confront the supply issue that we are facing?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

The supply issues? Of course, we are about to find out what the new bridging Island Plan is going to look like and that is very much what that team have been working on. There is a States strategy we have now from Property Holdings. There are sites earmarked for housing. I know that Government has traditionally liked to keep its options open for as long as possible with sites. There is always public interest in the property and the land that the state owns in terms of it being regarded

as the family silver, but it strikes me we have a housing shortage. We need supply desperately. We need to change crisis into a challenge that we are coping with. To do that, some of those sites that have been identified for housing I would like to see them allocated as soon as possible.

[15:00]

The other thing is that we really need to try to even out the work of our construction industry so that it is not dormant for periods of months and then suddenly cannot cope with the demand. The construction industry themselves would like a smooth, constant, consistent workload which will be better, help keep prices down. Identifying sites earlier and letting Andium or a housing trust know that is what we want in 2026 or 2027 or 2028, that is really important so that in this decade we reach our targets.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

That is an interesting point. I wonder if you have had any discussions with fellow Ministers yet, particularly the Minister for Health and Social Services with regard to the hospital or perhaps the Chief Minister with regard to the office building, how these might be paced and whether there is any long-term planning with regard to constructions on a large scale as you will have to be dealing with.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Well, Connétable, you raise an interesting point. I learnt the other day, in a meeting last week, that the Minister for Housing and Communities does not sit on the Regeneration Steering Group. I want to gate crash that or at least secure an invitation to it. I think the Minister for Housing and Communities should be there. Housing is a really important part of regeneration. I have not had a reply yet as to whether I am allowed in or not, but I think that would be really important so that I am regularly meeting with exactly the Ministers that you were talking about in your question.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

With regard to the parishes, each parish has different challenges. Are you aware if any consideration has been given as to how these different challenges will be dealt with? How can they be addressed? You might find one parish might need more housing, others may not.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

That is under way, is it not, right now? I know that the Connétables have been asked to supply potential sites. That is very much in the Minister for Planning and Environment's brief, but I am there to support.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Has any consideration been given to the development of one consistent parish housing policy which could be workable across all parishes rather than each parish having its own individual housing scheme or policy?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I do not know. There has been a lot of talk of trying to ... and I have to be a little bit careful because the Policy Development Board report has not been published but you have seen it. I do not think it will come as a surprise to many people to know that one of the recommendations is to look at the affordable assistance housing models available and maybe that it should be one type of scheme. But the other thing you have to respect, I suppose, is that scheme in Trinity is a fantastic success, is it not? So the Constable of Trinity might be quite happy with his scheme and how it is working, and I guess if autonomy is working, then maybe we should leave it as it is. There is a suggestion that we standardise an affordable housing support assistance model.

**The Connétable of Grouville:**

Just to carry on, really, from your question, we as a parish are keen to find a site for what I describe as local people, not necessarily Grouville people but people who live in the area. Because although we are a tiny Island, as you, Minister, will know, people still do like their parishes and there is still a very strong link between parishes. Currently, there is no system or policy in place that links the Gateway to such developments and it is all a little bit vague as to how parishes are allowed to allocate their houses, even if they have any involvement in that. I accept Deputy Gardiner's opinion and she brought a proposition to the States in line with that, that parishes should probably provide housing for people from St. Helier, for example, because there is limited scope for St. Helier to have parish schemes. All of the other parishes have the ability to do that, I believe, if they want to. Would you look at trying to develop a policy so that we could have a link between the parish and allocation of houses? Because if the parish is to support development within their parish, to get parishioners to buy into that, they are not going to want to do that just for the rest of the Island, if you like. It might sound a little bit selfish but I think if it is to try and support the parochial communities, all 12 of them, then such a policy should exist and it does not at the moment. Secondly, related to that, the Trinity scheme - and I have a family member who lives there - the problem with that scheme is it is affordable to buy to start off with, but then the moment the properties get sold, they then get taken out of that affordable bracket because of the way the schemes are set up. I think it is important that if we are going to have sites that are for affordable housing, whether to buy or to rent, that somehow or other there is a mechanism within the law that makes that carry on in perpetuity. I wonder what you think of those 2 things.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

It is done elsewhere. There are schemes in the U.K. (United Kingdom) which are available to people who have links to the parish first, have first dibs on it. It does exist elsewhere and as our parishes are so much a part of the character of this Island I think there is a lot of sense in what you say. The housing Gateway is under a complete review. I have around the table the person who knows most about it in the Island and if you want to hear from Sue then that would be a good thing. But I would say this, Connétable. We would like to help people find the right sized property. Very often older people - and you can probably think of some in Grouville - are rattling around a big house. Now, if they want to do that and stay there and do not want to change, that is their prerogative and one would not want to force anybody out. Some people might like the idea of going down in size to a smaller property, but if they have been in Grouville all their life and are part of the community, I am afraid that they do not want to go further afield. That is really important to them. Maybe it would assist in a way if there was help to stay in the parish, especially if we want to help people right size and free up large accommodation which might make one or 2-family homes.

**The Connétable of Grouville:**

I could not agree with you more. We discussed it at our pre-meeting to this question plan that there is indeed families, maybe a couple just in retirement, that have 3 or 4-bedroom houses with just the 2 of them living in there. Looking forward, they are not going to get any younger, obviously, and to find affordable downsizing properties, new properties, with all the modern facilities for people who are getting older would be a really good thing to achieve. But it has to be affordable because if you try and find a nice apartment you will spend a lot of money, almost as much as you might get for your house, which is maybe 50 or 60 years old. So, there is a target there really I think to try and find some good quality, affordable to buy, downsized homes, but again it would need to have some kind of mechanism probably written within the law to make sure that those houses remain as such so that when those people finally leave their homes they can be passed on for a similar reason. Because our population, I think Deputy Luce said this morning, the number of people over 65 is getting on for double in the next 20 or 30 years and if there is something that we can do there ...

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes, and I am getting a lot of nods from Sue Duhamel across the table, so I think you are being heard, Connétable. I think also you are right to identify this issue. You can be in a 3 or 4-bedroom detached bungalow and want to sell it and perhaps go to a new 2-bedroom flat. Of course, you might be able to do that but not have very much money left once the transaction has been done. So, I think as well we should look at models of helping people. Some people would not know where to start with relocating if they have been in their property for so long. There are models that are available around the world where basically everything is taken care of for you. It might be something that S.o.J.D.C. would be interested in doing when they have a new development, not to take control but to help people with every stage of that move. If they want to move and they are attracted by a

smaller, more manageable house and want to leave their property, we should try to help them as much as possible and keep them in the communities that they want to be in.

**Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Just to follow up the Connétable's point around policies for sharing the burden for affordable housing, you mentioned in your answer that the Gateway is going through changes. Would you please be able to extend what point or what themes you are looking at the Gateway? What do you think needs to be changed?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I am not that far advanced ...

**Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Maybe Sue will help.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

She will help, and I think it is worth hearing from her. The only thing I would say is looking at the Gateway I think the desire is for the Gateway to open a little wider but that cannot happen without the supply coming through. Sue, would you like to ...?

**Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Yes, and, Minister, one more point which the Connétable raised and I think it is important but we did not have time to address, how we are making sure that the houses are not leaving the affordable market. They have been created as affordable but with time it is going out of the affordable market, unfortunately. So, yes, please, Sue.

**Head of Policy, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance:**

Good afternoon. There was an independent review done of the Gateway a couple of years ago and that review was published. That was done by an independent academic. That review was published and the previous Minister for Housing accepted most of the recommendations. There has been work done in 2020 to first of all stabilise the Gateway in its current format, so that was to make sure that the various Gateway bands are very clear to people so they understand which band they are in. They are to reduce the number of bands so it is a less confusing system and to make sure that all the rules are well understood. So that bit is just about finished now. The next stage is, as the Minister has talked about, to consider how you could expand the Gateway. So the issue here is to be careful about letting more people on to a waiting list but not having any supply to service the large number of people on the waiting list. So that needs to be done carefully, but at the minute we do not allow people without children to be on the waiting list if they are under 50 and we have quite

a crude income limit which is just a single limit across all households regardless of their size. So there are definitely ways in which you could improve both the way in which single people, people without children, single and couples without children, could be accommodated and also having a more dynamic way of measuring household income. But that needs to be carefully considered with the amount of supply that is available so that we do not create lots of people on the waiting list but we are not able to satisfy that demand. So those are the main issues that are being looked at at the minute in terms of the Gateway and I would expect to I think finish that work this year. I am looking at my colleague who is also nodding at me. So, that is where we are, but I am very happy to share with the Scrutiny Panel the report that was published because there is a timetable in there of the actions we have taken.

[15:15]

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Thank you, Sue. Minister, I am just going to take you to community facilities in the parishes where this is lacking and particularly in the east of the Island. Is there any work being done in that regard?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

What sort of community facilities? Are you talking about sporting facilities or support for the elderly facilities?

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

I think all sorts of support for the elderly. Other parishes are quite well off but it is suggested that some parishes are less well off. I just wondered in terms of the C.S.P. (Common Strategic Policy) side of things whether any thought had been given to how that might be balanced.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Well, I hear you. I remember in my days on the Planning Committee passing another development in St. Clement. I think it was the Samares Nursery one. It was a very fine development but there was not any additional ... oh, maybe there was. Maybe that got put into it. I think I remember the Constable of St. Clement coming in and saying: "What about some community amenities to go along with this scheme?" and maybe he was successful.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

The skate park debate, I think he did question the lack of facilities at that time.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

It is just something that we have to very much keep an eye on. Maybe that strategic co-ordination that I was talking about, high-level co-ordination, can also evaluate not just about the size of houses and the quantity of them but also the community facilities that might be needed, including schools, et cetera.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Indeed.

**The Connétable of Grouville:**

Just to carry on with that point, really, there are very few facilities in the east. We have no swimming pool. We have no skate park. I know that is more planning and infrastructure but with joined-up Government, Minister, you did say earlier we do need to provide facilities if we are going to build houses somewhere. There has to be somewhere for children and anybody to go wherever they want to go when they have free time. So, it is linked to housing if it is not necessarily your responsibility.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes, I hear you. It is not my brief but that is not going to stop me from listening and trying to help in that way.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Moving to age, what consideration has been given to housing with regards to Jersey's ageing population? It is a broad subject but it needs to be addressed. What are your thoughts on that, Minister?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

It is a massive issue, the ageing population. It is a common challenge. The Island Plan is developing what used to be called downsizing but now we prefer to say right sizing policy to address these challenges, under-occupation and so on. But it is no good having those policies unless you have somewhere that is appropriate and right for the older person to go to. That may mean something that is a little bit more tailored and a little bit more sheltered perhaps in terms of keeping people's independence but also looking after them. So I think there is a case to be made for that kind of product in terms of housing for the elderly people to be available and more of it.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Do you think that needs to be low rise or can it be accommodated in 2 or 3-storey properties? Is it restricted to ground floor?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I cannot go into that sort of detail because I will start to try to blag it as an architectural expert, which I cannot do. All I can tell you is my inclination. I could not prescribe that so I do not want to stray into areas where I have no expertise.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

What about prioritising the development of care homes and suitable housing for downsizing, as we referred to before, to assist the Island to make the best use of its housing stock? Do you think care homes have a place in the structure of what will be proposed?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

That is not an issue I have touched on at all yet, but it is all part, is it not, of the care in the community? That is part of it, very definitely, yes.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

In your view, in conjunction with increasing the housing stock, what form of additional Government assistance would you propose to support the community and young Islanders who are wishing to purchase their first home?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

That is the question and very much one of my priorities is to explore that. A new funding model is probably not going to be in place within 12 months, but I would like if possible it to be within sight and there is some funding available. That is very much on the agenda and we want to look at all the models and see what might be best.

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

I was going to ask the Minister a question about communities, but seeing as we are talking about young people and their ability to access the housing ladder, does the Minister agree with me that the only way forward for these young families now is going to be some sort of shared equity scheme on the basis that the costs of housing are just so enormous now that if they have to pay the real price they will not be able to afford it?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes, absolutely. I am so sorry, I think I cut into you or you cut out. Yes, we have £10 million in the pot, as it were, for ownership schemes from 2022. So there is some money there. Am I still on?

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

You are, Minister, yes.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

So, we have that £10 million - maybe we need more - for shared ownership schemes coming online from 2022. We are looking at all models.

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

Minister, if the States currently own the land and you do a shared equity scheme, there is no cost in purchasing of the plot, but I understand, of course, that if you are using Andium as a private company they would almost need to purchase the site first and then retain the equity themselves, but I think that is detail. I am pleased that you agree that shared equity is going to be the way forward because the balance that you have is to find a way to reduce the cost of housing but doing that in such a way as not to create any negative equity for those people who already have houses. It is a terribly difficult thing to have to try and sort out.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Agreed.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Minister, what is your view regarding the opportunities? What opportunities in your view could work to resolve Jersey's housing situation in the short, medium and longer term? You have experience of planning in the Island. How can we do this?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I think it goes back to supply. Let us just take Andium for the moment. It has a lot of work on its plate right now. There is the hotel sites. There is the Metropole, the Apollo, the Kensington. There is the Gas Place development which I hope happens once it has cleared its little planning hurdle, which is unfortunate. So it has enough on its plate right now, but I just want to see it being given more certainty for in 2025, 2026 and 2027. I think that is the key. That is the message I picked up in this first period of my ministership and I am running with that. I have already had meetings to try and understand why they cannot be told earlier that these sites are coming to them. There are some that I think we all know that it is going to be housing there, so let us let Andium know so they can plan for it, do all the planning and have it oven ready for when it is available.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Have you consulted with community or other suppliers of affordable housing apart from Andium to further understand the demand and their current challenges?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Not yet, but I am going to be meeting with the trusts in the coming days and weeks.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Do you consider that Andium as an arm's length Government organisation should perhaps receive more support than it has had in the past from any Minister for Housing?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

No, I think my immediate predecessors were exactly the same. I remember Senator Mézec pushing for supply, supply, supply, and unfortunately for him he hit the period where COVID started and we were completely uncertain about where the hospital was going. I think those 2 things have really blocked progress in getting these sites to their right destinations, so I am going to keep the pressure up as much as I can on that. I do not think I need to persuade my ministerial colleagues, I think we just need to really be on the same page here that this is vitally important. We know how much supply is important. Supply affects affordability and that is totally key. So we have these sites and we should be releasing them.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Given the pressing housing concern in the Island, how will you work to champion housing as Minister for Housing and Communities? Will you be championing it at the Council of Ministers and in the States Chamber?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Morning, noon and night, yes. I think that is the job. I have already been feeding into the Island Plan just as a former chairman of the Planning Committee, but I do feel that the rural areas have their part to play as well. It just seems to me that there are so many redundant buildings in the countryside which could be used and people should be helped to do that. There are so many regulations on green zone policy, which is understandable, but when a building already exists - and some of these are very fine old granite buildings from 1738 - what is the point of them just decaying when they could be a fantastic home for people? So I hope that message has got through to the Minister for Planning and Environment. I am not saying build all over the countryside, but I am saying where those buildings exist they are not going to be knocked down. Some of them are listed. They are often owned by families who are asset rich but cash poor. Perhaps we can help there as well and unlock some potential. I think the farming industry is finding it very tough at the moment and I think we are going to be in a situation where farmers are going to need to diversify. Now, where possible, that diversification might mean providing plots for housing where it is not going to trash all the rules and regulations that are there. I think there is potential that we are not unlocking, even above shops in St. Helier. In this building I look out the window and I see empty first floor and second floor space above shops. I did a British-Irish Council meeting the other day and in Wales

they have this scheme to try to utilise living above shops. I think it is called live above a shop scheme. That seems to be working. Maybe owners do not really want the bother of it, but with a bit of help they can.

[15:30]

There is quite draconian measures in the U.K. where you can actually go in, agencies like No Use Empty can go in, and refurb something and put tenants in redundant buildings, which to us would seem absolutely shocking. They caveat that with there is an extended process they go through of talking to the landlord and exploring opportunities with the landlord, helping the landlord, if the landlord wants to do it themselves, or agreeing to let the agency do it and provide a home. I would like to see something like that, too, but this is something to talk about. We have a Policy Development Board here, with some very interesting and meaty recommendations, as you will see. They will provoke some very interesting debate. We have a work programme to take us to the end of this term and we have finite resources in which to complete that work programme. I am hopeful we can do and make progress on the areas that we have identified, and that is what I will be working towards.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

In your view, and this is picking up from a point made earlier, do you believe consideration should be given to how affordable housing is transacted to ensure its affordability is maintained for future buyers of affordable homes? Should shared equity schemes remain as such or should purchasers be allowed to buy those out?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

You have put your finger on something very important there. The way property is transacted in Jersey and the legislation around that is a potential barrier to helping people into affordable schemes to buy homes. That is being looked at. The conveyancing laws sometimes are not helpful. I cannot go into detail because I am not equipped to but that is something that has come up quite early on in conversation.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Going back to the Housing Policy Development Board progress, you suggested the report is something to look forward to. When can the community expect to see tangible deliveries resultant of this work?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

They will see them very soon in terms of the new Housing Advisory Service. It is just what they call soft launched at the moment and very soon, I think within weeks, it is going to go live and that is going to make a big difference to people who are encountering problems in trying to get their problem to the right person who can help with a solution. Of course, some of these cases are difficult and sometimes there is not an easy solution. But, where possible, we want to try and nip what could turn into major problems in the bud as quickly as possible. So people fear something is coming down the line and they are going to be in trouble, then the sooner they can get help and support and advice the better, and that is what this will do, especially tackling the extreme where somebody is at the risk of becoming homeless. Together with the homelessness strategy, we hope very much to get critical help. In the most difficult circumstances we are going to have a new team equipped to work across all departments and providers, the shelters and the sanctuaries, to try to ensure that people are not homeless. It is not as easy as sticking somebody into a bedsit or a flat. Some people have difficulty looking after themselves independently. So we need to bring all the agencies together, keep them in touch and, as I say, have this critical response team try to tackle the most difficult cases for people, while at the same time giving everybody support, hope and respect. I think what is in place with the homelessness strategy is very important. We want to try to end homelessness strategy by understanding it, supporting the agencies, like Shelter and Sanctuary, and having this new team to ...

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Minister, will there be an open door to this new office because at the moment there is not an open door and I just wonder what the policy will be with regard to that?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Do you mean a physical open door?

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Yes, because a lot of people do not do online and when they are in that desperate situation they might find themselves with the inability to do so. Will there be someone they can physically talk to?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Yes, there will be in those sort of situations. People are getting more used to, if they cannot use a computer, getting a friend who can. If you think of the vaccination scheme that has happened now, everybody is booking for that online. Some people are using the phone, but most people are booking online, and I have fielded calls on this, too, and I have done some for constituents. I have gone on and done it for them online. Or they have rung me and said: "Oh no, it is all right, my son is coming and he is going to do it." So it will be an online portal, too, but people should make appointments. They can make appointments and have physical meetings with the team, absolutely.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

It was suggested at one time that the Gateway could be handled by Andium, who have an office open to the public. Has that been considered further?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

The Gateway or this Housing Advisory Service?

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

It is a bit of both; it is the Housing Advisory Service which leads to the Gateway obviously. But they have a facility there already. Has it been considered that that should be used?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I think this is about a place for people to go. They might be having problems and their issue might be with Andium. So it is quite good to have an independent advisory service so people feel they can unload and have an independent hearing and a different person to go to with their problems, and see if that cannot be solved and helped.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Moving to the Jersey Tenants Forum, in your speech to the Assembly on your appointment you highlighted the importance of ensuring tenants are safe and secure in their homes. In your view, what challenges are Jersey's tenants facing at the moment?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

Help with the rental is a big one and there is a great deal of focus on it. Obviously, it is difficult enough to buy in Jersey. It is not going to be in everybody's reach, we have to accept that. But what we can do is make renting and being a tenant better and more secure. It is about changing the perception of renting being second class or not always as nice and for that we need to look at the Jersey Residential Tenancy Law. I have already asked officers who are working with that law, day in, day out as part of their work, to identify where the law needs to be changed and updated to help with this. We want to look at things like a tenancy that does not necessarily have to be 12 months or 2 years. It could be open-ended. Trying to give people a little bit more security while putting in measures to allow a landlord to change tenants if they need to. We want to keep rents stable. We want to try to discourage rent hikes for people, if we can. We want to make sure our stock in the private sector is up to scratch and is safe because if you are in an unsafe house you are effectively homeless. It is not right. I think this is going to be a big subject over the next 12 months; a very big subject.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

There was some concern raised with fears that the lifting of measures protecting renters during the pandemic could lead some at risk of eviction and criticised the Government for failing to meet them, after almost 3 months of them requesting a meeting with the Government. Are you aware of this evolving situation? If so, what is your view regarding these tenants with fears of eviction?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I think you might be referring to a group called the Jersey Tenants Forum who asked to meet the Minister. Because of the ministerial reshuffle they did not get to see me until 3 months afterwards. But I did see them, I think in the first week of taking office. We had a really good meeting and I encouraged them to form ... the forum is really a Facebook group, but a popular one with tenants, and I encouraged them to form an association and call on people; not just tenants who are unhappy but we want to help tenants who are unhappy. Very often there is a lot of people in the community who for them this is an interesting subject and they want to take on cases, they want to help. I think forming an association with interested people, philanthropists, what have you, who want to have a political activist is really important. So they put themselves on to an official footing. The eviction amnesty that happened during the spring and summer 2020 and ended on 30th September, they were asking for the amnesty to be extended to the end of March. By the time I met them it was very nearly the beginning of March. The evidence that we had was that the evictions that were taking place were not COVID-related. To extend that I would have had to go to the Assembly. The Assembly would have asked me for evidence that the amnesty should be extended because COVID was causing the problems for evictions. There was no evidence of that. I think the gentleman from the forum took my point on that. But we have agreed to meet every couple of months and they had lots of other interesting suggestions again about help for tenants. It was good to hear, very interesting to hear. We have opened that dialogue and I hope we are on pretty good terms.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Buy-to-let properties, in your view do you consider buy-to-let properties to be a wider issue impacting upon affordable housing in Jersey?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

If you mean foreign investors and the share transfer market for basically people developing their property portfolios as investors, S.o.J.D.C. are not doing that anymore, are they?

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

They agreed to stop it but it seems to me a fine line and I just wonder what your views were on that.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I remember, as a non-executive Member of the States, getting up and saying how outrageous it was that somebody from St. Martin could not buy a house because of whatever, but somebody in Moscow or Malaysia could for their property portfolio. It just does not feel right, it does not sit with us, does it? But obviously the argument has always been for some development that they need the investors to provide these homes. But it has always concerned me.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Do you consider that there is a necessity for the private sector to continue to provide for the rental market in Jersey? Is it reasonable this could be done by foreign investors rather than local ones?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

That is an interesting question, is it not?

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

Albeit the rental side.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

One would have to gather the evidence on that. But, yes, we are relying on the private sector to hit the target that we need to by 2030, very much so.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

In terms of the allocations, how will the allocation for the affordable housing portion of a development - shall we say - be allocated through the Housing Gateway?

[15:45]

How is this established, noting that the Council of Ministers has recognised the affordable housing component should be maximised beyond 50 per cent? How will that make the development stack up financially?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

That is exactly the sort of thing that we are discussing now off the back of this Housing Policy Development Board report. That is all in the mix. That is exactly the sort of questions that are being tackled now so I am not going to pre-empt.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

What is your view on the balance? What sort of balance should be achieved between providing affordable housing and housing for rental accommodation?

**The Minister for Housing and Communities:**

I think they need to go in tandem. We have to supply affordable housing to both rents and buy. The widest possible cross-section is the most favoured model. It is very interesting that discussions are now being had about whether Andium should be allowed to be perhaps a little bit more commercial with maybe 10, 20 or 25 per cent of a new development and whether private developers should be requested to be a little bit more philanthropic with affordable housing percentage in new developments. These are the issues that this Policy Development Board has put on the table and what we are looking at.

**The Connétable of St. Brelade:**

We certainly look forward to seeing that. I do not know if any of the other panel members have further questions. Nothing showing before me. So, Minister, I thank you and your team for your time this afternoon. It has been much appreciated and we look forward to discussing matters with you further in due course. Thank you very much.

[15:47]