



Environment, Housing and Technical Services Scrutiny Panel Supply of Housing

FRIDAY, 19th JUNE 2015

Panel:

Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier (Chairman)

Deputy D. Johnson of St. Mary (Vice-Chairman)

Witnesses:

The Minister for Housing

Director, Corporate Policy

Chief Officer, Home and Constitutional Affairs

Principal Planner Island Plan Review

Special Adviser:

Patrick Mooney, Ark Housing Consultancy

[10:01]

Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier (Chairman):

Environment, Housing and Technical Services Scrutiny Panel's hearing with the Minister for Housing. Good morning, and we welcome also the media and the public to the hearing, because it is public, and will last from 10.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. with a possibility of further questions after that if we want to carry on. Just to introduce ourselves, I am Simon Crowcroft, the Constable of St. Helier and Chairman of the panel.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Excellent. We have got some draft questions which we are just going to work through, if that is all right, and our adviser is going to chip in with questions as well and of course this is going to be a great help to us in preparing our second report on the supply of housing which we are hoping to produce in August. So first all monitoring and performance. There is usually a residential land availability report annually presented to the States but we have not had one since January 2013 and we wondered why not.

The Minister for Housing:

Right, as you know, across all the States of Jersey collecting data could definitely be improved on and I think the last report, £1,000, and data is fed through into the Island Plan which came to the States 2 years ago now I suppose but I know that Ralph, because he wears a dual hat of Strategic Housing Unit as well as Planning, is working hard to look at bringing all the data together. I think they have got data at Planning for what they approve now going forward but going back and, as you know, it can take quite a while up to planning permission and can last up to 5 years so some of that has to be gone through by hand but I know Ralph is working very hard on that and whether you wanted more details, where we are, what work that he has been doing from Ralph himself.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Well, I think it was more the issue that the States were getting these annual reviews and now they are not and so is that going to stop or ...

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

No, not at all. I think what happened, obviously, is that the Island Plan, which was approved last June 2014, was sort of the last, if you like, Residential Land Availability Evidence Report because that contained the latest information on housing data. We are now going to be, obviously, running the data this year again and that is going to be coming out shortly. We have been working with Planning and Environment, or I have been working there, to make sure that the systems are in place to ensure that we have that data coming out in good order. So that is what we are working on but we are also working on other information sources as well.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Will it still be called the Residential Land Availability Report or will it come under a new ...

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Well, I am not sure about that. It might be retitled because I think now that the Strategic Housing Unit effectively have taken over that evidence base we will probably widen it and it will be more of a market assessment report because it will cover other issues, not just the raw numbers coming

from Planning. It is probably going to cover issues such as the state of the nation in terms of the housing market, looking at the rental sector. So it is looking at probably a wide information source than just statistics from the planning system.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Will this report have targets and show how far the unit has succeeded in delivery because we have this ambitious target of new homes; 1,000 affordable homes by 2020? So will this report have those?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

What it will do is ... the Island Plan has set the demand for supply requirements for housing up to 2020 and as part of the Island Plan Review ... sorry, that is the Island Plan monitoring document. There will be a monitoring document on how that is performing against those targets. Now, clearly the report that we will be running will feed into that and the 2 will be very close in terms of making sure that if there are any gaps, if demand has gone up or supply has gone down and there is sort of a net imbalance then clearly we will be speaking to Planning about why that may have occurred and what can be done in terms of shortfall. Indeed we might have over-performed and done better than we anticipated.

The Minister for Housing:

Yes, but getting that data, up to date data, is vital and as you pointed out we need to make sure that within the lifetime of the Island Plan we do need to deliver on housing and be open and how we are doing.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

David, do you want to go on to question 4?

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes. Now, turn to question of initiatives to improve affordability. How much support are you willing to give to the creation of shared ownership schemes and when do you expect this type of scheme to be in operation?

The Minister for Housing:

Personally-wise, and I think as part of the Strategic Housing Unit, shared equity schemes or any type of product like that is important in this day and age to help young families own their own house. Regarding shared equity schemes I think some parishes have been successful in that but to be able to take it forward going into the future we do need a law change and I have spoken to the law ... not I have spoken to the law officers. I have spoken to the chair of the Legal Panel

regarding that and they are happy to take that road forward. It is coming and hopefully we will get something back to towards the end of the year.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Without wishing to push you too far do you know how far down the line we are on that and ...

The Minister for Housing:

I do not at the present moment but I think that bit can be quite easily done but there are other bits, the goal of the housing, I cannot think what you call it, the woodwork of that needs to be done as well.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Well, as far as the States are concerned you are obviously proactive in it and ...

The Minister for Housing:

Definitely proactive in it.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

That is good. Thank you.

The Minister for Housing:

Also importantly, I think; it has got to be done in perpetuity. That is what I would like to see. So once a house has been designed, been gone through as shared equity, it is not only there for the first person that has brought it; that when they sell it they can do it ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Or there should be safeguards to enable Andium or whoever to buy that possibly?

The Minister for Housing:

Or whatever. I mean that all needs to be worked through but I would like to say that is one of my aims; is that this is in perpetuity.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay, fine. Moving on to another thing, at present there is an 80/20 ratio for building affordable homes on rezoned site. Is that sort of written in stone? Is there scope for adjusting that if occasion demands?

The Minister for Housing:

It has been adjusted in the Island Plan last year and ... so am I right?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

No. That 80/20 was evidence based from ... that was approved in the Island Plan last June. That was evidence based against what we thought the requirements were for both 80 per cent rental and 20 per cent affordable purchase. So that was why that 80/20 split was given at that time. Clearly, if in the future that evidence changes then that can be reflected in a change of split.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I just sense it might not be right for every site; that is all.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

No, but there are only for 3 sites. That 80/20 split was only for 3 rezoned sites which is Samarès Nurseries, De La Mare Nurseries and Field 785 at St. Ouen.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay. So it is flexible though?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Which is nearly 300 units of accommodation. So it is only for those sites that that 80/20 split has been applied.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

So do you see flexibility for future ones then?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Absolutely. That was a short term supply that was given because of a review of the Island Plan that happened last year and obviously any future sites that may get rezoned or be allocated for affordable housing will be given a split or a tenure type that is evidenced at the time.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay, thanks. Moving on to first-time buyers and financial support. What level of financial support is the Council of Ministers willing to offer first-time buyers given their importance to the whole housing market? A possible example is the resumption of the deposit loan scheme.

The Minister for Housing:

Going back to the deposit loan scheme, I think that was done just a couple of years ago and that was very successful. I would like similar or, as I said, other products going forward but we need to find money for that and as we are in this financial climate it is not going to be easy and I think over the next couple months we need to sit down with Treasury to see if we can think of ways of having some money available for that instance.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay. This leads on in answer to your question really, which is that do you accept that first-time buyers or the like 10:11:35 (inaudible) a housing market and they need deeper help or the whole housing market could slow down so it is important that first-time buyers are given some sort of facility, is it not?

The Minister for Housing:

It is and I know there are several parishes in St. Mary; Trinity have been very much right in that way, especially Trinity, in helping first-time buyers. If we can encourage more parishes to do something like that that can be nothing but a good thing.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Moving on to

The Minister for Housing:

But saying that, does the shared equity help in one way or another? Will we have that? It must be, for my point of view, it must be done in perpetuity so that future generations can still have that benefit.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

The deposit scheme would ... well, again you are supposed to have given the first-time buyers a leg-up and the deposit scheme clearly did help. There would have been safeguards built in should they onward sell but ...

The Minister for Housing:

Yes. I think it was 55 households done that. So those 55 families have been very fortunate and it works but I think you need a whole range. You need to be a bit more flexible. It is not one scheme that will fit everyone's needs.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Understand that, yes. Sorry, Simon.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Moving on to sites for new housing. One of the things we have had from our feedback; we have done a call for evidence and we have had quite a lot of correspondence from individuals as well as from trusts and other providers, is that there simply are not enough sites coming forward. How confident are you that we do have enough sites to deliver the homes that we need?

The Minister for Housing:

Well, in the Island Plan it was the sites that they put forward. First of all, our States own sites and using sites that we have to better use, such as refurbished ones, that Andium are refurbishing at Le Squez, is increasing the capacity there. Dare I say La Collette?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

I was going to ask about ... because one of the problems is that as these sites are brought forward, even sites in our ownership or in Andium's ownership, huge problems are being thrown up by residents and have been taken up by Deputies and it looks like this is the kind of thing that could slow down the delivery of more units.

The Minister for Housing:

I think that needs to be factored in as it progresses but regarding La Collette and Le Squez it is working with the community and also I would have thought on design too. But at the end of the day we need more housing and there has got to be a right balance and working with the community to achieve what is right on that particular site is very important. The other land zone sites, there was sufficient in there to meet these up to 2020 but there are other sites. There is the Summerland site which was earmarked as well as Samarès and De La Mare.

[10:15]

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Another example in the news at the moment; is it the Keppel Tower site? I mean it is not a large amount of homes there but again that was earmarked for homes, was it not, and the Royal Court has got involved? So when you have got this level of difficulty in delivering and then you have got delays ... J.C.G. (Jersey College for Girls) is another good example. It has been available for as long as I have been in the States. Do you have any idea how we can speed up that process of delivery of these sites? When they are in our ownership it seems particularly frustrating that we cannot deliver homes on them.

The Minister for Housing:

I think it is very frustrating but again I think it is working with the community for the benefit of the community and it is going to be a balance. We know that people need houses but we know that people do not want, in various sites, to cram them in. So it is working through and getting a balance and design and putting the community's needs first too is important. It is not easy because, as you know, we are only 9 by 5 but we need houses, decent houses.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Are there any sites you have mind that you would particularly like to see brought into the mix for providing new homes?

The Minister for Housing:

Not at this present moment in time. That is a very good question. I would like to see what we have got built on and, as you have just said, progress like the Ann Court site; hopefully that is going to progress but it all takes time. I wish some things could just start tomorrow but it does not work like that but as long as we keep the momentum going, I think that is important, and get on and build.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Do you want to go on to the private rented, 11?

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes. We have been talking about it for a while now, the establishment of a licensing or registration scheme for private sector landlords. I know there is a deposit scheme in place. Is there much more legislation or proposed legislation in the pipeline?

The Minister for Housing:

For the private rental?

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes.

The Minister for Housing:

Not that I can think of. There is the Housing Dwelling (Jersey) Law which is the most ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

The thing of standards and the like, yes.

The Minister for Housing:

The standards with Health and Social Services is working so that private rental will have to meet certain standards and also the Environmental Department can go and visit and make sure that those standards are met. They are working on updating that law and hopefully that law will come forward in the next couple of months or so.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay. On starter homes, there is obviously a contest between the first-time buyer on the one hand and perhaps the investors who wish to buy the buy-to-let properties. Is there any way of controlling the activities of the latter so that the starter homes are made available to genuine owners rather than landlords who simply let them out to those people?

The Minister for Housing:

I think if you have got a home and where they wanted to go into the rental or own a home is open to, I think, as much as possible, that we can encourage people to live in a home that is a decent standard and whether that is the private sector or your own home it is important that the standards are met.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I am concerned obviously that those who wish to get on the bottom rung of ownership are disadvantaged in the absence of schemes if the buy-to-let landlord buys that and then rents it out. You do not have any control to stop that in any way?

The Minister for Housing:

Not on my radar at this present moment in time.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Because we are told by our adviser just this morning that in terms of ownership of properties we are way down in Jersey from say in comparison with the U.K. (United Kingdom). So there are far more people renting here and the classic scenario is that the couple that want to buy a flat are finding it snapped up by a buy-to-let investor who ends up renting it to them and therefore they remain in the rental sector.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

I think on the ownership statistics I think it can be misleading because I think the ownership numbers are like 56 or something per cent, on the top of my head, but actually there is a forced element that are not able to purchase which is, you know, 15 per cent are unqualified. So if you took them out of the equation it is purely ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

So they are not qualified.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

... so if you purely just looked at those people that are able to purchase and who are either in rental or homeownership it rises to over 60-odd per cent which is equivalent certainly to Guernsey and nearly to the U.K. I know in the U.K. homeownership has fallen and rental is going up. I think with rental what you want to do is improve standards which we are all ready to do through the Dwelling Law and so you make that market a far better market than currently exists since it is far better regulated. I think you have got to be careful when you look purely at the headline number on homeownership because it is skewed by that unqualified element.

Mr. P. Mooney:

The private letting figure in the U.K. is going up but it is precisely because of buy-to-let landlords buying up lots of properties, particularly in the major cities, and then renting them out. The trouble is it means that first-time buyers are not able to accumulate the deposits that are required so they are getting, effectively, priced out.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Do you think that is happening here?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

There is certainly a market for buy-to-let but equally if you look at the actual market for the purchase as well there is quite a lot of stock available for purchase and the problem we have, I think, in the ownership bracket in Jersey is not the entry at one-bedroom flat level, it is higher up the ladder. It is at 2 and 3-bedroom house level. That is where the real gap is, if you like, between people who have got an ... you know the affordability gap if you like. That is where the biggest gap is. The market at the bottom, which is the one-bedroom market, is the most affordable statistically and there are properties available to purchase in that market so it is not a ... I can understand where you are coming from but equally I think you have got to be careful about sort of saying that that is causing the problem because I do not think it is the sole problem.

Director, Corporate Policy:

When we last looked at this, and it was some time ago and it is a valid point, the extent of that market in Jersey was limited, very limited, and I think you have got to be careful with notional advice for that because there is a component there that encourages developers to develop because they have got more demand and we have got Control of Housing and Work Law, so we will secure qualified tenants for those properties. Ultimately it is about homes and then it is about homes to own.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Sorry, I suppose your argument is that there is quite a large transient population here and they would not want to necessarily buy a one-bedroom one and so it serves a purpose to maybe the nurses, teachers who are passing through.

Director, Corporate Policy:

Then I guess the ...

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Well, they could not purchase anyway.

Director, Corporate Policy:

Yes. I mean the point I was trying to make is when we last looked at it, prior to that it was not a major component of the market in Jersey. Buy-to-let has provided some assurance to developers so if you restricted that it might reduce developer assurance and Control of Housing and Work Law means that only qualified people can live in those properties so it is securing home for a load of people.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes, it provides a need.

Director, Corporate Policy:

Yes. I am not saying there is not an issue. I am just saying it is something we need to 10:23:20 (overspeaking)

Mr. P. Mooney:

Could I ask when did you last looked at it?

Director, Corporate Policy:

Top of my head I cannot recall but it is at least 3 or 4 years ago.

Mr. P. Mooney:

I was going to say the change in the U.K. in the last 2 years is where it has really had an impact.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

I mean equally in the U.K. houses prices have gone up much, much quicker than it has in Jersey. Jersey has been fairly steady on house price growth. I think it is always difficult to compare U.K. and Jersey sometimes and you just parachute in an idea from the U.K.; it does sometimes not work in the same way that you think it might work in Jersey.

Director, Corporate Policy:

I think there is a valid point to be made in terms of the changing market conditions. Two or 3 years ago interest rates were low, demand was low, buy-to-let was arguable an important way of continuing the supply to come along. As the market changes and potentially there is interest rate changes in due course; that is something we do need to monitor.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Support for the Housing Trust; do you feel that they are getting enough support for their schemes? I know there has been issues around Ann Court. We have had a very, I think, compelling submission from Jersey Homes Trust, including suggestions that we should be considering residential schemes on the waterfront instead of offices. I do not know whether you will have seen that correspondence yet. The chairman writes: "A retirement village would make excellent sense. Close to amenities with no detriment to the countryside. Freeing up badly needed family accommodation elsewhere." Do you feel that the trust are getting all the help that they need to develop these kind of schemes?

The Minister for Housing:

I would like to think so and I think part of our role as Strategic Housing Unit is to talk to the social housing providers; it is something that I have done, and also going around to visit the properties that they own and they do a very good job. We know that Les Vaux have just put a planning application in to improve Troy Court so there is some investment there too. Some of these social housing providers, Christians Together, I think want to go into more of a niche group to help young people and prisoners. I think that is what they would like to go into. They are ready to help in any way they can and that is what I suggested for the Christians Together too. The Jersey Homes Trust they are, I think, earmarked as well to build or purchase, whatever, from De La Mare Nurseries when that gets built. So they do have an important part to play being social housing providers.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

The private sector developers; we understand your predecessor did not meet with the biggest one, which was Dandara, to discuss issues of common concern. Are you going to be meeting with them?

The Minister for Housing:

I have not had the request. If and when a request comes in I will see what it entails and take it from there.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

You are not going to initiate meetings with the bigger private sector developers?

The Minister for Housing:

I have not done it yet, no.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Have they been involved in developing the framework?

The Minister for Housing:

They will be. The Housing Strategy, you mean?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes.

The Minister for Housing:

We will go out to consultation so they will be involved in that way. So going back to social housing providers too; they have been very much involved too in the first stages of the Social Housing Providers Regulation. We had a workshop with all the providers and also interested parties like the Citizens Advice Bureau, the churches and whatever, and that was very productive and they formed kind of the first draft of that regulation.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Thank you. Do you want to go on to resources, David?

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes. The framework sets out a programme of time within which certain actions were delivered. Are you fairly confident that you will be able to meet these times?

The Minister for Housing:

Yes, I hope so. I mean in the Housing Strategy it gives certain dates and years that we have to meet and I would like to think that we will meet them because housing is important. It is an important part of our Island life and we need to not only deliver on the housing strategies and the different initiatives that will come out from that but also going back to supply. We need to make sure that the supply is built and comes through.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Sure. Again, the ...

The Minister for Housing:

But that one is going to be more tricky.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Every plan creates a fairly busy workload on resources, are you happy that we do have the resources to meet that in terms of labour in particular?

The Minister for Housing:

Within the department you mean or ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

No, Island-wide. I am concerned about the resources available to create housing given that there are competitive demands on the construction industry for building houses, hospitals, office space or whatever. I am concerned about the capacity of the construction industry to meet.

The Minister for Housing:

Sorry. Yes, I would like to think it is. I mean the market is coming out of, shall we say, slower times but it is there. I think it is there ready to go ahead.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Yes, just to say on that, Andium are probably the biggest sort of players in the market in terms of the affordable sector, in terms of building up the new stock and obviously they published their business plan which identifies a number of sites, and I know they have been engaging way down the line with potential developers and builders and also there is a skillsets challenge as well. So if everyone in the building industry knows that there is construction going to be in the pipeline, then clearly they can align their resources and improve their resources when that happens.

[10:30]

So some of it might be happening in the shorter term but there are also longer term projects as well that have been identified, particularly in Andium's business plan and they, as I said, are delivering a lot of that new stock to the affordable housing sector.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It would be ironic if this led to a mass influx of construction workers and other skills involved that ended up using up the units. Is that something that is going to be avoided?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

That is also a challenge ...

The Minister for Housing:

Yes, I think wearing another hat of Housing and Work Force Law, it is something that we are aware of but it is, at the end of the day, a balance and if it is necessary that they need some people for a short term then we will consider it but also making sure that they use local employment wherever possible or include some apprenticeships or back to work schemes as well. So we are very aware.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is slightly off topic but I just have this vision of the ferry disgorging all these white vans to just undertake all this work and we will be back in the situation of not having enough accommodation for a percentage of these people who decide to stay here because it is such a good place to be.

The Minister for Housing:

I think now with the licences we are more ahead of the game so to speak but if that did happen and they need to work with back to work schemes and apprentices to get unemployment down and to get our skills and working with Highlands, so looking ahead at what skills our local people will need to help the building industry.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I was about to say within the mix you could consider buying more sort of not readymade houses but units or houses to be brought in which would reduce, if necessary, the requirements on local labour which is something we have not done too much of before.

The Minister for Housing:

Anything is open in that way providing they meet building control requirements.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Obviously, yes.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

We were also going to ask you about your in-house resources. It is not a huge department, is it? The briefing we have had about your proposals, it is ambitious to do all the things that you are going to deliver with the targets and we are hoping that the effect of our review will be to sharpen some of those targets and put numbers on them and more precise deadlines. Are you going to be looking for more staff to help you achieve this?

The Minister for Housing:

In this current climate I do not think that will go down ... no, I think I have got a very good team and very focused and I think what also works to our advantage is that I am now wearing 2 hats of Planning and Strategic Housing Unit so there is good interlink there as well with the Chief Minister's Office and that is where Tom's role is chief executive. He is bringing departments together so while we have been working in silos I would like to think that we can work closer together because our resources are tight.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes, slightly a throwaway comment in a way. I am pleased to see that you have a strategic housing group of Ministers and it has not always been the case that the States have been known or congratulated for their inter-co-operation between departments because it does seem that you have got it all together here and I very much hope that comes to pass.

The Minister for Housing:

Yes, I think that is important because we need to work together and we all need to know what each other is doing in some ways especially the housing ways because of all the data that needs to come out and so it works.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I hope it will.

The Minister for Housing:

I am sure you will hold us to account if it did not.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Moving on to planning policies. One of the common themes of the responses we have had from the public are the way in which planning policies do not help in the delivery of affordable homes. A

number of planning policies are particularly highlighted. One would be heritage and obviously we all value our heritage but there are schemes which are not progressing and there is one in parish ownership, so I know it very well, where because of a listing of a couple of buildings the scheme cannot be made to work to provide quite a few social rented or first-time buyer homes. Do you think that planning policies need to be reviewed particularly for developments going into urban areas where there may need to be a balance between losing a B.L.I. (building of local interest) and making a new social housing scheme affordable and stack up?

The Minister for Housing:

That is a very thorny question especially with what is happening with the Minister for Planning at present appealing the Royal Court decision and I think we need to look at that. Again it is down to balance and heritage has been quite challenging in what it wants to keep and what it does not keep but places need to develop. We need to evolve and I think if the heritage policy sits within planning, if it needs to be reviewed I am sure that is something that the Minister for Planning will look at and perhaps after the Royal Court decision it is something that he may need to do.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Again, the Homes Trust chairman says in his submission: "There is far too much protection for old and redundant buildings in St. Helier. It is an unnecessary disincentive and obstacle to residential development." It is tricky because we will all probably be in positions where we are found defending a particular old building because we value its charms, the Le Seilleur(?) building in Oxford Road is a good example.

The Minister for Housing:

Yes, I know that one very well. Yes, and that is where the clash of planning policy occurs but my thoughts are that buildings need to evolve, they need to be lived in and if you need to relax one policy going to another policy then I think you need to do it to get the best out of it for the community.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Do you have a view on whether facades are important? We have got a number of developments, the Southampton Hotel is the obvious one, where the façade is being kept of a listed building but effectively the rest of the building is being taken away. Do you think that preservation of buildings needs to go further than just the façade?

The Minister for Housing:

My personal thoughts there, Chairman? My personal thoughts. Each application has got to be assessed on its own merits so I am sitting on the fence shall we say. I think if it will benefit the

community at the end of the day that surely must be the right thing to do but you have got to look at the whole too. If there are other examples of that type or that era around Jersey then you have got to ask the question; well, why are we preserving it, but it is a balance and there will always be a clash.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is interesting in New Street you have got 16 New Street, which having seen how that has been restored, the idea that that would have just been a façade and we would have lost all the interior we would not support. Just up the road is the former ... is it Bissons(?), the old soldier, the ...

The Minister for Housing:

The one on the corner?

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes, the other one on the corner which is just a façade but there has not been a great deal of concern about that. It seems to work as an office building. So perhaps it is horses for courses. Now moving on to other planning issues. The battle lines have been drawn over car parking standards, particularly for the concentration of this sort of housing in St. Helier. The current standard is 0.7 parking spaces per unit and there has been public calls for that to be pushed up to one space per unit. What impact is that going to have on the ability of us to deliver the new homes that are required?

The Minister for Housing:

Well, again it is down to balance. I believe that you do need a parking space, especially in town if it is one parking space per unit; is that the right ratio? I know that Andium have done a lot of work on the right as they see and they have got experience over the years, I would have thought, to know what was needed and the Island Plan policy is 0.7 per unit, which if it works and has worked and is shown to work, then is that right that we should change it? So it is a balance but I think 0.7 is feasible going forward but we need to address ... it is not in isolation because you need to ensure that we have got a good bus system to work; not only coming into town but within town.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

I probably just need to make a correction. The parking standards are very old. They are 1994, I think from memory, and it is one space per unit. The 0.7 relates to specific sites and, for example, the 0.7 is something that came out through the Andium development of various sites because that was their experience of how they felt that it was best use of resources, best use of the car parking and then the real use of the site. So the 0.7 is a more site specific thing.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

But it is very flexible, is it not, because when we look at the conversion of redundant office buildings ...

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

It depends on the actual site basis ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

You are not going to have ...

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

... where there is no parking.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

If banks are going to relocate to the new finance quarter, there are going to be offices that will be up for redevelopment. We are seeing one at the moment at the corner of Bath Street and Phillips Street is being converted into flats and that that will have little or no parking with it. There is a car park opposite of course and there will be Ann Court down the road but do you think flexibility is going to be required if the idea of converting redundant offices into homes is going to work?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Certainly, absolutely. I think that the parking will be, as you will say, it is drawn there but it is all about sustainability, allowing sites to develop viably in town. Quite often if you put on too much of a requirement for parking on a tight site then it just will not happen. You will not get the residential development coming out of that site. There is clearly a policy in the Island Plan that expects that old, worn out office stock is to be replaced with residential stock going forward in time as the office area moves south towards the waterfront. So that is something that would probably be restricted if there was too much of an onerous parking requirement on some of these tighter sites. So it is a case by case basis. I think parking is important. It needs to be sort of provided where it is necessary to do so for particular types of developments as well or generate different types of parking requirements as well, depending on who the ultimate tenants are. So there is no kind of a one number fits all policy, I do not think, here and I think with the new parking standards that are due to come out they will address a lot of these very tricky questions that are obviously being raised at the moment.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Going on to open space standards. Do you think open space standards are right at the moment or do you think they need to be adjusted particularly for housing in built-up areas?

The Minister for Housing:

Well, again, I think it goes back to a site by site basis. We know that sites are at a premium especially in town and open space is important but it must be good open space that the community can use and benefit from but it has to be on a site by site basis.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Are you aware of the findings of the 2008 open space study by the Planning Department?

The Minister for Housing:

I was in Planning at that time.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

The findings were alluded to last evening at a public meeting on the north of town but back in 2008 Jersey, as a whole, is deficient not only in terms of open spaces accessible to the public but in play space as well. I think that the real worry is that we will be asking people to accept even less open space with these new housing schemes.

Director, Corporate Policy:

I do not have a detailed response to that but I do have the response that the Council of Ministers have been very clear in the Strategic Plan and in States debates that there needs to be more open space in the urban environment and that is part of the regeneration of St. Helier. It is not just about offices, it is about open space and there has been a clear statement of intent.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

You would support that, Minister?

The Minister for Housing:

Being part of council you just have to ...

The Deputy of St. Mary:

I do not think we have touched on the question of empty properties. Perhaps more for the Minister for Planning rather than yourself but at least these thoughts in progress, ways of inducing developers to start early development or failing which they will suffer penalty and maybe similar to owners of properties, vacant properties as well. Are there going to be some incentives looked at?

The Minister for Housing:

I think it is within Planning. I do not know whether that can ...

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Yes. This was a gift of the Minister for Planning. He is obviously aware that there a number of planning applications that have been approved that have not been developed. I think that is market driven and obviously if the market improves then these developments tend to sort of come on.

[10:45]

I know that he is looking at ways of encouraging those developments to possibly come along a bit quicker. Obviously that would be for him to comment. I think you are meeting with the Planning and Environment Department shortly.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Okay. We will wait for the hearing there then.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

In the draft plan that we have been briefed about today there are no specific links, I think, to health and wellbeing. As a previous Minister for Health you are obviously still very involved and committed to the health of the population. To what extent is the housing that you are going to deliver really going to meet the health and wellbeing needs of the people who live in them? I am particularly thinking in terms of space because we talk about the open space but it is the internal space of new housing which is so important. I have probably mentioned it before but I live in an 1830 house which I cannot touch the ceiling, even with a ladder. I mean it is way up there. Modern homes or buildings seem to be always built as small as possible, the ceilings as low as possible. There is a lack of storage space. There is a lack of space for bicycles, for suitcases. If mum or dad wants to study there is no spare room for that. There just seems to be that constant effort to put as little space in the flats as possible. If we are going to move people into the idea of living in flats, particularly with families, although some people say you cannot do that, they do it in Paris, surely there is a need to get much bigger standards for the internal spaces of what we are building?

The Minister for Housing:

Yes, you are quite right and the design plays a big part in that but regarding the health and wellbeing I think that does flow through the housing strategy like with the minimum standards, making sure that the standards ... so it has the effect of improving someone's health. They are not living in damp conditions or the children are not suffering from asthma, et cetera but also the objective too about the community. The importance of an objective for the community, the

importance of putting a community around not just building bricks and mortar but that you have got a softer touch of people for caring for each other again will have a knock on ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

How do you achieve that in practical terms? Are you talking about building community facilities in these developments?

The Minister for Housing:

Some big developments have got ... part of their planning obligation has been to build like a community centre or something like that and, as has been said before, we need to think outside the box not saying what we want to see built there but asking the community what they would want to see. I gave the example of perhaps an estate I think in the U.K. somewhere that did not want a community building but they wanted a community officer. So it is thinking outside the box of what the community wants and what the community needs.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Okay. Just going back to internal space, I know that there are some new apartments coming on the market where there are no hallways for example. You just go straight out of the communal corridor into the flat and you are in the living space. How important do you think it is that we reassess what sort of internal spaces people need before we start ratcheting up the delivery of all these new homes because I do have concerns that somebody manages to get their bicycle up to the 5th floor but there is nowhere to put it. There is nowhere to keep their coats and their umbrellas. Are we getting away from this emphasis on providing the smallest possible spaces in our flats?

The Minister for Housing:

I would like to think we are but the example that you have just given I think, to me that sounds wrong. I would like to think anything that is built you should be able to live in there yourself and I think inside space is important and if we need to look at that then it is something we need to look at it and increase if necessary.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Perhaps I can answer that. If I was sitting here next week when you are speaking to the Planning and Environment Department ... I know that there is new space standards coming out and they do address the issues you just raised particularly on storage space; also just for bikes and parking and all the rest of it. So there is some new guidance coming out. There is a package of guidance coming out which covers not just that. It covers the parking standards and also density as well as development. So there is sort of a bit of work that is being carried out at the moment which you

will see emerging in due course but I am sure if you want to speak to the Minister about that detail next week he will be able to give you more information.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Thank you. Did you want to come back to the floor now?

Director, Corporate Policy:

No. I mean my comment on that is there is this issue of asking the right Minister the right question but the Minister for Housing's responsibility is overall co-ordination of space and 10:50:45 (inaudible) in the housing framework. So it is something that we are seeking to co-ordinate at present.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Could I just, perhaps, in closing ask you about the need for a housing forum? We used to have one. When I was a Deputy there was a housing forum. Maurice Du Bois(?) was involved, met at the Ambassador Hotel a couple of times, and we had all the stakeholders there, including the major developers, the trusts and private developers. Do you think that would be a useful exercise because although we are perhaps talking more than we were there is not that ability to sit down together and get the responses? We have had some really quite compelling responses, I think, from our call for evidence. If that was happening and it was a sort of a natural process, even if it was just once or twice a year, do you think that would be useful and would you be interested in it because I think perhaps you would be the person to run with that with your limited resources?

The Minister for Housing:

I would suggest you, Chairman. The scrutiny chair could. It is something that you could run or as Constable of ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Do you remember the housing forum? I am not sure you were in the States when it happened.

The Minister for Housing:

No.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

No.

The Minister for Housing:

It was before my time.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Okay.

The Minister for Housing:

But, yes, I am happy to talk to you about it. Any way that we can encourage the community to be more engaged can be nothing but a good thing.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Because there is a lot of frustration. Well, whether it is private developers, individuals who try to develop housing and for all of our talk about ending red tape, there is a lot of red tape that seems to be getting in the way of people's desire to release housing, particularly the smaller schemes.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

I think there is also a lot of people who are frustrated that housing is happening as well. So there is always 2 sides of the coin.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

People who object to the housing?

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

Absolutely. The problem with the planning process is that it has to sort of look at both sides of the argument really and you are always going to be upsetting one side; naturally you will.

The Minister for Housing:

You can please 50 per cent of the people.

Principal Planner Island Plan Review:

A hundred per cent of the time.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Yes, that recent photograph of Deputy Labey in front of La Collette kind of summed it up; the problem we have got that you have got residents who do not particularly want their estate to be changed. They would like it to be improved but they do not really want to see it changed and become much denser in its development and then it becomes a sort of political football. It seems to me that a housing forum would enable the Deputies as well to be there to so that we ...

The Minister for Housing:

That incident is very much a specific site issue and I think you would need to gauge it as a specific site but the general issues ...

The Connétable of St. Helier:

It is going to happen to all. I think when Ann Court comes forward, if we achieve more parking, which are looking for than is currently on the table, it is going to push Ann Court a bit higher and that is going to get people coming in and saying, we do not want this building any higher so ...

Director, Corporate Policy:

If the question is, should we engage and should we consult on the overall strategy and all the initiatives and decide, yes. How precisely we do that; whether there is a standing housing forum or whether it is case by case, for example Ann Court, where we are firm on but we are firm that engagement was needed.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Okay. Well, perhaps work together on would be a useful task as long as we do not have to do all the work. You can send out the invitation. Adviser, if you want to ask a few questions.

Mr. P. Mooney:

There was just a couple from our list. The first one is, do you see a role for private sector landlords to play in helping to reduce the waiting list that exists in the form of the Gateway and if so what?

The Minister for Housing:

Yes, and that is a question that I have posed because we have got 3 social housing providers, would a developer become a social housing provider but they have to go through social security to cover all the bases within social security and I think it has to come back to the States anyhow to approve but the question needs to be asked.

Mr. P. Mooney:

I was thinking more in terms of existing private sector landlords who are providing accommodation. Could they have a role in offering accommodation to people via the Gateway?

The Minister for Housing:

If I remember rightly any landlord can access the Gateway.

Director, Corporate Policy:

Private landlords can offer tenants properties obviously and then suitable tenants can access income support in the same way as a social housing provider. The prerequisite is regulation and that is what we are working on. So a regulatory framework for social housing providers so you regulate the providers who take people off the Gateway. Once you have got the regulation in place can you permit other entities to become social housing providers? Well, I think that is then an open question. I think it depends when you could ...

The Minister for Housing:

That question needs to be answered.

Mr. P. Mooney:

Okay. The other one, with your permission, Chairman, are you willing to review the use of the new rental policy whereby new lettings and transfers are re-let at 90 per cent of the market value rent? It is recognised that obviously those in receipt of income support have their rent paid so it does not directly impact on them although it could prevent some people from seeking paid employment if they thought they were going to have to pay a high rent. But there are people who are just above the threshold of receiving income support who are hit with that 90 per cent charge in the same way as someone who is earning £10,000 above it and it is a question of, are you willing to sort of look at the possible impact because sometimes we cannot always foresee all of the outcomes and it is a question of; is there is a need for some tweaking perhaps?

The Minister for Housing:

That is a very good question, the 90 per cent, as you know, was put into place by the States Assembly decision last year with the housing transformation programme and do we need to review it? Perhaps in time we will need to review it but I think we need to let it run a little bit longer before it is done but it is a very fine balance that we know that refurbishment of housing over the years has been neglected by the States because there has not been any money and this way it has put it in place, a set regime of getting the rents to reinvest back in social housing buildings, which is most important to raise the standards, making them more energy efficient, et cetera and know those on income support, quite rightly, do get that extra support in their rental component. So it is not on my agenda at this present moment in time, put it that way. It has been running for less than a year.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Okay. Thank you. Well, thank you very much, Minister, and your team for coming to see us again and we look forward to working on this draft and bringing hopefully some useful ideas to bear on it before it is finally published.

The Minister for Housing:

Okay, thank you.

[11:00]