

6. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Housing

6.1 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

As the Minister supported the re-zoning of Samarès Nurseries site during the recent debate on the Island Plan, will he be lobbying the new Minister for Planning and Environment to bring back this site as an H1 site for affordable housing?

Deputy A.K.F. Green of St. Helier (The Minister for Housing):

My view is that currently we have it very clearly on record that we are looking for States-owned sites to provide the social rented housing. We should get on with that work, allow the H1 group and the H3 group to do their work and then review where we are, having released some sites, hopefully, to the States rental housing in view of where we are and see whether it is appropriate to bring back brown field sites such as Samarès.

6.2 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

I am rather surprised it was that quick. I wonder if the Minister could inform the House, either now or by email, as to the number of properties within Housing that are suitable for families with disabled children and also the number of properties that are likely to come online that would be suitable for families with severely disabled children?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

This is an area that I have particular interest in but I am afraid I do not have that information available at the moment. I do know that we have insufficient adapted accommodation for people with disabilities. It is a stream of work that we are working on at the present time and I am happy to provide Members with that information by email.

6.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Will the Minister give an update on progress at the Les Quennevais site, Belle Vue, St. Brelade, and if he does not have the information handy at the moment, will he undertake as a matter of urgency to talk to the Property Holdings Department to ascertain what the future of this site will be?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I have to say that this is one area, the Les Quennevais site, that both concerns me and which I know not that much about so I do undertake to come back to the Deputy and to the Members with information on that. I understand from memory that there is a problem around the use of the land and planning but it is something I need to come back to.

6.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

We hear a lot about the way forward for the Housing Department; when can we expect to see the Green Paper?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

You will not see a Green Paper; the Green Paper was already done before I was in post but there will be a White Paper and that will be in September. It has taken a little longer than I hoped it would take but there are 90 different work streams currently being undertaken. I have to say that the knobbling around the financial side has been one of the most complex pieces of work that our advisers have ever worked on but it is in hand and I am determined to see that we get this White Paper out to get people's comments back on it in September.

6.5 The Deputy of St. Mary:

I just wanted to know from the Minister whether he has a view on what kind of level of spare capacity ideally he would have in the system for social rented housing to allow transfers and movement so that people are housed adequately and in suitably-sized accommodation but also

without necessarily leaving their existing communities. What is the level of extra provision that he thinks is desirable and will that be figuring in the White Paper?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Currently it is not extra provision that I need to worry about, it is provision for people on the waiting list. We have currently 461 families on the waiting list and that is where my priority is at the present time.

6.6 Senator T.J. Le Main:

During my tenure as Minister for Housing, I was concerned at the amount of planning costs in relation to the development of social housing, particularly the regeneration of estates such as Le Squez. During my tenure I had an assurance from the Minister for Planning that he would look at these individual costs incurred by social housing providers, such as Housing. Will the Minister please try to achieve developments for social housing without the need for paying hundreds of thousands in planning costs associated with development, as would the private sector?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I wonder sometimes if the Senator has bugged my office with some of the questions that he asks me. This is a conversation I had with officers only about 3 days ago and I do give an assurance that I will discuss this matter with the new Minister for Planning, because it seems to me ludicrous just to be moving money around within the States departments and it is something that I will be discussing with the new Minister for Planning.

6.7 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Will the Minister request the economic adviser to undertake a study and produce a report to identify the affect that the housing element of the income support payment has upon rental prices and house prices?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I am sorry; could the Senator just ask who he suggested I ask to undertake?

6.7.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

The economic adviser of the States of Jersey.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Thank you. This is a piece of work that is already underway as part of the Housing Transformation Programme. **[Approbation]** I do have some concerns about the current rent rebate scheme inasmuch as I do not think it does what it says on the tin, and I think it has been responsible in the private sector for the increase in rents rather than supporting those that need help. While I have not asked the economic adviser to do it, I have asked my advisers and consultants that we are using to look at this, just because I am very concerned that we are funding people inappropriately. I will just make these figures up because you would be very lucky to find rent at £100, but if you were paying £100 rent and we were supporting the person with £20 rent rebate, or whatever the system is now called, it does not mean the person pays £80. It means they continue to pay £100 and the landlord gets £20 and that is fundamentally wrong and we need to do something about it.

6.7.2 Senator J.L. Perchard:

If I could pin the Minister down; I did say will he ask the economic adviser to undertake a study to identify the affects of the payments?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

No, I will not because we are already doing the work separately.

6.8 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

The Minister mentioned 461 people on the waiting list. Does he have the time-in-Island profile of these 461? How many 10 years, how many 12?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

No, I do not have that at the present time. I will see if I can get it and pass it to Members.

6.9 Senator T.J. Le Main:

Could the Minister have a word with the Minister for Treasury and Resources, please, in regard that currently in the property market there are many family homes that would be suitable price-wise for first-time buyers but the difficulty is accessing the loan or the deposit? Would he please convey my message to the Minister for Treasury that a guarantee to assist first-time buyers to access homes in the private sector, which in many cases, are now affordable if assistance was given, with a rental deposit guaranteed by the States?

[12:00]

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I think the Senator has already told the Minister for Treasury what he feels, but all jokes aside, I do think that we need to look at, as a separate work stream - I must get transformation programme up and running first - I do think we need to look at the States loan scheme. Only one States loan was made out last year and I think the States loan scheme as it was before would have supported this sort of initiative. You cannot tie up in today's world millions and millions of pounds of our assets in mortgages, but I do think we can work smarter working with the banks. Another separate piece of work, but I am going to concentrate my efforts between now and the next election on the transformation programme, otherwise I am in danger of trying to do everything and achieving nothing.

6.10 Deputy A.E. Jeune:

Just going back to Senator Ferguson's question, would the Minister be prepared to give Members a breakdown of the numbers on the waiting list by years of residency?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I would be prepared to do that if it is easy to access that information, what I would not be prepared to do is to tie up officers in hours and hours of work. But if it is easily accessible then I will do that.

6.11 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister aware of any arrangements in place to replace the £10,000 from the Prison? Me! No Way! scheme which unless replaced will result in Prison? Me! No Way! closing?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

First of all I would like place on record my admiration for the work that the Prison? Me! No Way! and the team do. We have support as the Housing Department, we have supported Prison? Me! No Way! to the tune of £107,000 to date, but currently I have no plans to extend the working agreement that we have had with them because our agreement has come to an end, we do not extend it. Now to get to the point that the Deputy was asking me, there is no need for Prison? Me! No Way! to close because they have not got that £10,000, in fact they had asked us for £20,000. They have in reserve £60,000 at the current time. I have some very difficult choices to make. Prison? Me! No Way! needs to continue its good work, to target its work where it would have the most effect, there is no need for them currently to close because they do

not get a grant from the Housing Department. That decision is made against things like adapting homes for disabled people. I have very tight budgets to work to. Prison? Me! No Way! is an excellent organisation and can continue to work with the £60,000 it has in its reserves at the current time.

6.11.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may, a supplementary? So the Minister is unaware of any measures to replace that missing £10,000 and he also appears to be unaware that effectively Prison? Me! No Way! is a franchise and unless the funding is in place Prison? Me! No Way! will close come next year. Is the Minister happy with the situation?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I do not run Prison? Me! No Way! They have £60,000 in reserve, they must target their work where they think it is appropriate.

Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Sorry, my question has been asked.

6.12 The Deputy of St. Peter:

What action, if any, would the Minister take to protect the people living in non-qualified accommodation from poor landlords?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I have been working with the Minister for Health particularly to have new legislation coming forward on the minimum standards of accommodation. Of course, the Tenancy Law will cover some of the arrangements around the contractual side, but in terms of the standard of accommodation there is work to be done and the Minister for Health has a law almost ready to come forward for debate. I do not know if it will be in the life of this Assembly, but we are not far off bringing that forward.

6.13 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Given that there are over 450 people on the Housing waiting list, is the Minister still minded to sell off those properties in States rental at the moment, such as those at St. Catherines(?)? Would the Minister not consider it may be better to house some of those 450 rather than sell off those properties?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

That is a very interesting question because it is something that has concerned me in my time as Minister for Housing. In fact I have blocked a number of sales on estates where I have not thought it was appropriate. I do think it is appropriate to sell some of the properties and what I call generally realigning our stock, there are some properties that we have that do not fit with the profile that we have at the Housing Department. There are some properties that are old, that need to be disposed of, that stand alone and just not for us. So, in short, I will not be selling off the majority of our stock, I will be realigning our stuff so that we have got modern, good accommodation for our tenants and allow other people to buy older property such as those at St. Catherines that they can do up and provide good family homes.

6.14 Senator T.J. Le Main:

I would like to follow up the question from the Deputy of St. Peter who asked the question of the Minister about bad landlords, how would he deal with bad landlords; could the Minister please explain how he would deal with bad tenants and good landlords?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

That is an interesting question because what I should have said, of course, there are some bad landlords but there are many good landlords as well and I meet with them and discuss with them fairly regularly. It is a fine balancing act between looking after the interests of the tenants and those tenants that abuse the homes and the accommodation that are provided by landlords. It is a fine balancing act and something that I am working on all the time.

6.15 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister explain to Members why his Transformation Plan has yet again been delayed, I understand until September, when it was due to be before us at the end of last month?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

It was due to be before us some time in July. It is because, as I said before, it is one of the work streams and there are 90 separate work streams, not helped by spending so much time in the House working as well, but there are 90 different work streams and our advisers on the financial side say it is the most complex piece of work that they have ever undertaken. I want this to come to this House in the correct format, in a format that will work and not something cobbled together because of the need to get it done in haste.