



Environment, Housing and Infrastructure Scrutiny

Panel

Quarterly Public Hearing

Witness: The Minister for Housing and Communities

Wednesday, 1st November 2023

Panel:

Deputy S.G. Luce of Grouville and St. Martin (Chair)

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat of St. Helier North

Witnesses:

Deputy D. Warr of St. Helier South, The Minister for Housing and Communities

Ms. N. Day, Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration

Mr. J. Norris, Policy Principal

[10:46]

Deputy S.G. Luce of Grouville and St. Martin (Chair):

Thank you for coming in this morning. Obviously, the weather is a little bit inclement out there, but we wanted to get this quarterly hearing done. Just right at the outset, I will introduce myself. I am Deputy Steve Luce, chair of the Economic, Housing and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel. On my left, I have with me ...

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat of St. Helier North:

Deputy Mary Le Hegarat, District North, a member of the panel.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Apologies from Constable Johnson, who is having to stay in St. Mary to deal with some issues there and also Constable Jackson, who has had to go away to represent the Comité des Connétables on some emergency pre-storm planning, so you have the 2 of us here. From your side, Minister.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I am Deputy David Warr, St. Helier South, Minister for Housing and Communities. To my right, Natasha Day, head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration, and Jack Norris on my left, policy principal, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Thank you, Minister. As I said, our quarterly hearing, we are scheduled for an hour and a half. We will see how we get on. We are keen to make sure that nobody has to stay in town any longer than is necessary today. Let us dive straight in, if we may, to the Residential Tenancy Law reform proposals. We just wondered if you could update us where you are currently with that. Are we still on target to gather information and publish by the end of the year?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Inherently, yes. We have had unfortunately one ... there is a slight delay because of personal circumstances of one individual who leads on this. They have had a tragedy domestically, so it just causing a little bit of a delay. But I do believe we will have that report out before Christmas. So that is our plan to do that.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Is it still your intention to bring forward the legislative reform in the first quarter of next year?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

That is my intention.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay. You told us at the last quarterly hearing that the 2 main areas of contention in the proposals were open-ended tenancies and rent stabilisation, and that is not surprising. We would certainly agree with you; open-ended tenancies is something which is of concern to many of us. Can you just talk us through how the feedback has been taken on board, and if you are going to, or how you are looking to address those concerns?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Obviously we have the consultation period ongoing and we are triaging out all different responses. What we will do is we will recognise ... you have highlighted one area, open-ended tenancies, what

the level of criticism in that area is. After that we will then, if we need to, adjust a policy or create a policy which maybe accommodates that criticism. This is the whole point of having this period of reflection, as it were, on the information that we have received back from all sectors, whether it be tenants, landlords, the whole caboodle, as it were, and we will respond to that accordingly. So I cannot really say: "Oh, we are going to go down this route or that route. I just have not been given sight of the data which we have collected to date.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Do you have any anecdotal knowledge of percentages or rough percentages as to whether these 2 particular things are being supported?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Being supported; I do not believe they have been supported so I think we will have to look at other alternatives. I do not know if Natasha can give me better information. Maybe she has more sight of the data than I have.

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

Yes, I think it is quite widely known that the issue of open-ended tenancies in particular was a very popular issue to be commented on, particularly by landlords. That included a degree of concern as to how that would operate in practice. That is a focus area of the analysis of the consultation response. What the team are aiming to do is provide not only a summary of what was said and what was the weighting of what was said relative to those in favour and not in favour of open-ended tenancies, but also what we would propose to do about it. The Minister has been quite clear that his underlying intention is about achieving greater security of tenure, and that that may not be through open-ended tenancies. We would be keen to explore what other mechanisms may be available and appropriate to secure enhanced protection of tenure. But, like I said, that will be set out as clearly as possible in the post-consultation report as to the direction of travel that the Minister will ultimately pursue for the law drafting.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

That is good to hear. Minister, you will take note of this consultation and you feel that some sort of compromise between nothing at all and open-ended tenancies could be where we end up?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Absolutely; 100 per cent. That is my take on it.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

You may well have heard, I am sure, in U.K. (United Kingdom) media recently reporting on no-fault eviction ban being delayed by the court reforms. Do you have any particular views on factoring in the no-fault or no-event evictions into the law?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

If I am honest with you, no. But I do believe that the setting up of a housing tribunal will help us in that route.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay, maybe just expand, can we, on the progress of the housing tribunal?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes, sure. Again, this will be something which will come out from the consultation period, as we are doing, but I think it is becoming apparent to me that we need some form of mediation, dare I say it, in the same way that we have an Employment Tribunal, same kind of mechanism between business owners and employees that we need kind of a halfway house, which does not go into the courts, and trying to use professional knowledge and expertise to encourage people to come forward. This is why we talk about housing tribunals as opposed to the original concept was a rental tribunal, but to cover all sorts of housing issues because we have seen ... Citizens Advice Bureau have highlighted lots of issues where people come to them for advice and seek advice, but it does not seem to be a very easy mechanism for people then to - shall we use this term bluntly - find justice and do that kind of thing. I am rather keen to develop that idea.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

That is encouraging to hear. Obviously the work we are doing on rented dwelling amendments, again, housing tribunal is used in some of the references we made. Of course, you would imagine that they would also have input on to rented dwellings, if necessary.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes, absolutely.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay. We are going to move to the Island Plan and the targets that were set in the bridging Island Plan. You were reported in the media recently, Minister, as saying that the bridging Island Plan, and I quote: "Is a complete fantasy and will not come forward in the plan." Sorry: "The housing developments in the bridging Island Plan, and we will get nowhere near the 800 units that have been a target." It is clear that in recent months we have seen challenges at South Hill, on the waterfront, and then, of course, most recently Les Sablons in Broad Street. What are your concerns? Where

do you see this going, Minister? What discussions have you had at Ministerial level about not just Les Sablons, but in the bigger picture?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Obviously the issue which is being highlighted by a lot of people are issues around turning schemes around. That is about how does ... obviously housing in itself, I cannot deliver homes myself, so I have to work with the likes of the Minister for Infrastructure, I have to work with the Minister for the Environment and the Planning Department in how they can more efficiently bring forward sites for us to develop and turn into homes. I think what we are doing is we are working much more closely now with Infrastructure, with the Minister for the Environment, and through Planning, and obviously the Planning Minister recognised that there is an issue in planning in terms of delay, which is why he has brought out the Mackinnon report in terms of identifying how do they speed up the process and make it a more efficient system for people to get things built.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

That is one thing, Minister. But, of course, those 3 decisions that I just mentioned, South Hill, waterfront and Broad Street, have got nothing to do with the speed of planning. They have got to do with decisions being made on applications.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

It is the democratic process, is it not? We have a system which is currently in place, which is planning officers put things forward for approval or recommend approval or recommend declining. We then have a system whereby we have a committee who then make a judgment on that. We just have a lot of process in terms of trying to get through the delivery of homes. That is something that has been there for a while and has not changed, to my mind, for a few years. But, as I say, that is my experience right now. I know Deputy Le Hegarat sits on the Planning Committee and maybe has various views about that.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

So do I, and I am the vice-chairman, so do not say too many nasty things.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I am probably telling you things you already know; that there is definitely a challenge. One of the things we have to work on very hard is about alignment. Alignment of what is trying to be achieved. We seem to be, at the moment, divergent from that.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Are there too many policies to play with to achieve what we ... we have a target for housing and we have a bridging Island Plan. But it would appear that the number and complexity of the policies in the Island Plan do not allow us to achieve the target. Would that be fair?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

One has to be very careful here because I absolutely agree with you. I think the last inspector's report which came out, and we referenced Les Sablons there earlier, highlighted just to me - I do not know if you have read it cover to cover - but it just highlighted to me how many different policies are in play just simply on one site and what ... you can take very easily very different perspectives on what those policies mean, how they integrate, how they work together. I would agree with the principle that there seems to be too many policies out there. I am sitting next to a planner here who would maybe argue the other case, but it is trying to find that balance between protection and encouragement. The question is: where is that line in the sand and how do we find it?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Who is at fault? Is it the policies in the plan? Or is it the developers who come forward with developments which just challenge the plan too much?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Private sector developers will, I guess, always challenge plans, but one of the problems I have is, is at the very start of the process I think we need to encourage our planners to be stronger in the advice that they give. In other words, if they believe that a scheme is simply a no-go, surely you can tell a developer: "Sorry, that is just not happening unless you amend the scheme because you are in breach of XYZ policy." I just think that planners need to be given maybe more power. Power is not the right word - I am sure they have got plenty of power - but be more assertive. That is an opinion, as I say, as opposed to where we are at.

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

Being somebody that is on the Planning Committee, can I just say that quite often people at the Planning Department will give advice, but you cannot always guarantee that the advice that you provide will be taken on board. Yes, there are going to be occasions when the applicants can complain about what advice they are given by the Planning Department but let us not make it all one-sided. It works both ways. People are given advice sometimes and they still wish to proceed with what they want to achieve on their site. I think it is very difficult. I will make this point, because when you go to a Planning Committee you have your person from the Planning Department providing their view of either rejecting or approving. You then have your applicant who will have an adviser about planning policies, and then you will have your objectors with a planning adviser. What

you have is a 3-street. Let us not make it simple because there seems to be this idea that it is all very simple.

[11:00]

I am going to make a point, I know, because everybody -- it is quite often a balanced decision looking at all of the policies. You will have the objectors, you will have the applicants, and then you will have the Planning Department and then the committee who have to then make a decision. I think the thing is, is sometimes people think it is quite straightforward and simple, but it is not. But the point I wanted to make was not about that. The point I wanted to make is that when you talk about the various sites that have been rejected, there are a number of properties that are still on the market. There are significant amounts of properties that are not selling on the market. In recent weeks, we have been advised that one site has stopped building because they have got a number that have not sold, and that is not the only site. We are saying we need to develop all of these sites but we have got sites that are being developed that are not selling. I do not know if you have a view on that.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I do, and Natasha wants to jump in here and make an observation. Because I know exactly what you are saying, but I am sure Natasha can articulate it.

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

I think a really important point is that, yes, there are a large number of properties on the market at the moment. I think to the order of around 1,500 advertised sales at this time. But the vast majority of those homes are occupied, so it is not representative of a surplus of housing. It is the affordability and the ability for those homes to transact and the movement in the market. In the longer term, housing is still required. It is just the issue of viability and whether or not those properties will sell in the current market conditions.

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

You misunderstand me. The properties I am talking about are not occupied. They are actually new properties. I am told that there are a lot on the waterfront that are not sold. There are a lot in the north of St. Helier that are not sold. It is not properties that people are living in. It is new properties that are not selling.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Sorry, just to interrupt you on that one. The Horizon Development for sure. I think it is just about 5 or 6 properties left to sell in the whole development; that is the advice which I have been told from

the Jersey Development Company. It is a tiny proportion. Just to come back to your point, Deputy Le Hegarat, it is about planning and what is happening. I think the issue and all the feedback that I have had recently, it is transparency. You highlight lots of things which are very, very complex and people do not quite ... the general public out there do not understand the complexity. There is a core group of people who understand planning, like the back of their hand, but the vast majority of the general public do not have that level of understanding. I think what is important is when we are developing our sites, I think one of the things we have to be very clear about is - and to come back to Deputy Luce's point - why are we developing this site? What is good about this? I am not talking about individual homes and extensions. I am talking about major developments here, in the countryside, in a greenfield site. What is the objective here? What are we trying to achieve? Can we just keep focused on the objective, maybe rather than some of the detail? How do we accommodate what I call ... I am trying to think of the word. It is almost like a spaghetti load of rules, regulations. How do we navigate to the point of reminding ourselves always this is what we are trying to achieve? This is the outcome we want to achieve. How do we all sing from the same hymn sheet in the end on that front? That is my challenge.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Minister, you were recently quoted again in the *Jersey Evening Post* saying there is something fundamentally wrong with the decision-making process. We have mentioned those 3 large sites. How concerning is this to you that we are not having the delivery when it comes to the projected figures for housing? It is massively concerning for me. We have a projection for housing, which is well-known and was established a few years ago. Clearly, we know there is a demand for homes. There will continue to be a demand for homes, regardless of whether we see immigration and emigration, because we know that families want to, what I call, atomising. In other words, we are creating smaller households now. So we will inevitably need more homes in that respect.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

What makes the change in the short term to start delivering some of these?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

The change is to get some of these big planning applications over the line, is it not? I think it is as simple as that.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I asked the question 10 minutes ago: what discussions are you having at Ministerial level to do this? How are you working with other Ministers to try to deliver these targets?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I come back to the point of discussing with the Minister for the Environment, the Planning Minister, and saying: “How do we move forward with special planning guidance?” Get some S.P.G.s (supplementary planning guidance) out and delivered to make sure that these sites can come onstream. To give you one example, St. Saviour's Hospital site, which has been like it has for the last decade. I am pleased to say that we are going to be issuing special planning guidance on that in the next couple of weeks. Now, that has been stuck for a long, long time. But that has meant me working with the Minister for the Environment. It means me working with the Minister for Infrastructure and coming to a view of clearing some of the hurdles that are in the way. As I said, we can talk about it being a housing issue, but it is a lot of other issues which we need to get over the line.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

You may, I think, also have to include the Minister for Health and Social Services because, am I right in thinking, St. Saviour's Hospital is a health site?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes. The one point with the health, we had to get an official agreement from the Minister for Health and Social Services that the south side is surplus to current health requirements. We have had the sign-off on that front.

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

But it is not vacant yet.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

It is not vacant yet but it is working towards a vacancy. Obviously by the time any planning permissions are given and things the site would be vacant.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Cutting to the chase, given what we have said, actual figures for homes delivered by the end of this year; do we have a number?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

We do, and I am trying to very, very quickly lay my hands on them here. On our side we are looking at Edinburgh House, 147 homes. Just clarify if I am right here. Yes, we do have the right figures. Cyril Le Marquand House, 165 homes. And we are looking at The Limes; this is going into 2024. So 147 and 165, those are the 2.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

312.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes, and then we have obviously the Horizon Development of 280.

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

But the 2 of those are not purchases; 2 of those are actually for rental.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

For rental, yes.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay, that is fine, it is homes and that is the important thing.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

They are homes and they are being built.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Have we now got revised estimates for delivery by the end of 2024?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

As far as 2024, looking at the numbers here, we have 142 homes coming through Limes. That is on the figures. Then obviously South Hill, which is up for guidance ...

Deputy S.G. Luce:

But it will not be delivered next year. There will not be homes.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

There will not be homes. Sorry, they are 2025. I am slipping into 2025 here, sorry. I have nothing from, and this is the point, is there is nothing coming through on the timeline for next year from J.D.C. (Jersey Development Company).

Deputy S.G. Luce:

What did we have as a target in the bridging Island Plan for 2024? Can you remind us?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

The year-on-year overall housing supply target was 800 homes per year for the bridging Island Plan. The Minister has outlined States-owned entities' delivery but that does not include private sector

delivery. It is really important to be clear that those 800 homes have represented a doubling of the historic housing delivery rate, which has been closer to around 400 homes per year. You might remember from the debates at the time, is that that was a hugely ambitious target to set not only in terms of the pace of delivery but also the capacity of the sector to deliver at that rate. But, of course, since the Island Plan was approved, we have seen a number of things happen. Our population is doing quite different things to what the projections were based on at the time. That was based on assumptions of population growth. At the time around 1,000 people a year was the assumed pattern. We saw through the census that there were much fewer people coming through into the Island, and likewise because of the state of the economy at the moment and migration patterns that we are seeing, the demands relative to the supply is perhaps slightly different to what the original Island Plan said. Moderating to more normal levels of housing delivery rather than the exponential growth that was perhaps assumed at the time of the bridging Island Plan being approved.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

But even revising those annual targets down to 400, we are going to be 400 short of those revised targets by the end of 2024. How concerning is that?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

It clearly is concerning. That is why I have to work with the Minister for Infrastructure, for instance, on greenfield sites, and making sure that we prioritise sites where we can get drainage to. There is money in the budget for him to deliver that and get that organised. But obviously it is about planning approvals. It is getting those sites up and ready and running.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

In St. Martin's, for example, we had a field rezoned, which has not made any progress at all since the debate, which is now 18 months away. But we have got a number of housing sites rezoned during that debate, which we are all aware of. Is there any progress on any of them?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

You would have to ask the Planning Department on that front. But I think what I would say to you is bear in mind the conditions have changed dramatically. Bank lending has become a lot tighter. We have got high inflation costs impacting on developers. We have to look at the wider picture, which is the economic scenario. That is do developers, at this moment in time, have the wherewithal to be able to get the funding to develop these sites and those ... that will be playing a part in some of the reasons why things are delayed.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

That will be one part of it, Minister. But, of course, the other issue that we have all mentioned is affordability. It may be that delivering affordable homes is the only mechanism that many families can find a way of getting on to the housing ladder.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

That is obviously one of our positive approaches in this front. Obviously we have seen the first step, which is the £10 million scheme, which is currently going to be ... we will know by the end of January that we will have something out there around shared equity. We have had a really good response to that. We have had over 200 people apply for that shared equity scheme, and we have had 100 people update their records as well with the Andium Homebuy, traditional homebuy. Obviously affordability is a major issue. We are seeing market corrections to a degree but obviously not to the extent whereby people can easily get a mortgage and afford a mortgage going forward. I would talk about our £10 million scheme just very briefly and talk about ... it is almost like a pilot scheme because, recognising your point about affordability, is this something that we need to push forward on going forward? Is it something we need to grow and get larger? Or will the economic conditions change significantly so that that affordability gap becomes more sensible?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

My view is my view but, in your opinion, though, Minister, surely the cost of building, the cost of development these days, it is almost out of reach. An affordable home has now, in my view, to be shared equity otherwise it is unaffordable.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes, and I empathise with that opinion. Absolutely. I think that is why the Andium Homebuy scheme, there is a good take up on it. They are selling, I think, 60 or 70 homes a year on a Homebuy scheme. So that's 25 per cent off the headline price; up to 25 per cent, I should say. The greenfield sites are all first-time buyer sites. I am sure Natasha will tell you exactly how we are trying to depress the costs of those to people who are buying homes going forward. We are doing our best ... I mean, obviously we have 15 per cent, for instance, on new sites, so something like a South Hill. I do not know if you made mention of this in the Assembly the other day, that they have gone from ... if we can get this one over the line, we are going from 15 to 25 per cent affordable homes. We are very cognisant of the fact that how do we achieve affordability for people. But clearly homes are still being transacted. It is not as though the whole market is stuck. It is that first-time buyer. It is getting that first step on the ladder, which is the issue.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Getting back to that Minister. Yes, I am really pleased that there is a huge take up of the scheme, and that is really encouraging. But are we going to have enough homes of that type for people to

purchase? It is one thing having a big list of people who want to buy these affordable shared equity homes, but where are they?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

The £10 million scheme is not new build. This is existing homes that are already out there in the market. We have kept away from the new builds in that area. But to your point, yes, we need to be building. We need to keep building. We do not want to stop building. This is why I talk about everybody becoming aligned to that fact, as Deputy Le Hegarat has highlighted, in what is a very complex area and how do we balance the demands of the society with keeping our Island green, with recognising that we actually want to densify St. Helier. These are all the things that people have to think about. But, in the end, it is about we have to deliver some homes.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Before we come off point, and Natasha was obviously hugely involved in the bridging Island Plan debate, and she did a huge amount of good work for that. But that was a 4-year bridging Island Plan. The Minister for the Environment seems very clear in his view that he wants to extend that. I do not know how he is going to legally do that because, to my mind, it is a set time. But what is your view, Minister, on the next Island Plan debate needing to be in 2026?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

My take, at this moment in time, and again there is a discussion around the table at the Council of Ministers, is that there is an awful lot of rezoning gone on which, as you highlighted already, has not been developed. In some ways, my take would be what is the point of having another plan until we can deliver what we already have in the pipeline? That is my take on it. Why would you start the whole process? As far as I understand it, and I missed the debate, the wonderful debates, around the bridging Island Plan and what fields should be rezoned, what should not be.

[11:15]

It sounded a pretty challenging conversation was taking place. Rather than having a further challenging conversation in a very complicated marketplace, why do we not just try and deliver those spaces that have been rezoned, why do we not just get building on those ones and then contemplate where we are with the next bridging Island Plan? Bear in mind, there has been so much change. We have had COVID since, we have got high inflation. We do not quite know where our population is at the moment in terms of is it still growing? Is it in decline? There are just so many question marks at the moment. So why do we not deal with the stuff that we know about rather than try and find some future which we are not there at yet.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Your view is very clear then. We have some sites delivered, let us get those over the line first before we do some more. What about the view that might be put forward, which is: "Yes, we rezone some fields." They have proved a challenge obviously because they are not being delivered. Should we not put them to one side and have some others which are less challenging so that we can deliver housing more quickly?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

Very regrettably, there are very few other fields on the Island that would be any less challenging than the ones that were considered. The ones that were put forward by the Minister for the Environment at the time were the most sustainable ones, with the best infrastructure available, as was known at the time. Additional fields were added and removed by States Members as a result of the debate. Very sadly, there is not a plan B, if you like. If you may remember, there was a B list that was offered at the time which was also a very challenging list to achieve. Infrastructure challenges exist across the Island. The most sustainable locations were identified, so alternatives are more rural locations and less sustainable infrastructure solutions. So there will be challenges if there were alternatives considered.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

What about derelict greenhouse sites, Minister?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

That is obviously an area I know the Chief Minister is quite passionate about, and I know the rezoning of these areas to be. From what I understand, they are quite complex sites. Many of them are in remote areas on the whole so my question has to be about priority. Surely we should be trying to redevelop the sites that are easier to develop, which are recognised already, before we move into glasshouses. That is my gut feel on it and I come back to the point of why can we not just deliver on what we already know is there and set up to be delivered on?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

And the alternative view will always be, well, those sites have been rezoned. They have not come forward. Do we want to take another 4 or 5 years and take a risk that they do not come forward for another 4 or 5 years and find 10 years down the line the rezoned sites have not been built on?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes. I do not have a crystal ball, unfortunately.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

It is a chicken and egg situation.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes, exactly.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay. Let us move on. Deputy Coles has very recently lodged a proposition about minimum residential standards, where he is proposing an increase in the minimum sizes. Do you have a view? I know it is early days, but do you have a general view on that proposition?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes. I am extremely concerned about that proposition because I think it is only going to lead to one thing, and that is more homes becoming more costly to build because of the additional space required. I think it is as simple as that. Love it or hate it, every extra square metre costs an extra tens of thousands of pounds or adds tens of thousands of pounds to the final selling price of a home. I am really struggling with all of this, because we already have very good ... we have moved to I think 52 square metres, if you can clarify that for me, that is a one-bed, 2-person home. I have been walked around some of these properties in Andium Homes and I think they are very adequate properties for what they are. To contemplate increasing the sizes and therefore meaning that you can build fewer homes on the site, which is the inevitable consequence of that, surely just pushes prices up. It comes back to the point of we will deliver even fewer homes that are affordable if we carry on down this route.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay, well that is very clear, Minister, and we look forward to that debate. There have been some challenges also in the same proposition from Deputy Coles around the one-bed, one person, 2-bed, 3 people and concerns over emergency vehicle access and the strain on drainage, but it sounds like it is going to be an interesting debate and we certainly take your views on board about every extra square metre costs money. The developers would have to bear that and reflect it in the cost of the purchase price. The key worker accommodation update is the next subject we can talk about, Minister. How many of these key worker homes have you delivered so far this year, and how many more are you anticipating next year?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

What has happened throughout the summer, and there has been quite an interesting change here, in the first instance to answer your first question, so far the numbers that have been put in front of me here is 28 temporarily housed, 5 into the private market, accommodation on a temporary basis roughly 45 long-term health employees have been supported to relocate into the private sector. That

is what has happened. The rethink has been the creation of a central accommodation service, which is within the government human resource area, and the idea is that they are going to manage 494 units of temporary accommodation. I have got a commentary here that says they are not planning on increasing that portfolio, but they are in the process of setting up a board with representatives from government departments to ensure strategic oversight of government accommodation management. Now, I think that is a new thing which has happened through the summer in developing and how we manage that, because the original thinking was that Andium Homes may well take over the running of key worker accommodation, but I think there has been a rethink on that area and hence the setting up of a central accommodation service within government to deal with that.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

When you say “temporary accommodation”, Minister, just explain a little bit more exactly what you mean by that. So this is accommodation for staff who are here for a temporary period and if so how long can that be?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

Yes, so temporary workers would be like the agency workers who come to Jersey. They need essentially just a bed, serviced accommodation, as an alternative to a hotel, which I am sure you can imagine is much more expensive. It depends on the nature of the contract as to how long somebody might be in that type of accommodation. The transitional accommodation is more towards a 12-month offer that helps somebody transition to Island life. It can be challenging to find accommodation in Jersey, as I am sure you can imagine, particularly if you are bringing your family with you, so that accommodation is to help you transition into permanent accommodation on the Island. I have got some numbers for you. So just in terms of increasing the supply, we did provide an additional 130 units of key worker accommodation within the government supply, so that was the Westaway Court coming back online, which was 56 units, and our working partnership with Andium Homes at what was then the Le Marais development we have another 76 units. Westaway Court is a prime example of that temporary short-term accommodation where somebody has a bed and some basic facilities which are looked after.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Do we know what sort of demand levels we are receiving for this? It is great that we are delivering that, but is that sufficient to meet the demand?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

A good question and, hands up, I do not know is the simple answer to that. As much as everybody says it is a housing problem, it is more an H.R. (human resources) issue in terms of the packages

that are being offered to bring key workers into Jersey. The recognition is in the past this has not been very well managed, so maybe inappropriate accommodation has been given to individuals who maybe should not be allowed to, and I think it is becoming much more tailored now, and I think that is why we have this central accommodation service, which is about tailoring and creating appropriate packages for key workers. That is the change, but in terms of the volume and numbers, I do not have that to hand.

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

The key to understanding the longer-term volume is having proper strategic workforce plans in place for those areas that have the key roles that should be able to access key worker housing. Those departments need to think forward to the future as to what their vacancy rate is like and where those people are likely to be coming from and what type of accommodation. It is very difficult for us to offer a number. Traditionally key worker housing in all the world that we used to know was offered on a far more informal basis and it was quite a crude calculation as to what the demand would be, so the Island Plan assumes that we would increase supply by 25 per year. Evidently even in this first year we have broken through and provided more than that, but now that we have a much clearer and more sustainable policy that will also create a churn in the supply that we have. We have, through the process, learnt that some key workers occupy their accommodation, which is meant to be on a temporary basis, for a decade. That home now will be occupied by 10 key workers over the course of that time if it was used in accordance with the policy. It completely changes the demand profile because of the way the policy will operate in terms of providing the housing. It is not a permanent solution to key workers.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

There are a number of different departments which need access to key worker accommodation for many and varied reasons, and as you say, Natasha, for different lengths of time as well. But that person who happened to be there for 10 years, they would now be expected to occupy this for a year and then move to something more permanent?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

Yes, so being supported in through that process, but moving into their permanent home, which would then free up that home to enable somebody else to transition to the Island. As I say, this is about having a more fair and sustainable policy, because the small number of key workers that are brought to the Island, we do also have local workers on the Island, and this is about an H.R. policy ultimately about the remuneration and benefits that staff have as part of their work offer. I think there has been quite a drive to make sure that that is, as I say. both fair and sustainable.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay, well, just moving on from there, is there a definition of “key worker” because my interpretation always was this person is essential to the running of this job, but we cannot find them locally therefore they are essentially employed as a key worker.

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

More or less. I think we are moving towards the language more about key roles now, so across the organisation where those critical services are being provided and where we have been unable to find those skills locally. I think the definition is going to be a bit more dynamic than previously where a nurse or a teacher would be a key worker. It is key services within particularly the public sector, obviously this is a public sector policy, are we struggling to fill those roles and do they need assistance in the form of housing support?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay. Last question on this, but you mentioned a lower target, which we have exceeded quite dramatically. Are all those properties full - the higher delivery number - are all those 492 all occupied?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

As far as my understanding goes, and I do not have the most recent up-to-date data, not all of the units that were provided at the former Le Marais development are yet fully occupied, but of course as the policy beds in and those key roles surface and this support is provided through the new accommodation service that is there, I do not expect that those units will stay empty for long.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

So the targets we may have set at the beginning may well have been a bit low and the demand has proved to be higher than we thought it might have been?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

As I say, because of the churn that we will see now that these will not be long-term occupied, that will mean that over a period of time we will not need an accumulation of properties. We would more likely stabilise.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I like to use the word “data” because I think this would be better use of data, better information and we are just using property much more efficiently and effectively. I love it. I think it is a great idea.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I have to agree that given the diversity of these key jobs and the different departments that need to access the key jobs it absolutely has got to be essential that we bring it all together, so that we know what the total is rather than ...

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Each department having their ...

Deputy S.G. Luce:

... for argument's sake Education want something else and that we funnel it all through one. Okay. I just want to move to assisted home ownership before we go back to the Government Plan because we were talking previously about shared equity. Early days as we know and how much uptake has there been. You mentioned it, Minister and maybe we could just run through it again, the uptake that we have seen since you launched the assisted home ownership scheme.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes, so I think we probably mentioned this in the Assembly that we thought the £10 million scheme would be around assisting maybe 50 to 60 families, and I think probably people were quite surprised that it was as low as that. However, the positive news for that was to try to make sure, and we were getting this feedback from estate agents, we get chains moving again. It was about getting that initial purchase made, to make sure a chain is delivered and we estimated that might help maybe 200 transactions down the road. As far as we are concerned at this moment in time, and as I say this is my latest data and I am sure this is being revised even as we speak, we have had 200 new applications for this particular scheme, the £10 million, our First Step scheme. When we talk about the 100 people who have updated their records, all of these people will be on a list which is for the Andium Homebuy scheme, and again one of the criticisms was that the Andium Homebuy scheme has 2,000 people registered on that. Well, you can be registered on it, but you may not have a hope in hell of getting a mortgage, so we think the real demand in that area was around, say, 500, something of that order when we were triaging our way through that list. The assisted purchases I would say are going really well and I am looking forward to seeing how we work out who are the fortunate people to get this initial funding.

[11:30]

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I share that enthusiasm but £10 million in the big scheme of things is not a great deal of money. How are we going to move forward with it? Have you got any other schemes or initiatives you are considering to increase affordable housing?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Obviously it is about building homes, so if we can build homes on our greenfield sites that is bringing in more affordability into that area. The other area is obviously around income levels, so okay, this is not purchase, this is renting but it is opening up a gateway and income levels, so trying to get more accessibility to homes, and it is building the right kind of accommodation. Obviously we have got the Northern Quarter, we have got the Ann Street brewery, we have got lots of places here which will be coming onstream.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

So your assisted home ownership shared equity, let us be straight, there are 200 applications, £10 million, £50,000 a pop. Is that enough?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Is that enough?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I am sorry, is £50,000 of equity enough to help the potential purchasers? Surely it is going to have to be quite a bit more.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

It is a lot more and that is why the number of people who can be assisted on the £10 million scheme is relatively small. Just to give you some indication here, if you go with 25 per cent on a one-bed flat for instance, with the shared equity, I am just very quickly looking at the maths here, £78,000 is required to assist and if we go up to a 4-bedroom home you are up to £231,000 assistance. These are big, chunky numbers which bring the affordability down. Bear in mind what we are trying to target is what I call middle Jersey, so we are trying very hard to look at people on middle incomes who potentially could not access the housing market. If you look at where the graphs are in terms of how housing is spread across the whole of the Island, you obviously have the people who can never afford to buy a home, and you have people at the same end who are hopefully homeowners, but there is a very big middle chunk of people who cannot quite access a mortgage in Jersey. One of the objectives of this policy is to try to see how we can encourage and move that tranche into home ownership and how do we do that. As I say, it is endeavouring to target middle Jersey, but as I was saying here, with the shared equity schemes here we are in for a lot of money per home.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

You mentioned people who can never afford to buy a home. We hear that. That number must be increasing at a rate of knots at the moment. Would you not agree? Inasmuch as the cost of building,

the cost is escalating so fast that people increasingly are looking and saying: "I probably could never afford to buy a home" even with shared equity.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Even with shared equity. I think with the shared equity this is where this will be such an interesting scheme in terms of trying to deliver home ownership. The one thing we just have to be really careful with when we are delivering so much shared equity is are we going to affect the wider market? Are we going to start having an impact? Everybody wants shared equity and in the end all we do is push up the prices of the shared equity homes. We have just got to be very careful about how we target that policy.

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

Is there a maximum price, then?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes. What we are trying to do is we are looking at what we call lower quartile property prices, so if I give you a number, so a 3-bedroom house at, say, £750,000. That would be the level of home ownership that we are looking at, £548,000 for a 2-bed, 2-bed flat £446,000, so we are not looking at the luxury end of the market here. We are looking at trying to help people into homes, because if you cannot afford this you are never going to be able to afford a luxury property, so we have to start somewhere and start at these levels. Obviously even today, for instance, the housing market has corrected significantly, so a £750,000 3-bed may well be £700,000, £650,000 today, so that will mean that that correction will enable us to help more people.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

The other thing I would come back on and having had a bit of experience of this, I know it was a few years ago now, but the actual physical cost of building a house, an average house now, Minister, it is, I do not know, £400,000.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

But bear in mind we are not talking about new builds here. We are talking about properties that are already in existence, so ...

Deputy S.G. Luce:

So this scheme does not apply to new builds?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

No. It is not aimed or targeted at new builds, because we want to stay away from that area of the market. Do you want to explain further on that one?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

The specific point is to ensure that the wider policy benefit of activating chains in the current stagnating housing market is achieved, so if you buy a new build there is no chain. It is just a one-to-one sale and then of course they are also more likely to attract the higher market values because they are the premium new product. If you would not mind, I think it is important to be clear that the First Step scheme is one of a wider package of assisted purchase schemes and I can provide what those are to you if that is helpful.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

That would be helpful. We did ask what other ideas the Minister had, so we are pleased to hear.

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

The First Step scheme is the £10 million open market scheme that is being launched by the Government, but of course we have Andium Homes who have their business plan target to deliver 1,000 assisted purchase homes by 2030 and as now we move into their new development we expect The Limes is going to include some purchase properties. We also have S.o.J.D.C. (States of Jersey Development Company) and their minimum of 15 per cent commitment up to 100 per cent where it is viable to do so; South Hill, the Minister recently wrote his letter of support that 25 per cent of that development would be provided for shared equity, which is an additional 35 homes. We then have the wider policy H5, this is to purchase sites coming through on the Island Plan. The Minister for the Environment's guidance on that, the draft guidance, suggests that those will be sold at 30 per cent below the open market values, and then we have policy H6, which is now in force, which is the open market private developments that also will be required to provide a form of assisted purchase or assisted home ownership.

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

Can I just clarify, with the new builds, the 30 per cent, that will be shared equity? That will not be 30 per cent less the market price and totally open, if that makes sense?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

So the way that it is being suggested is basically it is structured like a bond that is held on the property, so we do not want to see that 30 per cent value being realised in the future, because obviously the land value rises significantly when provision is given through the Island Plan for it to be for housing, so to capture some of that land value and ensure that it is reinvested back into the community somehow is done through the affordable housing contribution. Historic sites, through

previous Island Plans, have not had an effective mechanism to do that, so after the first sale the property value jumps in price, which means that while it is restricted to the first-time buyer you do not necessarily get the benefit of a first-time buyer price. We are trying to tighten that up now with the recent housing sites to secure that value depression in perpetuity so nobody ultimately benefits from that site from the occupant of the home.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

We have mentioned that the £10 million is not going to go very far, Minister. Are you coming back to the Government in the very near future for more money?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I have a conversation with the Minister for Treasury and Resources on that front. I do think that we want to see proof that this scheme has a very solid uptake and I think certainly with the conversation we have already had, I think, from a Treasury point of view, they would be encouraged to grow that scheme if they really feel that it has been hugely successful and the demand is there. Obviously again, bear in mind we keep coming back to this point about shared equity schemes and timing. A year ago, 2 years ago, we probably would not have launched a shared equity scheme because of the market conditions and the concern was the market turnover, the churn, was so high and properties were just going mad. You would not launch a shared equity because you were putting fuel on the fire. I think we recognise that this time is the good time to deliver a shared equity scheme, but in 8 months' time, as I say I am not a clairvoyant, where will the market be? Will this scheme still be needed? I take your point about the cost of building and the cost of things. We may not see the decline, but what if we do see significant declines in headline prices, which means that a lot more people can afford homes? Will we still need to develop and deliver a further shared equity scheme, or do we say: "No, we have done our piece. We have triggered the market, we have got things going, and let the market run"? So it is very iterative.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

So you are not ruling out in the next year's Government Plan for example you going back and saying: "This has worked well. I think it can continue to work well"?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes, and the market conditions say we should carry on and we should have some more money, yes, absolutely.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Let us just talk about some of the other figures that input into demand, and rightsizing is one. Just very briefly. We all know the reasons behind it. Can you provide us with an update with regards the work being done to encourage rightsizing?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

At this moment in time I am going to use a terrible term, and you are going to hate me for saying this, but policy under development. It is coming up there. It is going up on what we need to do, but it is for me to deal with. We obviously have issues not just in the private sector where there are couples where families have flown the nest and they are interested in rightsizing, but people are already rightsizing anyway in the current market. We know that at Horizon Development that has happened, but the other area is in our own social housing provision, and it is a question of how do we encourage people to right-size and use properties more efficiently there? It is a complicated area because of the way the rent system is set up and the problem is that if people go to smaller properties currently there is the danger that they will pay the same amount of rent for a small property as they do for a larger one, so hence why we talk about having a rent review. Again, that is something that we are going to be doing in 2024. The whole rightsizing issue for me is a massive priority now in 2024 to do some major work in that field.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay. The housing data intelligence working group is where we want to go next and it all leads into the same thing. We have mentioned data already and we heard at the last quarterly hearing that you are establishing this. Can you elaborate a bit further on the initial rationale for work on this?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes. It is basically trying to capture the data; where the gaps are and what we need to do. I am trying to find my quick note on this one. Sorry, just to give you some insights into this, one of the areas we established is a Housing Advice Service, which is what we are trying to do and collect data on that front. The other area is around delivery of homes through planning. What is coming through the pipeline? At this moment in time, I understand there have been some major computer developments but, would you believe it, we still are having to manually count what is coming through, through planning, in terms of numbers of people putting in applications, the number of applications being approved. It is all being manually counted at this time, so I think these are the areas where we really desperately need to become more effective and more efficient in our data collection. I believe, and Natasha will clarify this for me, we have got somebody working on that right now and it is an absolute priority. Without the data, as we all know, we cannot make good policy.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Who is working on the scheme, Minister? Any particular people doing it?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

To clarify, so the wording that was used in the Minister's Ministerial Plan published for 2023 suggested that there would be a project board established. I have been in conversations with colleagues, such as the chief statistician and the Economics Unit, and we found that we do not need an oversight board in order to make progress for this, because it is getting under the skin of what we know and understand and building that picture first. We did not want to create governance for governance sake if it is not necessary, so we do not have an oversight board for it because we did not consider it to be necessary. But of course as we identify those more critical data gaps, the basic fundamentals that we should know about Jersey's housing market, when we identify where those are and what the solutions might be then we may need to bring together working groups to find a resolution to those things. At the moment we are just mapping out the landscape to ensure that we prioritise appropriately where we invest effort in the future. As the Minister says, we did invest as our first project in trying to work with the existing planning systems to get an automated count on housing permissions, starts and completions. We were able to run that once, but unfortunately the system is so wobbly now because it is so antiquated, and that is quite widely known, that we are unable to continue to do that with the system until it has been modernised, which is due to happen next year.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

So the planning online system, is it working, or does it just not allow for the correlation of that data?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

It is the background system that is to the order of around 30 years old, a system called iLAP that is the records management system for tens of thousands of planning applications through the last few decades. It was that system that is not a modern system and is not compatible. There are no updates for it anymore, so that is the background system that is getting quite wobbly. The service went down a couple of times this year, so Regulation have had to work really hard to stabilise the system to ensure that work can continue in development control; so we have to be really careful to not further break that system while they are working on the longer-term solution.

[11:45]

Deputy S.G. Luce:

That sounds quite concerning, Minister. Do you have a view on that?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I agree. That is all I can say. I understand the investment is taking place right now, but yes, a 30 year-old system still being used today does seem a little bit strange. I am sure they are working on it.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Somewhere where we do have modern methods is modern methods of construction, and so let us head straight to that. Construction innovation, how is that progressing and what challenges have we found?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Well, first of all, let us talk about modern methods of construction and is it being used effectively at this moment in time? The answer is yes, and I think one of the things is around The Limes, which is being developed, and how quickly that has gone up in the time available. Very quickly, I think one of the things about modern methods of construction, what is really good about it, is it saves time, it saves labour, however potentially it does not save cost in terms of expense. You would say, well, things are delivered quicker, which is where we are at and which is what we want to do. About a week ago we met with the industry at the Radisson and we spoke about how we can work better together. Again, from that, I think we will be communicating better with the industry in terms of creating, as you say, this hub of expertise, this iteration between us, what can Government do, what can the industry do, how are we working together in those areas. As I say, it is still very early days on that front.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Because there are lots of options or roads you could go down, is the industry experimenting with those different options?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I am very encouraged with what the industry is doing. I really am. Sometimes we think as a Government we have got to tell them what to do, but I think what the industry recognises is what is in their best interests. We have a shrinking labour force. How do we acknowledge that and therefore how do we react to that and respond to that? Clearly faster methods of building are one way to react to that, but also cost, time, all these areas. If you are in a competitive environment and a competitive market why are you not going to innovate? We just do not want to underestimate what they can do. That is my take on it right now. What I have seen so far, and I talk about The Limes and I was topping out the site just opposite, Ingouville House opposite the Arts Centre, which has been put up in 6 weeks, that is a private sector one; just in awe of what is going on in the industry at the moment. It is really changing the dynamic of what is going on.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

That might be very gratefully received because, if we start to fall behind on some of these timescales, having the ability to do something quickly, even if it does not save any money, at least getting back on target would be good. Right, Minister, we have just come to our last line of questioning and they are the questions around the Government Plan and how confident you are that there is sufficient funding already in place or proposed to deliver all the things we have spoken about this morning so far.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Yes. Clearly there is a budget that we have had to work towards. I think in terms of the grand scheme of things our budget is relatively small compared to other departments that I could mention. We just have to be very targeted in our approach. At this moment in time, one of the areas that we have talked about, the Housing Advice Service, that sort of point of contact with customer and Government and how we deal with that, we are spending quite a lot of money in that area and making sure there is plenty of funding on that front. Clearly in the background we still have to spend money on policy, and policy work. Do we have enough money? We could always do with more money, but we have to work within the means that we have. What we are trying very hard not to do is to grow government numbers, how many people are employed by the government, which is obviously a great concern to the general public out there but it is just all of the areas. It is things such as a roadmap to improving access to social housing. There is plenty of stuff around, so implementation of the Jersey homelessness strategy, so we are doing lots of things with the budget that we have and it is just making sure that we focus and put the money where, in my opinion, we get the biggest bang for our buck, as it were. I think that would be a very simplistic way of putting it.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

It would be difficult to disagree with that, Minister. In 2024 you have got proposals for £138,000 for the Strategic Housing and Regeneration team. That number starts to fall away. In 2025 it is only £85,000. Are you satisfied that the funding for this team is sufficient?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

As the person who holds the budget, if Natasha could explain that to you and where the emphasis is on that front.

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

Yes. As the Minister suggested the Council of Ministers had to work within quite a constrained financial envelope in order to pull together the proposed Government Plan this year. Housing, you will see in the Government Plan, is allocated a total of £300,000 as additional growth, which is shared between the Strategic Housing and Regeneration team and the Housing Advice Service, which sits

in Customer and Local Services. Because we are trying to be as efficient as possible, and recognising where those priority areas are, it was considered that the greatest priority was to make sure that the front line services in the Housing Advice Service had the lion's share of that £300,000 allocation. Because for them that requires some growth of F.T.E. (full-time equivalent) we calculated the amount of money that would not be spent for the first 3 months of next year while they go through their recruitment process, and we have passed that money back over to the Strategic Housing and Regeneration team, which means that for 2024 we can keep up the pace in terms of clearing through the backlog of policy work. Ultimately into 2025 it may be that a small additional amount of budget is sought again through a new business case to close that gap that you have quite rightly identified from 2025, but of course we are focused on making sure that we are operating as efficiently as possible so any efficiencies that we can make over the course of this year we will try to make, to ensure that we do not have a gap in 2025.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

We can see that as you mentioned, Natasha, Housing Advice £162,000 rose, going up to £215,000 in 2025. Is that just an increase in staff numbers in that sector?

Head of Strategic Housing and Regeneration:

It is principally an increase in staff. It is a relatively new team that ultimately had a skeleton workforce attached to it. It was one F.T.E. and they have been able to grow that out slightly. As the Minister mentioned, the downstream pressure from the more policy work we do the more pressure that puts on the front line service to implement those policies, so the implementation of the homelessness strategy and the very much improved access to social housing are 2 key policy areas that put pressure on that service. We cannot do more policy unless we have got the capacity there to implement those policies at the front line.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

You have just mentioned 2. Are those the main queries that are coming into the Housing Advice Service or what would you say are people's main concerns?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

We have got a breakdown here. So social housing is number one by a significant proportion and then there will be private sector evictions, dare I say it, is another area, which they have, and obviously first-time buyers and something like that. Just to give you an idea of the numbers, the total number of enquiries involved at customer contacts, Q1 of 2023 we had 314, Q2 214, and Q3 284. So quite a steady demand is being created or going through there. I think it just proves that the Housing Advice Service as a concept, which came in just before I came onboard, was a great idea and I think it is proving its worth.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

You have got the numbers there, and that is really good on a weekly basis. How are we managing or assessing the impact and the value to Islanders of the advice they have been given? I suppose it is difficult to quantify.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Clearly obviously people accessing it, and this is where Natasha alluded to with the policies, in terms of we are creating demand by our policy actions. For instance, widening the Gateway will create more demand, because more people have access to social housing. For me, it is quite positive. It is positive that we are getting an increase in demand because in a quirky kind of way it proves that the policies that we are trying to introduce are being taken up and are being effective.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

When we have done our recent work on rented dwellings, Citizens Advice have been in and spoken to us and they are, in their own words, overwhelmed by housing-related enquiries. We had the impression that they get the people going into them very much because they are seen as independent and away from Government. To what extent do you think these charities, such as C.A.B. (Citizens Advice Bureau) should be the first point of contact for housing?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

That is a deep question.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

When does Government step in and provide broader assistance or advice?

Policy Principal:

Do you want me to step in? The homelessness strategy work, and I think there are various routes in for people. Having the Housing Advice Service is clearly important and they are there to provide advice and guidance but there are organisations out there such as C.A.B., Shelter, Women's Refuge, all of these organisations who are doing good work and people trust those organisations. I think the important thing is that we are all now speaking to each other, much better than we ever were. There is the Homelessness Strategic Board which brings together the Jersey Homelessness Cluster, which is more operational, which brings together all of these organisations and they are producing data, and making sure that they are more aligned and signposting people to services who can help. I think it is whichever route people feel most comfortable with, but making sure that those options are clear to people, and when they do that they are signposted to the right agency. I think it is a good thing and the numbers speak for themselves. I think there are more people going to the

Housing Advice Service, and that is clearly part of the role of building it up, but I think it is that people are aware that they can come forward with those concerns or issues now more than ever.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I would just add that I know it has been in existence for maybe a couple of years now but it is surprising how many people still do not know that it exists. We still have to tell people about the service.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

So maybe a bit more publicity, and it is clear from the title that it is not particularly specific - Housing Advice - so let us hope that more people go to it for whatever housing advice they need.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I agree.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Okay, Minister, we are pretty much at the end but I did want to ask you very quickly before we go about the written question response to Deputy Feltham from the Minister for Treasury and Resources, who provided a list of growth bids that were considered for inclusion in the Government Plan but did not make the final cut. We note that 2 of these were housing data and vacant homes, reprofiling the investment, and a business case was not commissioned and they were not included. Can I just ask how hard you pushed, how much of a business case you put forward and whether that was disappointing or were you just hopeful?

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

We are always hopeful. How hard did we push? I think Natasha will tell you that she pushed pretty hard. It is very challenging because clearly we are up against major budgets such as Health and Education. Housing is a "relentless focus" as far as this Government are concerned, and obviously given that the spend in our department is relatively small it can be frustrating that we even got a little bit of a cut in there because, as we have already identified, there are some key things we need to be doing. We need to be getting better data. There are areas where we really do need to spend some money but we are given what we are given. We have to cut our cloth to fit what we can do and get on with it but, as I said, the problem for Government as a whole is it is not a bottomless pit of money, as much as a few people think it is.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I would agree with you certainly on the bit about housing data because data is everything and without it you could be moving in the dark and not really sure.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I think we have highlighted that with the planning issue, a 30-year-old system. I talk about bang for buck, but these are areas where we really do need to focus some serious money into, if we are going to come up with very good policy decisions as far as our long-term housing strategy is concerned.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

Because you cannot make good decisions without good data.

Deputy M.R. Le Hegarat:

But would you not say when you say about the big departments that you are competing with, Health and Education, does housing not come as a priority? Without good accommodation then there is a risk to health and without good accommodation there is also a risk to education.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

I agree with you.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

On that point, we will say that is a good place to finish. We are a little bit earlier than expected, Minister, but thank you for coming today ...

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

My pleasure.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

... to our quarterly hearing and we look forward to the next one. Thank you very much.

The Minister for Housing and Communities:

Thank you for your time.

[12:00]