

Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Planning and Environment

4.1 Deputy S. Power:

I ask this question of the Minister for Planning and Environment. Does the Minister feel that control of population and migration should be strategic and should rest with a Minister or Ministerial department that is not in any way involved in driving or involved in economic development and I ask this Minister this question specifically because of the shortage of affordable housing and social housing.

Deputy R.C. Duhamel of St. Saviour (The Minister for Planning and Environment):

In a word, yes, I do.

4.2 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Six months ago 6 local families had their dream of home ownership dashed by a last minute decision of the Minister for Planning and Environment, who re-categorised the homes available under the Homebuy scheme to the more expensive first-home buyers at Le Clos Vaze. Can he tell Members what progress has been made in producing an affordable homes policy which satisfies the legal requirements which I believe he considered to be a bit of a problem beforehand?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

First and foremost, let me put the Deputy correct. The hopes of the 6 families were not dashed by a decision taken by the Minister for Planning and Environment. Those 6 families were offered similar conditions to which would have existed had we had the defunct Homebuy scheme. I am pleased to report to the House that 4 of those families have purchased their homes under those conditions, 2 dropped out and those homes went back on to the first-time buyer market. The House will receive through the Treasury a contribution to funds on the first re-sale of those properties, some £500,000. I think it is a success story and certainly does not accord with the comments from the Deputy. In the second part of her question; what is happening on the affordable homes front, she is well aware that there is a working party of a whole number of States Members seeking to address the redefinition of affordable homes to come forward with a replacement scheme for the Homebuy scheme and that work is well underway and due to be finished off in the very near future.

4.2.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

According to a report in the *Jersey Evening Post* who leaked an email in which the developer's lawyer confirmed that the 6 homes were to be sold at first-time buyer value of £425,000 and not the agreed price of £275,000, is the Minister for Planning categorically stating that those 6 families who were originally chosen, picked out of a hat to have homes at £275,000, only pay £275,000 for those homes?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I must reiterate, the Deputy did not hear me. I said 4 of those persons were offered the terms that were equivalent to the Homebuy Scheme. They did not pay the full price; they paid a reduced price and sums of monies will be coming back to the Treasury. However, 2 of those families, having been offered the opportunity to purchase, found reasons not to go through with the purchase and those 2 extra units were therefore put back on to the market at the open value price.

4.2.2 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Can I just have confirmation that the Minister for Planning and Environment is agreeing that those homes were sold at £275,000?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

That is my information.

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Thank you.

4.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

My question relates to architects' plans which I understand cannot currently be produced without prior permission of the architect. Will the Minister state whether that is the case and what that means for the media outlets who want to act in the public interest to inform residents of controversial developments that may be coming up in their area?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

At the moment, plans are normally copyrighted and deposited with the department as part of an application process. Members of the public, including members of the press, are entitled to inspect those copies at the Planning Department but they are not entitled to take a photocopy or some other electronic means of copying the material without the prior permission of the architect. There are plans afoot by the department to open up the planning process by the introduction of an electronic system which will enable members of the public and the press to view those details on line. Discussions will need to be had as to whether or not, in doing that, there will be a facility to print out those documents on your home printer machine or some other printing machine and whether or not, in doing so, you would be violating the copyright rules.

4.3.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I thank the Minister for that response. Does the Minister agree that irrespective of whether or not in future plans are put on line, the issue nonetheless remains with the copyright and will the Minister be bringing forward changes to allow the media, whether they be bloggers or the press, to reproduce architects' plans so that members of the public can view them and so that the public interest outweighs any copyrights that the architects may already have?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I agree with the Deputy. There is an argument for seeking to allow that to happen and I will take that into consideration when we review the system.

4.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

The Minister was reported in the press as saying that the replacement of the sewerage facilities would cost £250 million, which has spread alarm and despondency among the general population, and I will be asking the Minister for Transport and Technical Services a similar question. Would he acknowledge that this figure was correct and will he be prepared to provide written confirmation of how he reached this conclusion?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I would and indeed will do so.

4.5 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I would like to refer to 2 amendments to the Island Plan that was debated last year. Could I first of all ask the Minister to pass on my congratulations to his officers for implementing one of the amendments which relates to the costs of planning fees in relation to minor works done to listed buildings which has now taken force in law from January and hats off to the department. Could I secondly ask the Minister to advise me what progress his department has made with the amendment that was approved to investigate the feasibility of a St. Helier country park?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I thank the Constable for his comments. Work is being undertaken in a general context to see to what extent the provision of a country park could take place on the outskirts of St. Helier.

[11:30]

I must inform the House that although it was a proposition from the Constable as part of the Island Plan, countryside parks that are appended to urban areas are not the exclusive area of St. Helier and there might be alternative possibilities or other possibilities for doing similar things next door to the other urban areas, notably in St. Clement and notably at Le Quennevais.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

Could I thank Minister for his answers and ask him to involve me, if possible, in his departmental work. I agree that country parks could indeed border all of the urban parishes but I would like to remind him that the States approved my amendment in the Island Plan.

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

Yes, when the time comes for the Constable to be involved, he will certainly be involved.

4.6 Deputy J.H. Young:

Will the Minister advise the Assembly whether he has yet been able to meet with the Jersey Architecture Commission - the membership of which he appoints - and discuss with them, or will he discuss with them, how the Island might better achieve community involvement in the development of designs of significant developments which affect the community in line with the ideas of the U.K. Localism Act which comes into force in April which requires developers to work in collaboration with the community when they produce major designs?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I have not yet taken the opportunity to meet with all of the members since being appointed to office although I had met with a number of them previously. A new appointment has just been made to the Architects Association to bring the numbers up to the full complement. In setting out an Architecture Commission as one of the advisory groups to advise the Minister, that is exactly what they do. It is just one of many outside bodies that the Minister has the opportunity to draw upon in terms of their experience. In that context, I think that there is a very real separation between the professional capacity of those persons sitting on the Architecture Commission and, indeed, lay persons' opinions in dealing with community issues in line with the U.K. Localism Bill. To that extent, in seeking to bring forward to this House and to the local community opportunities for more people to be involved in how their individual areas will be developed, there must, in my view, be an alternative organisation, if you like - or body - to lock into those members of the public whose viewpoints must be consulted upon.

4.7 Deputy R.J. Rondel:

This is really a supplementary to Deputy Hilton's earlier question regarding the 6 homes at Clos Vaze. I do understand the Minister's answer that of the 6 homes, 4 were taken up and 2, for whatever reason, were not. My question is why then were the remaining 2 not offered to the people on the waiting list that desperately required affordable housing?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

The reason that the list was not extended to any other persons was that the gateway that was being run at the time was being operated indirectly by the Parish of St. Helier without permission to do so and we got ourselves into a political turmoil in that offers to enter into a purchasing agreement by certain parties were made by the Parish without having any ownership of the property which they could offer. That was part and parcel of the difficulties. In achieving an agreement with the developer, it was agreed that in order to be fair to the 6 who had been the ones drawn out of the hat, that they would be the ones who would be brokered with and that is what we did.

4.8 Senator P.F. Routier:

When the Minister was proposing the members of the Planning Applications Panel, he gave an undertaking that the members would sign up to a code of conduct and he also agreed that he would

publish that so that the public were aware how members were expected to operate. Can he indicate when that will be published?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I believe it is on the website but if Members would like their own personal copy, I will send that out later today.

4.9 Deputy S. Power:

The Minister may or may not be aware that in some sectors of the unqualified housing market, there are poor standards of accommodation and some residential buildings have not been upgraded for 30 or 40 years. Does the Minister feel in his role as Minister for Planning and Environment that there is a strategic responsibility to work with the Minister for Housing and with the Population Office inspections to deal with this problem as some of this accommodation may very well be close to being unfit for purpose?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

Any Island community, and in particular the governing bodies that govern it, must deal with the best use of its assets as possible. In that respect, if there are areas outside of the government control which impact on the use of buildings within the States sector and they are not sufficient for purpose, then it is only right that in bringing forward housing policies and planning policies that best use or improvements are sought to bring about best use. So I do agree with the Deputy.

4.10 Deputy J.H. Young:

Will the Minister confirm his support for the Island Plan policy of making available in the urban areas of the Island allotments for those that wish to have them? Is he able to provide any advice to the group currently working in the Island to assist them to identify suitable sites and not waste their resources on sites which prove to be unsuitable?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I honestly support the policies that my department has set and which have been ratified in this House but do have some provisos. The provision of garden allotments makes most sense when those garden areas are very close to areas that have been built-up in. If indeed requests come forward by the residents of those urban areas for garden allotments that are in the deep countryside, as far as it exists in Jersey, then that brings with it planning problems in respect of further requirements for garden sheds, for parking and all the other paraphernalia that is normally associated with this allotment-style gardening. In that respect, if indeed fields are going to be used in the deep countryside for gardening purposes for the general public, then I would personally favour a move towards community farming whereby individuals have a share, if you like, in the running of a particular farm and share not only in the workload but in the profits that are generated. I think that perhaps would provide a better model. But for areas that are close to the built-up area, yes, garden allotments are something that the department and the Minister do support.

The Bailiff:

Very well. That brings questions to the Minister to an end. Before we move on, I can inform Members that Deputy Young has lodged a second amendment to the Electoral Commission: Composition and Terms of Reference - P.5/2012 - and that will be with Members.