

22.04.25

**5 Deputy K.F. Morel of St. Lawrence of the Minister for Housing and Communities regarding the use of empty homes (OQ.72/2022)**

Following the information revealed by the 2021 census that there are 4,000 empty properties in Jersey, will the Minister advise the Assembly what measures, if any, he is taking to ensure that as many of these properties as possible are quickly made available for residential use?

**Deputy R. Labey (The Minister for Housing and Communities):**

Work is already under way by my team to identify the best ways to get empty properties back into the housing market. As we have an acute shortage of housing it is absolutely essential. I pledged to start this work in Q1 2022 and that has begun by the new housing strategy and regeneration team. A word on the census figures: 3,123 empty homes in 2011, gone up to 4,000 in this census. We do not have the breakdown yet and that is undertaken by enumerators personally. They chase up all the empty properties as best they can. They were able to identify in 2011 the reasons why 50 per cent of them were empty and that work is being done on the 4,000 in the current census. That figure will probably be available at the end of June or beginning of July. But it is worth noting that I think 50 per cent of those empty properties in the 2011 census were for legitimate reasons in terms of being between occupancy, in terms of being between tenancies or sales. That was about 29 per cent, and 23 per cent I think was holiday homes. Of course, the census is taken in March before the holiday home business kicks off. So we just have to be careful about how we interpret the figures.

**3.5.1 Deputy K.F. Morel:**

I thank the Minister for his answer. Even if only 25 per cent of those homes were to be available or to be made available, that would be 1,000 homes out of 7,000. That is a considerable use. Would the Minister please advise perhaps a bit more specifically: is the property register that the States voted for a couple of years ago, a register of all properties in Jersey, something that would make this task easier to understand and, if so, could he provide the Assembly with an update as to where we are with that property register?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

Yes, I think it can only help, the property register. Of course, what we want to capture are those properties that have been laying empty for years. We have all seen them. Some have been laying empty for decades - it is unbelievable - others a shorter time span, but we need to capture those properties. So we are now in discussion with the Parishes, with the Constables, with Her Majesty's Receiver General, because there are powers for the Receiver General to do that. Obviously, I think the law is going to need an update to be more fit for purpose in terms of reclaiming these properties, some of which they cannot trace the owners of, that is the problem. After the death of the owner that we knew, they cannot find anybody that is in the family. But we must find a way to bring those properties back into use and if somebody down the line does turn up and say: "I am the relative" that there is an agreed figure that is payable. But we have to bring them back into use and there are ways to do it.

**3.5.2 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

Can the Minister inform the Assembly how many of these 4,000 empty properties in Jersey are owned by the Government or its arm's length organisations?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

Very few, but I do not have those figures in my head. Obviously, we have seen some of the Government properties that are empty. It is not a good example. Some of those are part of schemes which have not yet come to fruition, part of a much bigger picture. I think of La Folie Inn and the little apartments behind that. But Government is behind the curve on this. Other jurisdictions - in the U.K. (United Kingdom), for example - district and borough councils, county councils use a scheme called "no use empty" which has considerable powers. After exhaustive consultation with a landowner or a property owner, if that comes to nothing that agency is entitled to enter the property, to redecorate it, refurbish it, let it out, take the rent until such time as that has been paid off. Now, I am not suggesting anything as draconian quite yet for Jersey, I do not think it is ready for it, but there must be a Jersey version of "no use empty" and that is what I am exploring, a way to do that. I would like it not to be a government agency but a trust because I think a trust might get more goodwill, cheaper rates, mates rates. There are ways. We could use some of the £250,000 that is allocated this year to the start-up of that and we have another £250,000 next year, to see if we can help people who might be asset rich in terms of property but cash strapped in terms of doing them up. Perhaps we can help that process happen and for the scheme to replenish itself.

### **3.5.3 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

In my head I visualised the monument to the Government of Jersey's empty properties, which is Westaway Court, which has been lying empty for a very substantial period of time and is due to be empty for much more time. Would the Minister agree that the Government's management of its portfolio in recent years has been particularly poor and that in the future we should not be letting buildings like this, where there is a substantial amount of space for apartments for people to live in, to lie empty for such a long time, even if that means coming up with temporary uses for them in the meantime?

### **Deputy R. Labey:**

Well, yes, I have said before I believe there is a structural issue here, a structural failure, and this is not - I repeat not - the fault of government agencies. It is not the fault of the officers of Property Holdings, who are working very hard with me and I am grateful for their expertise and their efforts and their energy. But politically we cannot be the monkey sitting there looking at 2 piles of nuts and trying to decide which pile to eat first and dying of hunger before he has made that decision. That is the game we are in. We have to make decisions on some of these sites and that is a good thing to do. While they then do not become available for a school or a hospital or whatever, that clears the picture of the other sites that might be available. So that is what I believe we should be working towards, a complete change of culture in that direction.

### **Deputy M. Tadier:**

Sir, I did have my light on earlier but it is probably hidden by ...

### **The Bailiff:**

It could have been hidden by an earlier ... I will add you to the list as you have had the light on previously, but then no other time for questions on this particular one.

### **3.5.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:**

My previous question was asked by Senator Mézec, so some clear thinking around some groups. May I ask the Minister how has he prioritised the importance of empty properties against new builds? Does he think there will be a quicker response with empty properties that have planning

permission, that are already set up to do that and really need refurbishment, above whole new areas of build? How will he go about doing that as Minister for Housing and Communities?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

Well, I suppose I slightly prioritised new builds but the work on empty properties could not begin until this year because we were at capacity with the team I have available to me. But with the new housing strategy and regeneration team we are able to start that work on the empty properties this year and that will continue ... probably continue a lot better in the next few months because there will be less political interference and the officers can get on with the job. Then when the new Minister for Housing and Communities takes office I hope there will be an advance and something for him or her to action.

**Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I am resisting the temptation to ask the Minister how he prioritises his nuts, [Laughter] but I am afraid what I have to ask him ...

**The Bailiff:**

Thank you for resisting the temptation.

**3.5.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:**

I have to ask the Minister whether he believes that particularly with States-owned and arm's length companies it is easier to make that prioritisation and just say: "Get on with it." Let us use these, rather than building on green sites or building temporary accommodation camps. Would he ask the arm's length organisations to make that priority right now?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

I think I have made my position clear on that in the nuts answer.

**3.5.6 Deputy S.M. Ahier of St. Helier:**

Is the Minister aware of whether a number of these properties were awaiting planning permission to be developed?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

Does the Deputy mean a number of empty properties that are ... yes, that will be a category, that will figure.

**3.5.7 Deputy S.M. Ahier:**

Is there a backlog at Planning which may be causing a delay to some of these developments moving forward?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

That is one for the Minister for the Environment. Just to be clear, properties that are built to a certain degree do count in the figures. They might not yet have been occupied but if they are at a certain level of build they count as a property. Anything with a kitchen is counted as a property. It might be one of those kitchens in a cupboard with a stove and a little sink, but that is counted, too. The work going on now is painstaking to establish exactly why, what is the reason for each property being empty.

**3.5.8 Deputy M. Tadier:**

I hope I am talking to the organ grinder rather than the monkey with this question. The Minister will know that one of probably the most famous empty properties in Jersey is in his constituency and it is called La Folie Inn. Although it is traditionally known as being a former commercial property, it does have a cottage attached to it and probably an apartment as well, which is effectively States-owned and has been languishing. It is a historic building and a residential property which has been languishing for years now. Does the Minister agree that the first thing we can do to get these kind of properties back into the market is to support the proposition later this week that seeks to ask the Minister to carry on that piece of work to address and discourage empty properties?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

As I have said, I am happy to accept Deputy Tadier's proposition. With Westaway Court, that has at last been designated for housing. It is probably best suited to key worker housing for health, but I hope that we have some movement on Westaway Court. La Folie, of course, falls with Ports of Jersey. They do have plans for the quays, the historic quays, La Folie and what is behind La Folie towards the water, moving what is there elsewhere so we can use the full potential of that fantastic site with La Folie Inn. I have always said La Folie Inn must stay in some way as a facility to be used by the public. There is a tremendous affection for that building and I think it should stay as a building that can be accessed and used by the public because they love it. But I have seen early plans that involve the redevelopment of that area and the refurbishment of La Folie Inn, so let us hope that that comes online very soon in the next session.

**3.5.9 Deputy K.F. Morel:**

Just very quickly, it is pleasing to hear that work has begun within the department. Is the Minister able to give any greater clarity around the timeline of that, assuming a new Minister would want to continue that work? Is there a rough end date for when that work is to be completed?

**Deputy R. Labey:**

Deputy Tadier asked me to bring options by the end of September. His wording is generous enough to allow me, I think, to bring options on options if they are not all absolutely worked up by the end of December. But yes, by the end of this year we must have something in place because I want to use that £250,000.