

2024.02.27.

13.7 Deputy D.J. Warr of the Chair of the Comité des Connétables regarding a review of the Rates (Jersey) Law 2005 (OQ.36/2024)

Further to the recent work carried out on vacant homes which demonstrated we are not making the most of our built environment and revealed that some rate assessments were based on figures over 20 years old, will the chair commit to undertaking a review of the Rates (Jersey) Law 2005 and present to the Assembly the findings of this review within the next 12 months and, if not, why not?

Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence (Vice-Chair, Comité des Connétables - rapporteur):

I thank the Deputy for his question, asking whether the chair will commit to undertaking a review of the Rates (Jersey) Law 2005. In the absence of the chair, as vice-chair, I cannot give such a commitment. However, I recognise that the Deputy, when he was Minister for Housing and Communities, did not have the opportunity to meet with the Supervisory Committee to progress the findings of his report, *Action on Vacant Properties*, R.151/2023. I am, therefore, pleased to invite him to a future meeting of the Supervisory Committee to express his views to us on how he believes we are not making the most of our built environment and how a review of the Rates (Jersey) Law 2005 would mitigate this. We will, of course, also be meeting with the newly-elected Minister for Housing and Communities and I understand that officers are in the process of arranging that meeting.

13.7.1 Deputy D.J. Warr:

I thank the Constable for her answer. What proactive measures does the Constable believe would be most appropriate to ensure that homes that lie vacant in the Parishes of our Island are encouraged to be brought back into use?

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

I think the former Minister himself was keen to see obviously empty homes being brought back into use, and I know that he recommended a number of ways forward that he thought would be useful to do this. He was not proposing to tax empty homes, as I understand it. But he did feel - if I can just find his recommendations - that there should be legislation considered to identify vacant and ownerless properties. He did work with the Supervisory Committee to identify that there were a number of vacant homes available at the moment and he was consulting with H.M.C. (His Majesty's Counsel), the General also.

[11:45]

I cannot disagree with the recommendations that he made in the report that I have just mentioned. I think the best starting point is for the Deputy to meet with the Supervisory Committee so that we can consider his views and can consider his report in detail, as well of course as to meet with the now Minister for Housing and Communities to hear how he would want to progress this situation.

13.7.2 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

Does the vice-chair believe that aspects of the Rates Law, which mean that homeowners who make improvements to their properties for environmental and energy-reduction reasons can end up paying more than they did before, are fair and encourage Islanders to want to be environmentally responsible?

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

The Rates (Jersey) Law 2005 does not stipulate whether homeowners or indeed those who rent properties should make any environmental improvements to their homes. However, the law itself does state that the attributes of a property are what the value of the property is based on. I do not think I am explaining that very well. The attributes of a property are assessed and not the rental property. We have not considered, as the Supervisory Committee, making any changes to the Rates Law to take into account the benefit to properties that have had environmental work undertaken on them or work to improve them environmentally. No doubt the Deputy, if she feels that should be considered, would want to put her suggestion to us to consider it.

13.7.3 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

Yes, I am encouraged by that. I would very much like to take the vice-chair up on that discussion further, and certainly I have one example of a constituent who had put cladding in place and then their bill was a lot higher. Sorry, I have not asked a question, have I, Sir?

The Deputy Bailiff:

No, we are looking forward to one though, have you got one?

Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

No, I am now stuck. But will she agree to receive further information from me on that point?

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

The properties are assessed on the attributes and their condition. It is a case that those properties that are in poor condition are assessed at less than those that are maintained in good condition. Therefore, it does encourage people to make improvements to them for an environmental reason.

13.7.4 Deputy J. Renouf:

Would the Constable agree with me that there is a considerable social and environmental cost to the Island for empty properties in the sense that properties that are already built and not being used mean that we have to, potentially, consider building on greenfields or in other places where we might otherwise prefer not to? We have to put in facilities to those locations and so on. Does she, therefore, accept that this is a significant issue that we should be addressing as a matter of urgency?

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

I do not disagree with the Deputy's comments. However, the review that was undertaken last year into vacant properties only identified the relatively few number of them, compared to the 46,000 residential properties that we have in the Island. Although I do not disagree and I do think that we should be looking at vacant properties, not least of which is our properties that are owned by the States, the Government themselves. I think we should be looking at how we can utilise unused States-owned properties to find additional homes for the many people that need them.

Deputy D.J. Warr:

Sorry, Sir, can I just clarify? The Constable said 46 ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

No, it is not your question though, is it?

Deputy D.J. Warr:

Sorry, no, but it is just a factual error I just wanted ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Yes, perhaps in your final supplementary you can ask a question involving that matter. Yes, any supplementary, Deputy Renouf, or not?

13.7.5 Deputy J. Renouf:

Would the Constable be able to commit to investigating whether changes to the Rates Law might be a method by which empty properties might be incentivised to be brought back into use, for example, increasing the foncier rate on empty properties, which my understanding is would require a change to the Rates Law?

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

Yes, I think reviewing the Rates Law on empty properties is certainly something that the Supervisory Committee could commit to. However, as I said earlier, we would need to hear from the current Minister for Housing and Communities on what his views are and how he thinks that should be progressed. I am just trying to find the correct number of domestic properties that Deputy Warr thinks I have misled the House. I am just trying to find that so that I can agree or disagree with him.

The Deputy Bailiff:

The question was about vacant homes, so no one is expecting you to know everything about housing. Any other questions for the Connétable? Final supplementary, Deputy Warr.

13.7.6 Deputy D.J. Warr:

I do not really have a final supplementary, I just want to help the Connétable with the number. She referred to 46,000, it is 4,000 was the original figure, which has ended up being 900 as identified by the housing team.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Sorry, can you clarify your question, 4,000 what? Because you said there were 46,000 homes.

Deputy D.J. Warr:

46,000 vacant homes, sorry.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I think she said 46,000 homes in total.

Deputy D.J. Warr:

I thought you had referred to vacant homes. I apologise if I misheard that.

The Deputy Bailiff:

No, she said there were 46,000 homes in total, she did not give a number of vacant homes. Do you have a final supplementary question, Deputy Warr?

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

If I may just address that, Sir. I understand that there are about 46,000 domestic properties ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

So you said, yes.

The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

... and 13,000 non-domestic in the Island. I was not saying that there were 46,000 vacant homes.

The Deputy Bailiff:

No, you were not. Thank you.