

6. The Minister for Housing regarding the Social Housing Property Plan 2007–2016

6.1 Senator T.J. Le Main (The Minister for Housing):

I have this morning lodged my department's 10-year Property Plan. The plan has been produced in response to a number of issues. These include (1) the need for regeneration of the social rented housing stock, particularly in terms of high-rise blocks in urban areas; (2) the need to secure funding for ongoing maintenance and refurbishment; (3) the changing stock requirements, chiefly as a result of a demographic shift; (4) the need for affordable housing for purchase, particularly for first-time buyers; and finally, the States' commitment, made in last year's Strategic Plan, to expand home ownership in the Island. Sir, I must stress that, as the plan makes clear, the situation is very urgent. Any delay beyond the normal democratic process would be against the interests of States' tenants, aspiring home-owners and the taxpayer. Indeed, it would be contrary to the commitment made in the States Strategic Plan. But I believe the plan is an exciting one with huge potential benefits for large numbers of people in the Island. I look forward to discussing it with the relevant Scrutiny Panel and debating it on the floor of this House where I hope it will receive overwhelming support. Sir, the Housing Department will be arranging a presentation for all States' Members in early February and I urge Members to please attend.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Any questions?

6.1.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Bullet point 3: the change in stock requirements, chiefly as a result of demographic shift. I take that to mean... I have only glanced at it, Sir, and it was released today, but being on the Scrutiny Panel I did have prior knowledge; but it does still state 400 sheltered homes required. Could the Minister explain to people in the rest of the House, when I suggested the Sunshine site would be an ideal land for sheltered housing he said he would not support any of that sort of proposition. Could he explain why, Sir?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The answer is that we are trying to provide sheltered housing that would be picked up by the Parishes in general to make the first tranche of it. Having developed the further trust development, then we would hit huge public subsidies and I felt that the only way that the States could benefit was to recover as much money as possible for the site and sell the site off for first-time buyers. It certainly will, in the long run, be hugely beneficial to what we are paying out in subsidies around.

6.1.2 Deputy of St. Martin:

The Minister knows that he sent out a letter to a number of tenants. Is he aware of the distress that has been suffered by those States' tenants who have received his totally inadequate and insensitive letter and did he take any advice from other Members, maybe, on how possibly to send out a letter which has caused a great amount of distress to a number of tenants who have now realised that their homes are going to be sold under them?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, Sir, I dispute that completely. The letter went out to a selected amount of tenants, 26 or 27 of them, indicating that officers would be visiting and working with them and will be visiting today. There will be, of course, one or 2 that will be concerned about the loss of their homes but I have given a categorical assurance that we will be working with all tenants to provide them with help, assistance and to make sure that they have a similar type of accommodation in another area that will meet their needs. After all, Sir, at the end of the day, we are providing social housing and I intend fully on the whole Property Plan - and, in fact, the next plan we bring out for social housing - to work with all our tenants and to work with all our clients to make sure that they are

the first priority in all this. Unfortunately, it was very difficult in this area. We had to notify them that the Property Plan was coming out and there was a balance to be struck, but I am pretty sure, Sir, that at the end of the day the majority of the tenants will be very happy. Of course, some will not be happy, where people are living in wonderful properties, paying little rent and living in million pound properties. So, there will be some difficulties but, hopefully, with our professional and caring staff, we will meet the needs of our clients and we will make sure that they are, in fact, probably better off than what they are now in modern, new accommodation.

6.1.3 Deputy of St. Martin:

Is the Minister able to inform Members how quickly he intends to sell these houses because there are a number of people who are very distressed with the thought that the house is going to be sold under them?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, that is not correct. It is a 10-year Property Plan and it could be several years before those properties are sold and we intend to work fully - and I think I sent an email to one Member who was concerned in St. Aubin - that I intend to work with all the Parish Deputies, all the Constables and anybody else with their constituents on any of the issues, and to work completely with them to make sure that what we do is thorough and what we do is transparent and is in the best interests of all concerned.

6.1.4 Deputy A. Breckon:

The Minister has said in his statement that it is urgent and he does not want any delay but would he also agree that we have to be accountable for public assets and funding? We have heard an example this morning which is probably not the best example, but does he believe, Sir, that we must exercise, as well as the urgency and not having delays, a very great degree of a duty of care?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Absolutely, Sir, and this is why we have already invited Deputy Power, who is going to be chairing the Scrutiny Panel on the investigation of this; and in relation to a question on the procedure to the House this morning of Deputy Breckon, Deputy Power has given us an assurance that within a few weeks this could be easily scrutinised and come back to this Assembly. So I am confident, working with yourselves. We have met with Deputy Breckon and his Panel already, we have invited Deputy Power, who has come to see us, and I am very hopeful that everything will be transparently done and done for the benefit of all concerned.

6.1.5 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Would the Minister undertake to prepare a list of these million pound properties that he has in his social housing portfolio?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, Sir, they are in the Property Plan.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Any other questions? Very well, that concludes questions for that statement.