

23.05.23

**3 Deputy A. Howell of St. John, St. Lawrence and Trinity of the Minister for the Environment regarding the prospect of reinstating a dedicated Planning Office. (OQ.93/2023)**

Will the Minister advise whether he has given any consideration to reinstating dedicated Planning Department offices, with all personnel working together in one place; and if not, why not?

**Deputy J. Renouf of St. Brelade (The Minister for the Environment):**

I thank the Deputy for her question. In fact, for the last 3 years all planning officers have worked together in one place; the officers at 28-30 The Parade. The problem with that building being that it has no front of office, there is no reception, no ability for the public to engage with officers. As a result of the Mackinnon Review, which Members will know was published a couple of weeks ago, I undertook to reinstate a public facing planning officer function at C.L.S. (Customer and Local Services) in La Motte Street and that should be happening very soon, within a matter of a week or 2. So there will be that front-of-office function, which I think is what the public have missed. Of course when the Government moves into the new building in the summer of next year, at least that is when it is scheduled, all planning officers will be in one place and there will be in that one building also the ability to meet with the public.

**3.3.1 Deputy A. Howell:**

I appreciate the fact that La Motte Street is going to have someone there. It was just I was going to ask the Minister if he feels that the service to Islanders is not as good as we used to have when everyone was together at South Hill, when we could ask ... it was not just a support officer at La Motte Street, it was all of the officers together.

**Deputy J. Renouf:**

There are really 2 parts to that. I would reiterate all planning officers are together. The problem is that they cannot be accessed easily in that building. When we reinstate the officer function at La Motte Street it will be with planning officers. It will not be with junior staff. The quality of advice will be good. I am told that in the past at La Motte Street planning officers were subject to questions such as: "Where is the nearest public toilet?" So there were reasons why it was considered to be not an efficient use of officer time. But I do recognise that inability to meet with planning officers is a significant issue and that is why we have taken action on it. I think that that is a key part of the delivery going forward. The Mackinnon report recognised that customer service in general in Planning has not been good enough over the last few years and my action plan, and indeed the detailed implementation plan which I developed, will be intending to address that very thoroughly.

**3.3.2 Deputy M.B. Andrews of St. Helier North:**

Can the Minister confirm how many planning officers are working overseas and what impact does this have on the delivery of services?

**Deputy J. Renouf:**

I do not have that figure to hand but I think it has been the subject of written questions in the past. It is, in any case, a figure that fluctuates. It is not a high number. There is a tension here, is there not? We want to clear backlogs in the planning system and we are unable to recruit into all the posts that we need in the short term so we use officers from the U.K. (United Kingdom).

[10:00]

I think from memory it is 2 at the moment. It is not a large number - one or 2 - to help clear those backlogs. I think that is an appropriate and proportionate response to the problems we have. But the long-term solution is unquestionably to fill the posts that we have and that programme of recruitment, I am pleased to say, is going pretty well. We are beginning to fill key posts that have been empty for quite a while.

### **3.3.3 Deputy M.B. Andrews:**

Can the Minister confirm how many of the agencies there are currently in the Planning Department?

#### **Deputy J. Renouf:**

Once again, no, I cannot confirm that exact figure off the top of my head. Again, I think it has been the subject of written questions. I am very happy to contact the Deputy and indeed circulate to Members the current figure. It is a moving target and, as I say, the most important thing from my point of view is that it is coming down. We are filling into key vacancies. Just for example, a person will take up a role in June ahead of the regulation and validation part of the planning function, which was identified in particular by the Mackinnon report as the area of most concern. We are beginning to address it with a very determined plan of recruitment and also, by the way, running a scheme where we take junior planners on from school and from college and nurture them through the system to become trained planners in Jersey.

### **3.3.4 Deputy L.V. Feltham:**

Given the current closure of La Motte Street and the lack of parking around Philip Le Feuvre House, does the Minister consider that that is the best place to have open public access to planning officers?

#### **Deputy J. Renouf:**

I think the reality is it is the best place because it is the place that is available. There are very rarely perfect answers but it is well-known to the public that that is the public-facing part of the government and I think certainly the feedback we had was: "Why can we not have La Motte Street back?" I think it is the best that we have but it is also worth remembering it is a temporary solution. We are aware that it is not ideal and in just over a year's time hopefully we will be in a shiny new office where the officers will have the ability to meet with the public without having to go to a separate building.

### **3.3.5 Deputy L.V. Feltham:**

Will the Minister undertake to take feedback from visitors to the Planning Department at La Motte Street and seek to improve access, if indeed that is required?

#### **Deputy J. Renouf:**

One of the recommendations in the Mackinnon report was to have a system of feedback, not just for people coming to meet planners but more generally from all stakeholders. That is something I committed to in the action plan and we will work out the best way of achieving that. But customer feedback is a fundamental part of improving service and one of the things I would say is that one of the encouraging things that came out of the Mackinnon report was the determination on the part of staff to improve the service. Staff are aware that they are not the service that Islanders deserve. I think one of the good things we have now is a road map to how to improve things and a commitment within the team to do that, and feedback is most definitely a part of that.

### **3.3.6 Deputy M.R. Scott of St. Brelade:**

Would the Minister agree that the availability of planning officers is quite crucial to the service to the public. On this note, will the list of phone numbers for planning officers that used to be available on the government website be reinstated so that the public can contact them by telephone?

#### **Deputy J. Renouf:**

I agree that the ability to talk to planning officers is crucial. It was certainly one of the key things that the Mackinnon report highlighted, that the ability to ... particularly in advance of applications going in, so the preapplication advice can be provided and it is very important. I have committed to improve that. I will look at the question of whether or not phone numbers can be provided and report back to the Deputy on that.

### **3.3.7 Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:**

If, as the Minister says, it will be a year before the public are able to access the planning officers themselves within the new government building, my view is that it is absolutely crucial that particularly for major developments it is the planning officer themselves who should be able to answer the public's questions and I do not believe that the people based at C.L.S. will be able to answer any in-depth questions. Does the Minister agree and if so, how will he mitigate this? Will the public be able to be referred to the officer who is dealing directly with the application, as used to happen at South Hill when there was a reception there?

#### **Deputy J. Renouf:**

The intention is that a planning officer, not a member of C.L.S. staff, will be based at La Motte Street. Therefore I believe that that will help mitigate the issue. But what will have to happen is if that planning officer is not directly responsible for the issue which the member of the public or the developer brings to the table, so to speak, then they will need to be referred to make an appointment with the relevant officer because that is the only way that they will be able to deal with that level of detail in the advice.

### **3.3.8 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:**

I would like to go back to Deputy Scott's question because in days gone by it was far easier to contact the planning officers because we had direct numbers for them. I do believe that the Minister should not be taking time to think whether that should be available again. It should be available. So will he please answer now whether he agrees that planning officers should be immediately accessible to the public by giving their contact details? Far too many departments now we are not able to contact the officers dealing with matters that we need to speak to them about, and that includes States Members as well as the public.

#### **Deputy J. Renouf:**

My only reservation around that is that I do not know the reasons why that practice was stopped. I do not know whether it is the case that every planning officer has a unique phone number in the office and whether there were specific reasons why that practice was stopped. As I said, I am very happy to look into it and, assuming there is no fundamental reason why that should not be the case, since the whole commitment and my commitment in response to the Mackinnon report was to improve customer service, I will do everything I can to make sure that that happens.

**3.3.9 Deputy A. Howell:**

I thank the Minister for looking into all these issues but I just would like him to reiterate that he wishes the public to be able to contact officers within the Planning Department and receive advice in a timely fashion.

**Deputy J. Renouf:**

Very happy to reiterate that point, which I think I have made in multiple forms during the course of the answers to these questions.