

2.14 Deputy M. Tadier of the Minister for Housing regarding measures to ensure that habitable properties did not remain vacant for long periods:

Given that the 2011 census revealed that there are a total of 3,103 properties lying vacant in the Islands and that there are waiting lists for social housing, will the Minister explain what course of action he is willing to take, or he will be taking, to ensure that habitable properties do not remain vacant for long periods but are used to house the population?

Deputy A.K.F. Green of St. Helier (The Minister for Housing):

The 3,103 properties vacant at the time of the census represent approximately 6.5 per cent of our housing stock. Interestingly, this is the same vacancy rate reported in the 2001 census. Properties may be vacant for a number of very good reasons. The problem is that I do not know what those reasons are. What I do know is that in the 2001 census 80 per cent of the vacancies were short term, for example, during refurbishment or having recently been completed or while waiting for a tenant and a small number were caused by long holidays and a few people in nursing homes. For that reason I am keen to get accurate information and on the day these figures were released I went to the Statistics Unit and asked them if they could give me more information. That they are currently working on and I await that information.

Deputy M. Tadier:

Just to clarify, the Minister said that figure represents 6.5 per cent of our housing stock. Can he just confirm he means of housing stock in the Island not simply in his department?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, sorry, that was a bit vague, 6.5 per cent of the Island's housing stock.

2.14.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Since it is my understanding that the Minister for Housing, or the Housing Department, has a substantial record of every unit of accommodation on the Island, can he not research this information himself within the department without needing to call on the services of the Statistics Unit to ask further questions of their own data?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The short answer to that is no, I cannot. We do not have that detailed information.

2.14.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister for Housing aware that there is increasing concern among the population that many new properties are lying empty because they are just there for investments and are not even 'buy-to-let'?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I have heard the same comments made and I am concerned about that but I have to wait until I have got accurate information before I can make any decisions or discuss the matter with my colleagues

at the Council of Ministers. We cannot do it on rumour. We have to do it on facts. Those facts are being gathered for me now.

2.14.3 Deputy J.G. Reed of St. Ouen:

Will the Minister confirm that it is rather misleading to identify these 3,000 units of accommodation as property when, indeed, they are in fact dwelling units and will he explain the difference between what is classified as a dwelling unit and a property. Thank you.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I am not sure that I can do justification to explaining the difference between a dwelling unit and a property. But the Deputy is quite right we are talking about homes, units of accommodation. There could be several units of accommodation in one building. So what we are talking about are units of accommodation – addresses - that are vacant at the present time.

2.14.4 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Would the Minister confirm that units of accommodation and dwellings would include lodging accommodation within a house?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, lodging accommodation but not holiday accommodation.

2.14.5 Deputy J.H. Young:

Would the Minister agree that given the number of important strategic issues in relation to housing, particularly pressure from the construction industry to increase the amount of construction and dwellings, the need for housing and the degree of under occupation, that it may be that this is consistent with previous years but is it not important that we examine this in much more detail? Can he commit to bring a detailed report of his researches to the House which sets out all the reasons and the periods that a property is not being occupied? Would he also examine the possibility of a 'carrot-and-stick' approach to trying to reduce this problem?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

What I have already done is to ask for more detailed information. We cannot make strategic decisions, or plan for the future, without accurate information. I am aware of the need for housing our community. I am aware, on the social housing list alone, there are 505 families that are waiting for their homes but we have to invest in our properties. We have to have a strategic way forward that is based on fact and accurate information. I have asked for that information. I am working hard to improve it. When I have got that information I am certainly quite happy to share it with Members.

2.14.6 The Connétable of Trinity:

Would the Minister confirm whether this number of properties includes houses that are up for sale at the present time?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, that would include houses that are up for sale but not occupied at the present time.

2.14.7 Senator A. Breckon:

The Minister, a couple of times, has mentioned accurate information. Would he give the House an undertaking to carry out an all-Island residential housing survey because information is already available with the Parishes, with the Post Office, with the utilities and, I would suggest, even with his department? Could he give some undertaking that he will co-ordinate that and publish that so we can make some sense out of it?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I cannot commit to carry out an all-Island survey at the present time because that would involve a tremendous amount of resources but what I can say is the new Control of Housing and Work (Jersey) Law 201- that is coming into force, hopefully, sometime this year, will give us - because we will have one database - much more accurate information on the homes and people in the Island. I went to a presentation last night where we were shown the sort of information that may be available to us. So that information will be available soon in a useful format.

2.14.8 Senator A. Breckon:

Could I ask the Minister if, perhaps, he would consider using people who are not employed who would be capable of carrying out this work, who could produce such a report at not a great deal of cost?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

As I have already said, I believe that information will be available in another format soon. There is no need to duplicate work.

2.14.9 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I thank this particular Minister for promising to report back to this particular House. Can I ask the question I asked the previous Assistant Minister, does he have an idea of when he might be doing so? What is his aim?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I would like it to be sooner rather than later but I am in the hands of the officers that need to analyse all these records and give me the information. That is all I can I say on that.

2.14.10 Deputy M. Tadier:

I regret putting the first part of the question in because that seems to have been diversionary. The actual question which I would like the Minister to answer is what course of action will he be taking to ensure that habitable properties which remain vacant for long periods are used to house the population. That is the question and that does not matter whether the figures is 3,000 or 600, which the Minister is suggesting: that is still a significant number.

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I do not know the answer to that at the present time because it does depend on the information we have. If we have got a significant problem we will be discussing it at the Council of Ministers and bringing forward proposals. But let us see if we have got a problem, what the issues are, how we can solve them. I am concerned but I need accurate information before I can make decisions on that.

2.14.11 Deputy M. Tadier:

Can I have just one supplementary on that? Does the Minister acknowledge - and I think he has acknowledged it - that they do not have the figures available and this is because we do not have any form of any meaningful regulation in Jersey for rental properties. So people can be renting out properties left, right and centre or not and the Housing Department will be completely blissfully unaware of what is going on in the private sector. Surely, if we are to make to progress the social rented and private sector need to be working together in a joined-up way. Will the Minister look at regulating landlords so that he knows who is renting out properties and who is not?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

As I said the new Control of Housing and Work Law database will give us much more useful information and I think will resolve the issues that the Deputy has around us not knowing what is going on.