

4. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Housing

4.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

On a number of previous occasions the Minister for Housing has brought forward proposals to reduce the qualification period for residents in Jersey to be able to grant qualifications under the Housing Law and each time that those proposals have been brought to the Assembly it has been coupled with promises and assurances that this will help to reduce those in urgent need on the housing waiting list, and each time the Assembly has been requested and the Minister has succeeded in getting that approval for those sorts of reasons. Can the Minister please outline for us what the situation is at the moment for the housing waiting list, how many he has on it and what intentions he has in the near future, if any, to bring forward proposals to reduce the qualification period?

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

The Migration Advisory Group comprised of Connétable Norman and Senator Routier and myself met last week having had a recommendation from the officers on a further reduction or not of the reduction in housing qualification of years. This recommendation will be going to the Council of Ministers to seek their advice or clarification on the issue. Subject to that, it will come to the House for a decision very soon. In regard to waiting lists, the current waiting list is that currently we have on our waiting list 318 requirements for one-bed ground floor lift or lift-assisted accommodation and 125 of those are in urgent need; and currently on our waiting list for urgent need for 3-bedrooms, 38 3-bedroom homes required at the moment.

4.1.1 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Can the Minister please outline how many years he is talking about in recommending a reduction to the housing qualification to the Council of Ministers and would he also accept that despite the ever decreasing time that is put on this qualification period the housing need always seems to remain at around 450?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The total waiting list is 300 but many of those within the list are people already in existing accommodation awaiting transfers to more suitable accommodation where they are over-occupied or under-occupied, so around 300 at the moment. In regard to the further reduction in qualifications, I have not made the decision yet although there are recommendations and I will seek advice first of all to the Council of Ministers before I make my final decision.

4.2 Deputy S. Pitman:

Could the Minister confirm that during the elections of 2008 that he supported 2 of the candidates, and could he admit that this was the real reason behind his calling for re-election in No. 2 district. Isn't it ironic, that he was calling for this given his fraudulent past?

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy, stand up please, stand up please. What do you mean fraudulent past? That is an imputation on another Member.

Deputy S. Pitman:

I believe in the past that the Senator has forged a States document while part of the I.D.C. Committee in 1985 for a land transaction.

The Deputy Bailiff:

He has what, sorry?

Deputy S. Pitman:

He forged a signature ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Was he convicted of an offence?

Deputy S. Pitman:

No, but he did actually admit to it.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

No, no, no.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Was he convicted of any offence in relation to this?

Deputy S. Pitman:

No, Sir, he was not.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Was he, in fact, charged and acquitted?

Deputy S. Pitman:

Yes, I believe he was.

The Deputy Bailiff:

So on what basis are you alleging fraud by him? He has been found not guilty.

Deputy S. Pitman:

The Senator admitted it.

Deputy T.M. Pitman:

And resigned from I.D.C.

The Deputy Bailiff:

He cannot have admitted fraud if, in fact ...

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I did not admit to anything at all.

Deputy S. Pitman:

It is a fraudulent action in my view.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

That just shows the low-down acts that the J.D.A. (Jersey Democratic Alliance) are prepared to go down to. Just absolutely ridiculous. There was no question; yes, I did get involved with an incident and I pleaded not guilty and I was acquitted and it is public knowledge and has been public knowledge for years, and to bring this up now is just low-down dirty work.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Now has anyone got a more relevant question?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I ask the Member to withdraw her allegations of fraud.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy Shona Pitman, I do not think you can properly allege fraud. You can allege that he signed a document he should not have signed because that is what he admitted, but you cannot allege fraud when he was acquitted, so do you withdraw that?

Deputy S. Pitman:

By the law it is not forged but I can hold an opinion and believe that ...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Do you withdraw the allegation which you have just made in public?

Deputy S. Pitman:

No, Sir, I will not.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am sorry, you cannot allege fraud when a person has been charged and acquitted.

Deputy S. Pitman:

I do believe that the Senator himself publicly said that both I and Deputy Southern committed fraud...

The Deputy Bailiff:

Yes, and I made him withdraw it and he did withdraw it. Now, I am saying to you, you cannot properly allege fraud where he has been charged and acquitted. He is not guilty of fraud. Do you withdraw it?

Deputy S. Pitman:

I do not, and I remember the Senator did withdraw it but he did not do it publicly.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Yes, he did. I am going to direct you to withdraw it.

Deputy S. Pitman:

I accept; I will withdraw it.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Very well. Deputy Vallois.

4.3 Deputy T.A. Vallois:

Would the Minister confirm whether there have been any significant problems or issues in the department's ability to conduct their services or business due to the move of housing properties to Property Holdings?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I am not sure what the Deputy is alluding to but certainly the sale of homes to current tenants and property transactions could be improved upon.

4.3.1 Deputy T.A. Vallois:

I was not alluding to anything as such, I was just asking basically if there had been any problems with the housing properties, on the part of the Housing Department, by their being looked after by Property Holdings under the Treasury and Resources Ministerial department; whether there had been any issues; and if it was an ongoing problem?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, there have been some delays which, quite honestly, had the connections between the Housing Department, the Treasury and Property Services been better placed in the first place then some of these transactions would have gone through much quicker.

4.4 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I will try to use the right words: does the Housing Minister concede there might be a conflict in his overseeing a multi-million pound budgeted department when he actually resigned from I.D.C. (Island Development Committee) and at least admitted forging a signature on a planning application? I will not accuse him of fraud because that is the niceties of the law I appreciate.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I am not prepared to enter into a slugging match with the likes of the J.D.A. in this Assembly. As I say, it is just dirty underhand work by the Deputies Pitman in this Assembly this morning, and I am not prepared to go to their low level and attempt to even get involved with them.

4.5 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Does the Minister know the list of tenants that are waiting for assisted housing at the moment?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Sorry, could the Deputy repeat that, I was trying to ...

Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Is the Minister aware of the number of people currently waiting for assisted housing?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

Yes, I gave them out previously; 125.

4.6 Connétable G.F. Butcher of St. John:

Could the Minister confirm to the Assembly that the demand for over-55 housing is as great now if not greater than it was last year because I am receiving conflicting reports from senior officers at the Planning Department with developers stating the demand has dried up, and I can only assume that comes from developers that own the fields that are rezoned?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

We do not have any real figures on over-55s as to those who want to downsize. All I can say is that the requirements for elderly people in requiring a suitable one-bed/2-bed accommodation to meet their needs as their age with medical or physical problems has remained fairly stable in the last 12 months and, as I say, 318 on our waiting list, and 125 urgent need. But the over-55s, certainly I know that in places like St. Brelade there is a considerable demand for people that want to sell 3 or 4-bed homes with large gardens and want to downsize, but I am not sure what the whole requirements are generally in the Island on that.

4.7 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Earlier on in an answer to Deputy Le Claire the Minister said that he is going to be taking a proposition or some comments to the Council of Ministers re reducing the housing qualification period. Can the Minister, in his Housing role, assure the House there is enough housing at the moment, without having had a census for over 8 or 9 years, and that the population register is not set up yet; can he assure this House that until we have a set number on the population register he will fight his corner as the Minister for Minister and in maintaining the people in houses that are already here?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

We could never be sure on how many are going to apply for qualifications. Many people do not move, many people do not apply when their time is up for their qualifying time so I could never be sure. But on the evidence that we have had from reducing from 20 years down to 12 years, it has not had any impact whatsoever on the current housing situation.

4.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister for Housing is awaiting a major report on housing in Jersey which was promised for the end of last year, I believe, and was more recently promised for the end of January. We are now into March; does the Minister have any idea when he will be receiving that report?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The Professor Christine Whitehead investigation and report into social housing is in draft form at the moment but we have had to delay it a little while because of the economic situation and the downturn in the economy, so we have had to ask some extra questions. But we are pretty hopeful that within the next 4 or 5 weeks it will be fairly completed.

4.9 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Given the downsize that is occurring with associated redundancies, does he expect the demand for social housing to be going up rather than down?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

There is no evidence to show any demand for going up at this present time.

4.10 Deputy M. Tadier:

A 2-part question if I may. Can I ask the Minister if he is in favour of equal rights for all of Jersey residents?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The Housing Department and the Population Office have that policy in place for equal rights on Jersey residents in as much on gender and religion and otherwise.

4.10.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

In response to that, can I ask how the Minister morally justifies allowing a rich, very wealthy individual to jump the housing queue and not have to wait the statutory 13-year period in order to buy a house in Jersey while other people do?

Senator T.J. Le Main:

I grant consent on the basis - for wealthy residents - of the benefits they are going to accrue to the Island. It is a States-approved policy. I have to say every country in the world applies that policy, whether it is the U.K. with their wealthy oligarchs from Russia and all over the world or every other country. Every civilised country in the Western world, including America, have a policy of welcoming people that have wealth into their country to assist in the community or what have you. We are no different from any other country and in fact the wealth creators that have come into the Island over a number of years, wealthy residents, have brought great credit to the Island and some are great contributors in not only in employment in the Island but very much so on charitable donations and are involved with charities. There are some giving huge sums of money.

Deputy M. Tadier:

Supplementary, Sir. A clarification.

The Deputy Bailiff:

You have asked your supplementary, Deputy, you have had your go, I will come back to you if there is time. I must be fair to all members. Deputy Jeune.

4.11 Deputy A.E. Jeune:

Where there are the plans for lifelong housing and these are deemed necessary for downsizing can the Minister confirm that he can require that those who then occupy or purchase to occupy these are by those who are downsizing.

Senator T.J. Le Main:

The policy plan is that it is a policy of this being applied by the Minister for Planning and Environment in conjunction with advice received from myself and my department. Only yesterday we had a meeting with the Connétables and the subject was raised, as a matter of one of the subjects to be discussed, and the policy will apply that where there are sites rezoned in individual Parishes, the Connétables will be the ones who will know the people that are going to be downsizing from 3 and 4 bedrooms with large gardens where there are one or 2 people living who want to downsize. It will be the Connétables who know their parishioners and it is the intention that under the policy approved by the Minister for Planning and Environment, supported by the Minister for Housing, that it is to allow people who are living in large family homes so they can be released back in the market and those people can move into smaller, better accommodation.

4.12 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

The Minister has had a bit of a rough ride this morning but then again one is compared with the animosity that one receives from his opposite number. I would like to ask an informed question for helping to move the process forward with housing in Jersey and that is to ask the Minister if he can update us in relation to the first-time home buying scheme and how that is developing, if at all, and what is happening on the first-time home buyer front; what is happening in that area, please?

Senator T.J. Main:

The first-time home buyer scheme ...La Providence at Goose Green is the only place that has houses nearly finished but not quite finished and there is no movement at the moment because I understand there is some dispute on main drains to be provided by the developer and Property Services. I understand that is close to being resolved, if it has not been resolved. But hopefully once that is resolved then the scheme of 46 houses then will be negotiated for affordable purchase and approved by the Housing Department and the Minister for Planning and Environment, and then distributed once that is done. But we are still a little way away from getting a result.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Very well. That completes the time available for the Minister. I did allow a small extension for the diversion in the middle.