

Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Housing

3.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I am particularly keen, because the Minister is doing a good job. It has got to be wrong. I suppose the Minister is very upset to see the T.V. (television) report on the conditions at Le Squez, the appalling conditions that some people were living in. Would he agree with me that the real reason for this appalling state is 30 or 40 years of not being maintained, because the 6 houses that were sold on Le Squez, built at the same time, were in perfect condition where these people are living in absolutely shocking conditions. Would he agree with that? I know he is moving towards hopefully overcoming the problem.

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

I would agree with the Deputy that the problems we are experiencing with some of our property is distinctly down to lack of investment and that is something I am working very hard to address. But while I am on my feet I would like to (and I am sure the Deputy would join me) disassociate myself from some of the comments that have been made following the media article where it saddens me that a few people have on-line criticised people who are in our housing situation. The majority of our customers are very good people; they work hard, they raise families, they pay taxes and they pay their rent and it saddens me; the Jersey I know is a Jersey where the better-off support the less-well-off and the quicker we get back to that the better. But I do agree with the Deputy; it is lack of investment.

3.2 Deputy S. Power:

I pose this question in the context of the Minister's involvement on the Migration Advisory Group. In the light of the recent census figures of the 98,000 population, does the Minister feel that control of population and migration should be strategic and should rest with a Minister or a Ministerial department that is not in any way involved in driving... or involved in economic growth?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The quick answer to that is yes, the Deputy knows full well that I felt that the Minister for Housing should be responsible for population control and growth. The Assembly felt otherwise and that is why when the new law comes in it will be in the Chief Minister's Office.

3.2.1 Deputy S. Power:

This is a supplementary question on the last part of the Minister's response and I am very grateful to him for his reply. Does he feel that therefore it should rest with the Chief Minister as the Chief Minister cannot be involved in economic development?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, I am confident with this Chief Minister particularly that it sits comfortably in his department. Do bear in mind that the Chief Minister will be creating a much more robust social policy unit which will have oversight of all the different things, including employment, migration, population, and, if I have my way, with housing transformation programmes and will be directing the strategic housing unit as well.

3.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Is the Minister comfortable that taxpayer's money is used to pay private landlords in the form of income support rent components without any requirement of those landlords to provide that their properties meet basic standards?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

This is something that I am not comfortable with to be perfectly honest, that we do not have measurable standards for all types of tenancy and it is work that I am undertaking. We will have of

course the residential tenancy law and the deposit protection coming in. What concerns me more, and it is something that does not directly come under my department at the moment, is the unqualified accommodation and the lack of standards there and it is something that I do intend to work on with my good colleague the Minister for Health. At the moment I am concentrating on the Housing Transformation Programme so that we can invest properly and substantially in social housing throughout Jersey and also have a Strategic Plan for housing across all tenures going forward 30 years.

3.3.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am glad to hear that that is something which the Minister is not comfortable with and wants to change but I would respectfully say that it is completely within his remit and it is within his power to put in place changes. So will the Minister be bringing forward proposals in the very near future to resolve problems of a lack of standard in the unqualified sector but in all sectors of housing in our Island because it is something which could quite simply and quickly be done by him?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

It is not quite simply or quickly done by me. The unqualified sector, for example, comes under Health at the present time. I am going to work and am working very hard to improve the opportunity for housing right through the Island, whether that be subsidised social housing, whether that be affordable houses in terms of houses that people can rent, whether that be States loans changed into a States deposit scheme. We need - and this is what Jersey has lacked recently - a complete plan for the next 30 years to house our community. That is why the Council of Ministers accepted housing our community as one of the major parts of the Strategic Plan that we are going to do now. I could say to the Deputy: "I am going to concentrate on the standards in the private sector" but there is so much work that needs to be done that I am going to initially concentrate on the overall Strategic Plan and then social housing as part of that. Then there will be other work that will fall out of that because I will be working on all these different things, but we are in danger of trying to do everything and achieving nothing if we are not careful.

3.4 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Will the Minister advise the Assembly whether a new social housing policy is being developed by his department, and if this is the case when does the Minister plan to bring this policy to the States prior to its implementation?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

The Assembly would be aware that I am working on the Housing Transformation Programme which I would imagine fits into the area that the Deputy is asking me about. Some of that work will be coming forward shortly. One item particularly has already been implemented and I will just talk about that quickly. That is the gateway that we now have where all social housing providers other than the Parish are on one waiting list. So, for the first time, we have one waiting list for the Island and we have basically 6 categories of people within that; one being those of utmost urgency, category 6 being those who are urgent but supported by different agencies for whatever reason, and then other people that may be in sound accommodation but overcrowded because of larger families or whatever. So the affordable gateway is working very well. It started in January.

[11:15]

For the first time we have got a handle on those who meet our criteria - and I have to stress that - that are on the waiting list. We now know that because it is all in one place and it is working well. We have made about 80 allocations through the gateway since January including housing trusts. Of course the gateway criteria does not entirely satisfy me (for example, we do not help anybody under 25) but there is no point in changing the gateway until we can increase the supply of homes; you just increase the waiting list and do not solve the problem. That is something that I will be reviewing later on. So the gateway is part of what we have been working on and from that also is

the formation of a strategic housing unit. We have got to have someone who will champion the supply of homes right across the Island in all tenures, whether that be Homebuy or some sort of shared equity, whether that be social rented, whatever it might be; someone needs to be championing that supply. We have got to get away from turning the tap on to full blast and then turning it off and taking years to turn it back on. We need a proper Strategic Plan for housing in Jersey. Then, beyond that, I would like to have a much more flexible and agile organisation delivering social housing and that will be the Housing Association which will replace ... it is quite a complicated story.

3.4.1 The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The Minister speaks about someone should champion the supply of homes to meet the needs of our local community and he speaks about this brave new world where we are going to have this strategic unit set up. Surely the Minister must realise he is responsible, he is accountable to the States and to the public for the delivery of housing on the Island and promotion of the needs of our individuals. Is he going to be our champion?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

No, because I want to take the politics out of housing and ensure that it continues, whoever is in charge of it politically. So I will be the champion that ensures there is a champion, if that answers the Deputy's question. I want a proper strategic housing unit that looks at everything. At the moment, for example, States loans (and we only gave one States loan last year because, I would suggest, of the low amount) comes under population not under housing, and so we need to have that in one place. But I will be ensuring when I leave this office that Jersey has a much more robust housing system that meets the needs of all Islanders and also, to be honest, I want to support those that need support, I want to invest in independence rather than dependence and to do that we need to be much more strategic, we need to be much more open-minded and we need to be much more pro-active.

3.5 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Six months ago 6 local families had their dream of home ownership dashed by a last-minute decision of the Minister for Planning and Environment who re-categorised the homes available under the Homebuy scheme at Le Clos Vaze, the more expensive first-time buyer scheme. Can he tell Members what progress has been made in producing an affordable home scheme which satisfies the legal requirements?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

I am afraid that at the moment - and maybe this is something that will change when we have the strategic housing unit - that is entirely a matter for the Minister for Planning and Environment.

3.6 Deputy K.L. Moore of St. Peter:

Earlier the Minister described the new priority scheme for people who will be assessed as they enter the gateway to housing. When we met about 10 days ago there were 82 names on the Band 1 priority for those who were most in need; could the Minister tell the House when he anticipates that those 82 people or families will be housed?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Not in its entirety but I do have some good news inasmuch as we have 60 units coming on line at Le Squez fairly soon so that will considerably help more than 60 families, because very often there is a domino effect as Members would appreciate inasmuch as if you can move somebody - who wishes to move I hasten to add - to release a 3-bedroom house by putting them in a new one-bedroom home then that obviously has the effect of helping people on the other list. So there is good news on the horizon. There are sites coming online; 60 fairly soon. We have just taken possession of Lesquende land and we have planning permission for that. We have yet to get the by-

laws sorted out but once that is done I would envisage in another 18 months there will be another 70 units there. So we are working very hard but at least 60 families will be rehoused in March.

3.6.1 The Deputy of St. Peter:

Would the Minister explain why he continues to allow his department to sell off housing stock when there are so many people in need of housing?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

Yes, and this is simply one of finance although we must get it into context. We are talking about a handful of homes on an annual basis. If you looked at it from an uninformed situation you might say: "Well, why would you sell a home and then find yourself one down when you have got 80 people on the list?" I signed a Ministerial Decision recently selling a home at Grasset Park to a family that are already in social housing - I am trying to be vague so that I do not identify the people. They are in a housing trust property so they are in a position where they are able to buy. They bought the house that we have sold, that money then goes in to allow for the much-needed refurbishment because that is one of the ways that I fund it but more importantly that vacated unit has gone to somebody on the Category 1 waiting list. So it is not as simple as just selling homes. What we do need to do though, as an organisation, is admit that some of the homes are not homes that we want for various reasons and we need to realign our stock from time to time as well.

3.7 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

It is a question regarding housing trusts. Obviously many States Members have had complaints about housing trusts and their activities. Can the Minister tell me what proposals he has got to bring them under much tighter control and stop some of the abuses that some of the housing trusts are causing to their clients?

Deputy A.K.F. Green:

That was my next thing when you suggested that my answer was too long last time. I will be proposing the introduction of new legislation which will provide appropriate regulation that will give this House and the Islanders confidence. The statute will apply to the existing housing department and its new form as a housing association and to all those housing trusts who receive or have received public support in any way by way of land or capital allocations or interest rate subsidies, so I will be regulating the whole of the social housing providers whether they be housing trusts or part of the new housing association.

The Bailiff:

I am afraid that brings questions to the Minister for Housing to an end so we move on to questions to the Minister for Planning and Environment.