

2025.02.25

3.11 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade of the Minister for Housing regarding an empty residential property tax (OQ.44/2025):

Further to the adoption of P.48/2022, will the Minister advise whether he is taking steps to implement an empty residential property tax or a similar mechanism, and if not, explain how he intends to encourage the use of empty properties?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec of St. Helier South (The Minister for Housing):

The short answer to the first part of the Deputy's question is no, I am not currently taking any steps to implement an empty residential property tax. In a previous Government Plan several years ago, £500,000 was allocated for a project to deal with empty homes. At the end of 2023 that funding expired with only 10 per cent of it having been spent, but some unbudgeted commitments set to continue in 2024 when I took over office. Because those commitments constituted little more than managing a spreadsheet of data of empty homes and not actual action to tackle empty homes, I decided to suspend that service because I regarded it as bad value for money. I regret that because that £500,000 of funding for a project like this expired and went back in as an underspend. I do not have resources within my budget at this point to pursue the kind of option that I would like to, to help tackle empty homes. My preferences remain some kind of empty residential property tax or the introduction of empty property management orders, which I think would be helpful. But in the absence of being able to undertake that kind of project, members of my staff have been working with His Majesty's Receiver General to assist him in using some of the old legal powers that he has to bring some formerly empty homes back into use. I am pleased to see some of that has been happening, and I continue to liaise with some of my colleagues in Government about Government-owned empty homes where there are opportunities to bring some of those back into use as well.

3.11.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. If I refer the Minister back to the actual wording of the proposition, part (a) stated that - and it was a decision that was passed by a strong majority - was to ask that an effective mechanism should be introduced to discourage domestic properties from being left vacant for long periods. That is an in-principle decision of a previous Assembly and I know how the Minister feels about previous decisions not being implemented. Would he revisit that first part with the Council of Ministers and ask for a fresh mandate from them to say that this decision still stands and that he can be provided with all the support that he might need in order to make sure that that effective mechanism to return empty properties back into use is brought to fruition?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I thank the Deputy for that question. I think the key word that he used in there was "effective" and I think it is a matter of regret that funding was either not used or used on a measure that was not effective. The Deputy is right though that the decision of the States Assembly stands, and I am more than happy to do what he has just suggested that I do and hopefully at the very least provide for some groundwork so that at some point in the future a project could recommence to help deal with this problem. I do not have the resources to tackle it right now, but it would be good if I could muster some political support to be able to do so in the future with perhaps an allocation at some point in a future budget. But I thank the Deputy for his suggestion, which I will look at taking up.

3.11.2 Deputy J. Renouf of St. Brelade:

On 3rd October 2022, Deputy Mézec wrote to the then Chief Minister regarding P.48. He said: “There may well be a reasonable explanation as to why the Minister is unable to fulfil this Assembly decision, but no full explanation has been provided to States Members.” That was written less than 3 months after the Government had taken office; he has had more than 13 months since he took over the responsibility. Can he detail all the actions that he has taken to bring that into fruition?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

When I took office, I attempted to utilise what work had already been done to get as much positives out of it and I regret to inform the Assembly that there was precisely no positives to be taken from it. An unbudgeted spending commitment had been made without the outgoing Government at that point seeking to provide long-term funding for it, so that meant that was money coming out of my budget for a project that was not capable or not set up to be able to get a single empty home back into use. My officers, I am sure, would testify to the challenge that I put to them to try to salvage that service and get something good out of it, but that was not possible because nothing good was able to be achieved out of it as it constituted not much more than a spreadsheet. What I have done is asked my officers to work, as I said in response to an earlier question, with His Majesty’s Receiver General to use some legal powers that do exist. That is resulting in some empty homes being brought back into use. But I think this is a good episode of showing what can happen when money is allocated to a project but those in charge at the time do not have the vision to actually do anything positive with it.

3.11.3 Deputy J. Renouf:

I think we get that the Minister does not think that the previous Minister was doing a good job on this, but the question is really about what he has done since. The previous Minister was at least able to get some money together. The proposition in question relates to an empty property tax, so can he tell us what he is doing to try and bring in an empty property tax?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I believe I have answered that question very comprehensively, and I did so in the first sentence to my answer to Deputy Tadier. I am currently not doing anything to pursue that because I do not have the budget or resources to do so because, in a previous budget - it was the 2021 Budget by the way, so under the previous term of office - £500,000 was allocated to do that, 90 per cent of which expired and was subsumed back into general revenue as an underspend and not reallocated, and I had not a penny in order to be able to dedicate to doing anything. I think that is regrettable.

3.11.4 Deputy D.J. Warr of St. Helier South:

I am truly saddened that the Minister did not follow up on this because the biggest issue we had was we did not know how many vacant homes there were in existence. It started out around between 4,000 to 6,000; we managed through our research to get that down to 900. The purpose of the work is to make more effective use of the built environment and, as the Minister knows, his party has consistently voted against greenfields being redeveloped outside of St. Helier. Surely, if we are going to make more effective use of the built environment, make housing more affordable for the people of Jersey, this kind of work should have been carried on, should be pursued. As my department at the time found out, a tax is totally inappropriate in this setting

...

The Bailiff:

Deputy, this has to be a question.

Deputy D.J. Warr:

Sorry.

The Bailiff:

You have effectively done half a speech.

Deputy D.J. Warr:

Okay, thank you, Sir. My question is: does the Minister not believe in collecting data?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Yes. It was a strange question; I have no idea what else to say to that.

Deputy D.J. Warr:

Is that: “Yes, it is correct to collect data” or: “Yes, it is not correct to collect data”?

The Bailiff:

I think the question was: “Does the Minister believe?” and the answer was in a rather casual affirmative. I am not sure it requires ...

Deputy D.J. Warr:

I do not think we can carry on this. Thank you, Sir.

3.11.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am not so interested in the number of empty properties; we were told by the census that it was somewhere in the region of 4,500. I know, just walking around St. Brelade knocking on doors before Christmas, that is entirely believable. But could I ask the Minister: does he agree that, if it is a question of money that is required to continue this work, could he - certainly for the next financial year - ensure that he has sufficient resources to continue to find a way to introduce an effective mechanism to discourage the disuse of properties being left vacant for long periods of time?

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I cannot unilaterally ensure it, because obviously budget processes involve more than just me; they will involve the whole Government and ultimately the whole Assembly. But I can ensure that I can make representations to ask to be in a position where we do get the resourcing in place to find not just an effective mechanism, but effective mechanisms, because I think that there would need to be more than one to approach empty homes that are empty in the long term for different reasons, some of which would be financial penalty-based, others which in my view would be useful would be empty property management orders. But as I have said to the Deputy, I am happy to make those representations to try to be in a position where we can move forward on that.

The Bailiff:

Question 13 falls away because Deputy Jeune is excused.

[11:00]

Question 14 is from Deputy Ozouf. The Assembly agreed that Question 1 could go to the end of the list and I assume this, if he is available, goes to the end of the list as well. Very well. We come then to Question 15 that Deputy Warr will ask of the Minister for Infrastructure.

