



HM Government of Gibraltar

Ministry of Tourism, Equality,
Social Services and Housing

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Minister for Tourism, Equality, Social Services and Housing

The Hon Samantha Sacramento

Budget Speech 2016

Mr Speaker,

Another term, after our resounding election success and the public vote of confidence, and with the challengers that lie ahead for us now. But we are a strong team Mr Speaker and together we will work as hard as we need to, to serve and to deliver.

Mr Speaker, as you know I have an extremely broad portfolio. It would be impossible for me to list all the achievements this past financial year. I will highlight the most notable matters and that is not to say that anything that I may not specifically mention is any less important.

TOURISM

Mr Speaker I will commence my intervention outlining achievements in my tourism portfolio.

Now, more than ever, the development of our tourism industry is essential. Since the referendum, we have had a very busy week indeed reassuring our industry partners that it is business as usual in Gibraltar.

Our administration has already presided over a tourist boom in Gibraltar in recent years, we have seen growth in an industry that has been greatly boosted as a result of our efforts.

Our vision from the outset was to prioritise tourism as a key sector for the sustained development of our local economy and we have demonstrated our political commitment to tourism growth.

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We believed that the tourism sector in Gibraltar suffered from underinvestment, was underdeveloped and as such it was not the economic driver that it ought to be. My predecessor Minister Costa quickly set about to change that at the start of our first term of office. Our Government has invested in the massive, untapped potential and taken Gibraltar to new and impressive heights. In our second term I will continue with the same vision and determination and vigour as I did in the last.

We have invested heavily in what we have no doubt is a unique tourist product. We have worked closely with our tourism partners and stakeholders in our community and internationally and we have transformed.

The Upper Rock is a unique feature we have to offer and is certainly recognised as the jewel in our crown.

The tourist board's unprecedented investment in its sites in the Upper Rock and the transformation of the Nature Reserve led by the Department of the Environment and Climate Change and my colleague Minister Cortes have been a game changer in upgrading our product.

The restoration of the themed country trails and footpaths and the additional of some innovative attractions. The most impressive is certainly the Windsor suspension bridge at Royal Anglian Way, it is breath-taking and a tremendous engineering feat which we opened just a few weeks ago.

We will shortly be adding a further attraction when we open the glass sky walk viewing platform which is perched near the Rock's summit, it will provide striking panoramic vistas of the majestic geography surrounding Gibraltar, I look forward to the inauguration of that too Mr Speaker.

The Northern Defences is another important new addition, we heard the DCM describe this beautiful place of great military significance and heritage value which for decades was merely a dumping ground for anything that could be thrown over a wall.

Wonderful additions to our visitor attractions which of course my department is already busy marketing.

Symbolically, they are enduring symbols of our Government's commitment to improve Gibraltar.

Our plan for growth has been strategic and has been focused primarily on niche markets such as the weddings and MICE markets.

One of the most successful niche markets is our events led tourism strategy. We have become adept at organising first class cultural events that are thoroughly enjoyed by everyone here and which act as a magnet for visitors. On the back of these intense and high profile occasions, the Gibraltar leisure and hospitality industry has been able to take advantage of the interest generated by visitors we attract.

It has become an important tool in our revitalised tourism strategy as these instruments help us



promote Gibraltar. I work very closely with my friend Minister Linares and the GTB is closely involved with the Ministry for Culture which takes the lead in organising these fantastic events which the GTB market.

The tourist board is responsible for organising the Gibunco Gibraltar Literary Festival. While the quality and high standard appears effortless to everyone attending, this is no mean feat to organise!

This festival has become one of our flagship events and will enjoy its 4th edition this autumn. It has become firmly established and its popularity continues to increase, as does its status. Testament to its prestige in such a short period of time is that we have been fortunate and are thrilled and honoured that earlier this year Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal agreed to the patron of the festival. This status of course also provides us with fantastic international exposure which attracts high level participants and visitors.

Our festival attracts a constellation of authors, poets and renowned speakers, we have already announced over 20 speakers who will be participating this year and we are engaged in intense marketing of the event in Spain and the UK. As part of our vigorous marketing campaign of this event it is interesting to note that last year the festival achieved a radio audience of 2 million in the UK, commercial radio outlets and seven BBC radio stations between Scotland and the Channel Islands featured the festival and included extended interviews with a couple of the main speakers.

Mr Speaker, I wish to thank our principal sponsor, Gibunco and all sponsors who by doing so make the event viable and contribute to enriching our culture through it.

Also, we have upgraded and rebranded our marketing strategy and that is also contributing to our success. We have an excellent tourist product that we want to show off and we are continually looking for more efficient and effective ways of marketing ourselves.

We actively participate in various fora and are continuously looking to establish new partnerships such as the ITT conference that I attended in Tel Aviv last month.

We will be hosting the Med Cruise conference next year, another wonderful platform for promotion.

Mr Speaker I am delighted to report that we have already seen return on our investments and growth in the sector. Our figures are up year on year so clearly the improvements that I have outlined have had a positive effect on visitor numbers.

I am pleased to say that the last published statistics show that all arrivals at hotels have increased; in fact we have the highest numbers since 2007.

We are achieving our objective Mr Speaker and our transformed tourist product is translating into growth.



The most notable growth since we were elected has been seen in aviation. This sector continues to report very healthy findings in all categories catering for the needs of both the business and the leisure traveller.

Inbound and outgoing air passengers on established routes have increased in the past 12 months.

Today we have more flights to the UK than ever before.

Just last Sunday we saw the arrival of the inaugural easyJet flight from Manchester. Indeed Mr Speaker, when I was at the airport last Sunday, I was delighted to see the departure lounge busier than I have ever seen it.

The additional flights and new routes we have secured; Monarch's Birmingham flight, the new easyJet routes to Bristol and Manchester along with Royal Air Maroc's service to Tangier and Cassablanca and Tangier have generated extra passengers.

In specific terms, Mr Speaker, this summer alone we have seen a 40.8% growth in capacity and a weekly flights increase of 31.5% compared to last year, which in itself was a record year.

Among other highlights of this past year has been easyJet's achievement in attending the tremendous milestone last August of carrying a million passengers on the Gibraltar - London Gatwick route.

The Gibraltar - Bristol Link carried 35,000 passengers in its first year and is proving extremely successful.

I am also delighted to report that that easyJet is set to provide extra seat capacity between Gibraltar and London Gatwick by 15% this summer season with an additional 13,000 places being made available since March this year. Overall this airline will operate 18 weekly flights to Gibraltar this summer season, up from 14 last summer.

We are extremely pleased about the close working relationship that we have established with easyJet of late which has enabled us to establish the new routes, given the commitment to Gibraltar we continue to work closely with them on further growth and look forward to being able to introduce new routes in due course.

Additional capacity has also been provided by another long standing partner British Airways with two extra weekly London Heathrow - Gibraltar flights which commenced on the 1st May this year bringing the total number of flights on this route to 13 a week.

Monarch also launched their London Gatwick - Gibraltar route in May this year offering four flights a week, this is the airline's fourth UK destination from Gibraltar.

In summary Mr Speaker, over the summer months, Gibraltar will offer:



- 17 weekly flights from London Gatwick – up from 11
- 13 weekly flights from London Heathrow - up from 9
- 5 weekly flights from London Luton
- 6 weekly flights from Manchester - up from 4
- 4 weekly flights from Birmingham - up from 3
- 3 weekly flights from Bristol
- 2 weekly flights to Casablanca and Tangier

This represents no less than 50 flights a week – up from 37 in the summer of 2015.

Mr Speaker you will be pleased to know that we recorded our busiest summer in 2015 and in the period July to August we recorded over 45,000 passengers per month. This represents an increase of 12.7% against July 2014 and 10% above the August figures.

Importantly, visitor arrivals by air increased by 7.1 % in 2015 over 2014.

Mr Speaker, we have recorded an increase of 22% in passenger growth in the first five months of 2016 compared to the same period in 2015.

May was already a record month with 49,583 passengers processed, beating even the record number from last August. With the main summer holiday period still to take place, further records are expected to be registered in the next few months.

Mr Speaker, I wish to emphasise at this juncture that the substantial increase in airline activity has come as a result principally due to our ability to generate demand for Gibraltar bound seats, and on a broader scale, on our political foresight in making tourism a priority and our success in developing and massively upgrading to local tourist product. It is NOT, as the opposition would have you believe due to the new airport terminal on which they grossly overspent.

Gibraltar is one of the most diverse ports in the Mediterranean.

Any objective observer closely following the development of Gibraltar's cruise industry in recent years would agree that the Rock is experiencing a golden age if cruising.

In 2015 we ranked third in terms of countries that experienced an increase in the number of cruise port calls with a growth of 12.7%.

Our extraordinary accomplishment on this front is backed by hard evidence as the number of cruise calls, cruise inaugurals and passenger visits continue to grow year after year. We really do have something to offer for all types of customers and visitors.

In 2015 we had 13 cruise inaugurals, 204 cruise visits and 295,922 passenger visits.

In 2016 Gibraltar Port is scheduled to receive 225 cruise calls, a 10.3% increase on last year carrying an estimated 344,415 passengers to the Rock and no less than a record of 18 inaugural



cruise calls.

Arrivals by sea have this year increased by 14.2%. That includes yacht arrivals that have increased by 8%.

The robust upward trend reflects the healthy state of the industry and consolidates the growth registered in 2015, which was in turn a sizeable improvement on 2014's 180 cruise calls.

A notable development for 2016 is that Noble Calendonia has chosen Gibraltar as a turnaround port. This represents a major breakthrough. There will be two turnarounds this year, one in October and another in November.

It must be noted that growth also demonstrates that we can successfully handle some of the largest vessels ever built including the Royal Caribbean's Ovation of the Seas.

The progress demonstrates the confidence that the industry has in Gibraltar.

We look forward to continuing our business partnerships with some of the most prestigious cruise lines in the world.

Mr Speaker,

In 2015 visitor numbers to the Upper Rock registered an 8% increase in respect of 2014 reaching the record breaking figure of 858,508.

To end May 2016, visitor numbers to the Upper Rock have increased by 13.64% over last year. April this year is the only month to have shown a decrease, this we attribute to Easter falling at the end of March which showed a significant increase on the same month the previous year.

Mr Speaker, it is clear that whether it be arrivals by land, increased air travellers or cruise line passengers, it can be said that the international leisure industry firmly has Gibraltar in its sights. Mr Speaker, Gibraltar has strengthened its position in the global market as a leading short break destination and port of call in the western Mediterranean.

Mr Speaker, we will continue our determination that this sector grows as an economic driver and of course, we are committed to work tirelessly on this front with our partners and stakeholders to stimulate further growth and expansion.

We are determined to ensure that that the positive outcomes experienced in the past 12 months continue unabated.

We will continue to diversify and of course, without a shadow of a doubt, the message is clear insofar as tourism as with every other part of our strong and successful economy - Gibraltar remains open for business.



HOUSING

Mr Speaker,

Turning to my portfolio as Minister for Housing, I am proud to say that this past year has indeed been a landmark year on a number of fronts.

In my speech last year, I referred to the affordable housing schemes that we were constructing, this year those have become a reality. Earlier in the year we saw the completion of two magnificent affordable housing projects at Beach View Terraces and at Mons Calpe Mews. The homes are spacious and the standard of construction is indeed very high.

Many families have already moved in and I receive frequent reports of how happy people are with these new homes: Exiting times for many.

Mr Speaker, the ingenious idea of constructing for co-ownership, thereby making it affordable and as such so successful and enabling people to get on the property ladder, was developed by the GLSP when we were first in office, and we will continue so as to ensure that the acute demand for housing that we saw snowball in the last 20 years are not repeated. The construction of a further at least 1500 flats in the next phase of construction of affordable housing at Hassan Centenary Terraces and Bob Peliza Mews has already shown incredible interest. This Mr Speaker demonstrates that there is an overwhelming desire to own property.

Furthermore, I am just as proud to be part of a government that will deliver purpose built flats for the elderly, 142 to be precise.

The concept of building flats for elderly people is a great one. Such flats are in high demand. We have taken it to the next level in the new developments at Charles Bruzon House and Sea Master Lodge by consulting with every single relevant professional who have been collaborating in the planning and design to achieve the best design of these flats and learning from the mistakes of the existing accommodation for the elderly.

These flats incorporate the latest accessibility features, spacious showers, colour contrast for the benefit of the visually impaired, non-slip tiles and individual panic buttons. The building design takes account of wheelchair users, includes ramps, automatic doors and lifts.

Regrettably Mr Speaker you will recall that we had to go to considerable expense in alterations to remedy defects preventing accessibility in Albert Risso and Bishop Canilla Homes as well as converting baths to showers so as to make those flats more comfortable to elderly tenants.

Our purpose built flats will make an incredible improvement to the quality of life of our elderly community and will help them remain at home with dignity, comfortably, safely and independently for longer. In turn, a considerable number of larger accommodations will be returned to the Government's housing stock.



The first of those, Sea Master Lodge at the Mons Calpe Mews estate, and just now been handed over to the Government and we shall embark on the process of allocation to applicants very shortly. In no time at all Mr Speaker, those individuals who have applied for these flats will be hearing from us.

All in all, the first phase of construction of flats by our Government have given the people of Gibraltar in excess of 1000 new homes. Needless to say that this will in turn have a considerable impact on the housing waiting lists. In addition, there will also be flats returned to the rental stock by individuals who have purchased or who may be moving to the flats for the elderly.

In addition to the new construction, we continue with our extensive refurbishment program of existing government rental housing estates, which as we heard on Tuesday, the enhancement has converted these into assets by way of investment.

Major refurbishment works at Glacis and Moorish Castle estates are virtually complete and have undeniably contributed to visually transforming what was previously dreary and neglected architecture at Gibraltar's land entry point.

Phases I and II at Laguna Estate are practically complete too and phase III is already being staged in. Again, the improvement to this estate is plainly visible.

Refurbishment works to Alameda Estate also continue, and the blocks remaining will be completed in this term of office.

An extensive refurbishment programme is also underway at New Police Barracks at Willis' Road.

The general embellishment, road resurfacing and parking rationalisation works to Varyl Begg Estate is now complete.

Mr Speaker, refurbishment works to other major estates also continue we are committed to an ongoing programme of maintenance and improvement of our rental housing stock. We have invested, and will continue to invest in the maintenance and upkeep of our estates for the benefit of the families who live in them.

Mr Speaker, the Chief Minister announced on Tuesday that housing rent will be increased for the first time since 1984 by 3%.

Mr Speaker you are aware that the Ombudsman in his report called for the need to review housing rents. Since the announcement, this step has been widely accepted and indeed welcomed, perhaps more on a matter of principle than the value of income that it will generate.

After all Mr Speaker the increase is relatively minimal and modest by all accounts. I will take the liberty of reminding the house of the statistics that the Chief Minister provided:

- Average earnings in 1984 were £126 per week



- Average earnings in 2015 were £555 p/w: ie a rise of 340.5%
- Inflation in that time has risen by 153.5%

The increase is therefore considerably lower than if it had been increased in line with inflation.

Looking at these figures and providing an income statistics / affordability comparison -
In 1984 rent at £18.70 was 14.8% and at income rates in 2015, the cost of rent was 3.4%.

On this basis, if the same proportion of income was expended on rent, the rents in 2015 would now be £82.14 per flat per week and if rents from 1984 had been adjusted for actual inflation in 2015 they would have risen to a level of £47.40 per flat per week.

And Mr Speaker, it's all relative too as £100 in April 1984 is the equivalent of £253.36 today.

So all in all Mr Speaker, a very modest increase indeed.

The increase of 3% will take effect as from the 1st September this year and tenants will be notified accordingly.

As an aside, but important to note Mr Speaker, tenants paying by direct debit, standing order or other method of deduction must remember to make arrangements for the payment of the new rent once due and adjust their payment mandate, otherwise Mr Speaker, we would not want anyone to inadvertently fall into arrears on the increase otherwise an average of 60p will accrued each month! In any event, the Department will of course be checking this.

On the subject of arrears, Mr Speaker, perhaps the most notable achievement in the Housing Department this financial year has been FINALLY the implementation of procedures to recover arrears of housing rent, a long standing problem that has been festering for far too long.

Before I go any further Mr Speaker, I wish to make one thing very clear at the outset, we are certain that there must be a distinction between those who cannot pay rent and those who do not wish to pay rent without any reason for not doing so. Because firm action has never been taken in the past, it has unfortunately become the norm for the latter not to pay rent. The department is sympathetic to individuals who genuinely are unable to or have difficulty to meet their monthly rental instalments and officials try to be as helpful as possible. Unfortunately there will always be people who are genuinely unable to pay rent, and in these circumstances it is our duty as a community to assist. They are not the priority in our recovery strategy.

Now Mr Speaker, I sincerely hope that the Principal Auditor is listening because I think that he will be very pleased with what I am about to explain, he will also now have to, as a result of the work that the Department is doing, have change the template that he has been using in his report in respect of the Housing Department for the past say 15 years !

Mr Speaker, I am proud to announce that the problem with the accrual of rent arrears and failing to collect these is no longer.



Upon my appointment as Minister for Housing just over a year and a half ago, I made it my first priority to tackle this issue that had for a long time spiraled out of control and as such, suffered from the ostrich syndrome.

I make the point at this stage that this is in no way a criticism of my predecessors, my friends the late Charles Bruzon and Minister Paul Balban, indeed I have been fortunate to benefit from their hard work as they had already set about dealing with other housing priorities which were of course to lay for the foundations for the construction of additional housing and plan the major refurbishment works, the results and benefits of which we have already seen.

Mr Speaker, it is absolutely unconscionable that we find ourselves in this situation. For too long, far too many people have considered the payment of rent as optional or have seen it as an interest free loan which would never be required to repay. They have been allowed to think this and get away with it as there has been no action taken or even an attempt to recover and no consequences for failure to pay.

This is about people understanding their duties. Paying rent is about taking social and moral responsibility and therefore if this is not done, it is right and just that we pursue this debt, not just because we are contractually entitled to, but it is right that we do so because we have a duty to all other tenants who their pay rent dutifully and on time, to all who meet their mortgage repayments and to tax payers who are otherwise having to subsidise those who choose not to pay rent.

Mr Speaker, it took me the better part of a year to organise the Housing Department's databases and IT systems so that we could have clear information to formulate a recovery strategy and then work on the strategy itself so as to have a clear picture on our plan of action in the most efficient and effective way.

We were finally able to embark on the recovery strategy and implement it in earnest in January this year with a new team within the Housing Department dedicated almost exclusively to the recovery of rent arrears so the majority of the progress figures are from that date. Next year I will be able to properly report back for the full financial year. More or less at the same time, the Government's central arrears unit was formed and we have also called upon them from time to time for assistance.

We have a fluid strategy, I meet with the dedicated arrears team weekly, to ensure that we consolidate the process and keep the momentum going. Every week we review the position and brainstorm as to how we can improve the process further.

Given the large number of debtors, we have broken them down into bands depending on the size of the debt and have varying strategies for the recovery of each band. The priority has been to recover from the top 25 debtors and everyone who owed under £1000 as we wanted to deal with it while it was still manageable.

In most cases we ask tenants to repay a lump sum and then enter into a repayment agreement for the balance.



In all cases of arrears where agreements have been signed, repayment is secured by direct debit, standing order or deduction at source in the case of public servants.

We have updated our systems and databases and updated a software system for rent collection;
Introduced a monthly billing format;
Introduced a revised rent arrears agreement.

We have embarked on an awareness campaign and introduced the facility to make lump sum payments on line via the e-gov portal of up to £2,500 so that people do not have to physically attend the department to effect payment.

No exchanges, inclusions or exclusions are allowed on tenancies in cases of arrears.

No parking spaces will be provided or renewed in the cases where people are in arrears.

I will use Mid Harbours estate as an example. Parking permits here expired on the 30th June. For a number of months we have written to tenants on a number of occasions advising them of the requirement that arrears be paid in full in order for the parking permit to be renewed. A fob is required to activate the barrier to the car park at the estate for those authorised to park there. Those in arrears have been clearly advised that they are no longer authorised to park. On the 4th July we deactivated the barrier fobs to all those in arrears, and Mr Speaker on the basis of our strategy to collect rent on our arrears in relation to this estate which historically had suffered from big arrears problems the total figure in arrears of which just exceeds half a million pounds we have collected in this period £90,411 in just a few months Mr Speaker. 39 tenants have settled their arrears in fully amounting to £84,085 and these are figures that I have as from yesterday. So Mr Speaker that's is just by way of example to show how our strategy is working.

This says more about the willingness to pay rent than the ability to pay rent Mr Speaker.

Traditionally Mid Harbours estate tenants owed a lot of arrears, but the situation is now much improved and we are addressing that, principally because people wish to retain their parking spaces, but even those who are giving them up are engaging in the recovery process and entering into arrears.

Similarly, we have not allocated any sheds or berths in the new small boats marina in cases of arrears – of those offered berths, 32 people were in arrears, 26 people have paid in full and in this way we have recovered £42,747.94 in a short space of time and 11 debtors have foregone the opportunity of a new berth.

Requests for non-essential works are not accepted for those in arrears

As from the 1st September it will be compulsory for all rent and arrears to be deducted at source for all public servants unless payment is already being made by direct debit or standing order without default. It is unacceptable that people who are in employment should be indebted to their employer, this should never have been allowed and for years no one has implemented any



mechanism to prevent it. We now have Mr Speaker.

Since January to date, in addition to issuing bills in the new format which highlights that the tenancy is in arrears, the Housing Department has issued a total of 2599 letters to debtors. This figure includes up to 3 letters for the same household in some cases.

In the same period, the department has arranged 414 appointments with debtors, of which 313 have attended the meetings. Officers meet with tenants individually and try to establish the reason for the non-payment and offer assistance with a repayment plan.

Meetings are amiable. Officials consider the individual circumstances and try to assist genuine cases of hardship as much as possible. Close liaison with the DSS quickly verifies whether rent relief may be offered. In cases of unemployment, a seamless referral is made to the Employment Service.

At the moment we have two teams of officers who see people daily.

There are already further 687 further meetings scheduled so as you can see a very live process but people are engaging well.

A total of 196 repayment agreements have been signed since January this year.

This has secured arrears in the sum of £766,447.99 – payment is mostly secured by deduction at source and standing order.

Essentially so far we have secured the sum of £21,569.77 per month in respect of arrears via repayment agreements and in addition and more importantly, we have secured the payment of monthly rent going forward in the sum of £16,012.14 every month. Of course that number will continue to increase as the team continues to see people.

We have introduced a mechanism in the software that immediately advises upon a default in repayment and a letter is issued immediately.

The department is now working closely with a number of other government departments to update information on tenants, working together to safeguard arrears by public sector workers. Other mechanisms will be introduced for those who work in the private sector.

First and foremost Mr Speaker, the most important thing is that there is a clear strategy on arrears collection which is being pursued and is constantly under review with a view to improving.

This debt has been allowed to accumulate over a period of 20 years and it is still early days for the strategy but it is clearly working.

The strategy is twofold Mr Speaker, of course we will aim to recover the existing debt, but even more importantly, we will stop it from escalating and by introducing the new mechanisms we are



securing the monthly rent going forward; ie not only have we reduced the figure of the debt, had we not implemented the new system it would have continued to grow beyond £6m.

Mr Speaker, I am delighted to report, that since the answer to the last parliament question on the balance of arrears, ie people who owe in excess of 3 months rent at the 31st May, the balance of arrears at the 30th June has again reduced and is £5,425,830.21.

Mr Speaker the debt accrued is not something that can easily be resolved overnight, after all it has taken 20 years for it to reach where it is.

It must be recalled Mr Speaker, that when the GSLP left office in 1996 arrears were £655,031. It was under the GSD's watch that rent arrears passed the £1m mark and increased steadily and by about 600% by the time they left office leaving behind a debt of £4m by 2011. While it is a matter of fact that the debt continued to grow on the same trends while we were unable to change the system, we are now addressing the matter and I am relieved that the balance of arrears is for the first time in steady decline.

An important factor, am sure that those opposite, in particular Mr Clinton, will be glad to hear, has been achieved at no additional human resources expense. We have restructured and deployed people to arrears, no additional personnel have been employed and there has been no need to work overtime either.

Mr Speaker, it is still early days, but the important point to note is that there is a plan of action, the plan is in place and it is working.

The most valuable achievement is ensuring that going forward tenants do not continue to default in their arrears

I am confident Mr Speaker that my report at the end of this financial year will show significant improvement and I look forward to reporting back to this Parliament a year from now.

Mr Speaker at this stage I wish to publicly recognise the commitment and hard work of the arrears recovery team at the Housing Department for their absolute dedication to the process. Previously, they had no mandate to do this despite them wanting to embark on the recovery of arrears as the diligent public servants that they are for a long time. This year they have vigorously pursued the arrears recovery strategy, have seen hundreds of people, not all meetings are pleasant as you can imagine, they have processed hundreds of payments accurately and on time and all with a turnover, vigour and efficiency that you would have thought that they were being paid on commission on the amount recovered!

One final note on housing and a reference to the Ombudsman's report. For the last few years the Ombudsman has noted a downward trend in housing complaints and enquiries, I am pleased that this trend continues, to the extent, according to the Ombudsman that we could see housing issues being removed from the top of the complaints league. Housing has always been a very difficult sector but it is indeed very gratifying to read such an acknowledgement.



EQUALITY

Mr Speaker, as a Government we have demonstrated a strong track record on equality in our first term and this will of course continue our work as we strive for a more inclusive community.

Mr Speaker, having introduced the civil partnership legislation in our first term in office, the most live issue at present is our manifesto commitment with regard to amendments to the Marriage Act to make it equal for all. As you are aware, in our manifesto we set ourselves a time line for June. We have already undertaken the consultation process, but given the results of the referendum, we have been overtaken by events and we seek the indulgence of the electorate for a little longer, but that does not mean that we have lost sight of the matter.

In July last year the Equal Opportunities Act was amended to include transgender individuals as a class protected from discrimination. We are working with other government departments on progressing policies in this regard as appropriate.

A lot of work has been undertaken on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Disabled including substantial consultation with stakeholders and we are finalising documentation to be able to give this effect.

This is not the only progress on the rights of people with disabilities and we continue to make progress to assist individuals with disabilities and have introduced various measures throughout the year.

There has been substantial training provided both the private and public sector on accessibility to premises as we prepare for the introduction of regulations to make buildings accessible.

Importantly, as part of our work in life planning for the disabled, the department is spearheading an interagency working group with a view to formulating an autism strategy and other ways of assisting people with learning disabilities.

I also continue to undertake work on gender equality and this year numerous awareness events have been arranged.

Mr Speaker, this is an area where I am greatly assisted by the support of professionals and groups in the voluntary sector with whom I work very closely and I wish to thank all of those who have provided professional and practical guidance.



SOCIAL SERVICES

Mr Speaker,

My final portfolio is of course Social Services.

The development in this department is ongoing. In the same way as the needs of our community and society change, the service ensures that it adapts and models its services to reflect this.

The users of social services encounter in their lives issues which affect many facets and dimensions and the inter agency teams that work to support them have embraced this.

I am happy to report that there now seems to be a deeper understanding that social services does not work in isolation from other Government departments.

The Social Services department of the Care Agency provides for children, vulnerable adults, adults with learning disabilities and individuals suffering from addiction.

The driving force in children's services is the understanding that children want to grow up within their families and the opportunity to grow up in a safe, healthy family unit is what social services aspired to for every child. It is for this reason that the dynamic of children's services has now changed to promote early intervention to avoid future difficulties such as criminality, substance abuse and domestic abuse from arising.

One of the flagship successes of the service this year has been the adoption and fostering service as a way of providing a family life for children who cannot live with their own parents.

The Care Agency celebrated its first fostering and adoption awareness week in October 2015. The success of the campaign has been reflected in the number of children placed with foster parents and family placements in the last few months as opposed to institutional care. This is a great achievement for children.

Training of potential foster and adoptive parents has greatly improved and it helps individuals cope with the sometimes contentious issue of fostering within a small community.

The success of the fostering initiative has had an effect on residential services which is undergoing a restructure as the team there work very closely with the family placements to ensure their success.

The process for leaving care children has also been greatly improved, thereby achieving a better result for children who grow up and leave the residential service, but for whom there continues to be support from social services where necessary to assist them with their transition to adulthood and independence.



The team from adult services, who assist vulnerable adults aged 18 or over, principally support individuals to live safely and independently in the community. This is generally achieved through a multi-disciplinary approach with social workers, carers and other agencies.

This year, the service received a total of 472 referrals for social work assessment and support. There is an increasing amount of referrals from the public and self-referrals, and this is as a result in the growing confidence in this service.

They are also responsible for the running of the day centre for the elderly at Waterport Terraces, such a valuable investment for the benefit of our elderly community who are able to spend time in this warm, caring environment.

Domiciliary care of course continues to be provided to assist vulnerable, elderly or infirm people at home. We constantly monitor this service for clinical standards and well to ensure that it runs on a cost efficient basis.

Social workers are now integrated in hospital multi-disciplinary teams and bed management meetings which ensures better planning of services and a seamless approach to care.

At present we have 220 individuals receiving care at home through social services, this enables elderly people to remain home safely and independently for longer in line with their wishes.

During this financial year, the focus of the disability service has been the emphasis on continued improvements to ensure the highest standards and quality of care are provided to St Bernadette's Resource Centre and Dr Giraldi Home.

We have engaged the services of an external consultant to assist in the development of the service and assessment of individual service users.

We have refurbished St Bernadette's to improve it and make it more accessible and completely refurbished the sensory room which is so core to our service.

Finally, turning to addiction rehabilitation and outreach and community services.

This Government, and all of us who are responsible for drugs and alcohol abuse in difference way are totally and equally committed to assist.

Mr Speaker, the Honourable gentleman opposite mentioned yesterday that he has met with addicts in recovery and is learning from what he hears. That is exactly what I have been doing for over 4 years, and Minister Linares who held this portfolio as well last year, and this is how we have shaped our policies and led the service to where it is.

And what it is Mr Speaker is a far cry from what it was when we first came Mr Speaker, and I am sure that it is not what Mr Corby, who initially set up Bruce's Farm left either. I know what we inherited, I was there, I saw it, an empty, dilapidated Bruce's Farm, forgotten and neglected by the



GSD, and I am not referring to the building, I am referring to the people who needed it at that time. But I do not wish to dwell on the past, Mr Speaker because that is not what this service is about.

In previous answers to questions Mr Speaker I have stated that occupancy levels at Bruce's Farm are higher than ever, well guess what Mr Speaker, last month I was delighted to have been faced with the problem that it was full to capacity! This had not happened for at least 12 years and it shows that the system is now working and help is being provided. Incidentally on that occasion I asked the staff to buy bunkbeds as a temporary measure as I wanted to ensure, as I always have, that people who ask for help and seek to be admitted are.

Beyond Bruce's Farm we have important manifesto commitments to meet on wider strategy, we are working very hard to achieve this. Once our ambitions are implemented, we will transform how drugs misuse and its damaging consequences are dealt with in our community.

This is certainly an area where interagency working together is crucial for success, as is engagement with the charities and voluntary sector with whom I meet frequently and they know they have an open door and my full support.

The significance of the progress of the Care Agency is the overall improvement over the past few years. This has been achieved principally through the employment of staff in a service which never has a full complement of either professionals or admin support. As an essential service, this is one that has seen growth posts of key staff in our first terms and we are clearly seeing the results of this valuable investment. One of the key functions outside the day to day professional work is the outreach careers work that has been undertaken by staff to encourage, especially children in schools, to consider a career in care, whether it be as a social worker, in care or nursing. We are keen to invest in the future of this service.

Finally Mr Speaker, I would like to give credit to Mr Albert Bruzon who retired as the CEO of the Care Agency at the end of last year. Albert is a kind man and a man who holds strong principles and values who has dedicated his career to working in the public service. Albert stepped in as CEO of the Care Agency over 3 years ago at a very difficult time and helped steer the ship and give it the balance it has today. Being at the helm of this incredibly challenging and demanding organisation is not an easy task. After a short period of retirement, Albert has agreed to return to work with me in my ministerial office on a part time basis. I am grateful that he has and I look forward to working with him again, his role will now be different, but no less important.

This year has also seen the retirement of Debbie Guinn the head of service of the adult social work team. Debbie is a true professional, a kind and gentle lady who has dedicated her career to helping others and had done a lot for social services in Gibraltar and from whom I have learnt a lot. I wish her well but ask that she does not go too far either.

It just leaves me to thank everyone who works with me, either on a daily basis or in departments that I call upon for support from time to time. I have numerous departments I am responsible for and I work closely with senior management and officials to progress each service for the benefit of those relying on us to do so, I could not make the progress without their support.



My portfolio is vast, varied and very demanding with very real and live issues and of late also requires a lot of travel. My team, particularly those in my immediate ministerial office, while very small are hardworking and dedicated and help me keep everything together. They provide me with day to day support and also co-ordinate with all the departments and sectors that I am responsible for.

Together Mr Speaker we will all continue to work hard in order to deliver what we have committed to in our manifesto

Thank you.