



PRESS RELEASE

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Budget Speech 2019 – The Hon Samantha Sacramento MP

Mr Speaker

It seems incredible that this is the last budget speech of this Parliament, and that it is the eighth time that I have risen to deliver a budget address.

EQUALITY

During our two terms in office, it has been my privilege to have held many portfolios.

Of all those portfolios, there has been one that I have held from the very first day, and that is Equality. I am Gibraltar's first Minister for Equality, a responsibility that I am very proud of.

As Minister for Equality, I lead the Ministry for Equality, a department that we created and which for the first time, and is dedicated to upholding equality principles and eliminating all forms of discrimination.

It has been immensely rewarding to have been at the helm of a responsibility that has been ground breaking, in philosophy, ideas, in policies and most importantly in legislation.

Gay Rights

In December 2011, there was a fundamental change in that the electorate got a Government that stands for fairness and equality for everyone in our community.

Our progress has been such that many may well have forgotten that we took over from an administration that did not share these fundamental values.



Equally, many will have not forgotten what it was like back then. As unimaginable as it may now seem, those were times when a same sex couple had to challenge the then establishment, to be determined by the highest Court in the land, at great public expense, in order to assert their rights to a joint tenancy of a government rental flat. Needless to say that the Privy Council determined that the state had discriminated against the couple.

An administration with many shortcomings, and none clearer and more obvious than in equality, and particularly in gay rights.

Thankfully, those dark days are gone since the new dawn of December 2011. The imbalance on equality has been redressed and such shortcomings addressed because what for them was not even a dot on the radar of importance, in contrast, for us, has been a priority.

June is considered to be the month to mark gay pride, it is therefore fitting I think, that I should commence my address marking our progress on this important subject.

It is incredible to now think that the first time that the word gay was mentioned in parliament was in my very first budget speech in 2012 and gay rights were first properly achieved in this House in 2014.

Indeed, the first Bill that I ever moved in this Parliament was the Civil Partnership Bill in March 2014, a landmark piece of legislation because for the first time in our history, it enabled the formal recognition of relationships between couples of the same sex. It was also progressive because it extended to opposite sex couples as well, something that we did ahead of the UK where it has only just recently been changed as a result of a challenge.

Up until that point, the gay men and women who lived in Gibraltar did not have their relationships, love and commitment recognised in the eyes of the law.

That Act represented a historic step on what had been a long journey for respect, dignity and above all recognition of gay couples.

In our second term in office, in October 2016, I brought the Civil Marriage Amendment Act to this House to allow for the civil marriage of gay couples. At the time, the response to the consultation paper was the most overwhelming we had ever had, mostly in favour of the proposed Bill. The passing of that Act once again demonstrated our commitment to reflect respect for all individuals regardless of their sexuality, and also strengthening the institution of marriage, ensuring that it remains an essential building block of modern society.

In addition, we have also legislated to outlaw homophobic hate crime and hate speech in 2013, such crimes are now aggravated offences.

Transgender rights

Equality is at the heart of this Government as it affects everyone.



In July 2015, in recognition of our transgender community, we made provision to extend protection from discrimination for individuals who have undergone gender reassignment.

The Department of Equality is currently preparing an awareness and information programme to raise awareness of the rights of individuals who have transitioned and also work with partner departments who provide services to ensure that the members of the transgender community are supported.

Gender equality

Our Government's commitment to equality is embedded in everything that we do.

Gender equality is another important strand of my equality portfolio.

At the start of my tenure as Minister for Equality, I was keen to develop and introduce policies that would promote gender equality. Before that time, this was not something that was really discussed.

I believe most resolutely that gender equality is a vital component of a mature and modern society and it is an intrinsic factor in our quest for social justice.

One of the strands of our gender equality strategy is the economic empowerment of women.

The annual overall earnings gap, as distilled from the Employment Survey indicates that men earn significantly more than their female counterparts.

We know that more gender diverse and inclusive teams, organisations and businesses fare better than their less diverse counterparts.

We know that having a gender balanced workforce and closing the gender pay gap, for example, can add millions to a country's economy.

All this has been amply demonstrated and widely documented by global and international agencies and these are indisputable and clear goals that the Ministry for Equality is working towards.

In order to secure more precise data, this year I issued Gibraltar's first Gender Pay Gap Survey to accompany the Employment Survey.

I am very heartened by the positive response of the local business community. The survey, which this being the first year is voluntary, was issued to employers who employ 20 or more employees, we had a response rate of 58%. In addition, a further 271 employers with less than 20 employees also returned a completed survey.

I look forward to the final analysis of the data which will provide a clearer picture of where horizontal or vertical segregation may exist. This will allow us to develop strategies to address these imbalances.



My recent attendance at the Equal Pay International Coalition's technical conference in Iceland in April was a prime opportunity to keep abreast of how to promote better indicators, statistics, data and policies to reduce the gender pay gap.

Needless to say, closing the gender pay gap is a moral and social issue with micro and macroeconomic benefits that we would be foolish to ignore and we will therefore continue to address.

The under-representation of women in leadership and management is another issue which the gender equality strategy seeks to change and we have embarked on various initiatives to achieve this.

The mentorship programme for women is another important part of the strategy on the economic development and advancement of women. I am delighted to say that after the great success of the pilot cycle which we commenced last year and saw the participation of 50 mentors and mentees, we have recently launched the second cycle.

Interest in this initiative continues, and what is a key indicator of its success is that over 50% of the mentors who participated in the pilot cycle have committed to participate in this cycle again.

The programme is going from strength to strength. It has been very well received by the business community and enjoys the support of key stakeholder organisations including the Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses, Women in Business, Girls in Tech and EY, all of whom are represented on the selection panel.

I am grateful to His Excellency the Governor, the Chief Minister and all the other mentors who gave up of their valuable time to give back and to everyone involved in making this important initiative a success.

In some people's minds, gender equality is a women's affair; led by women and exclusively about women's issues. This is an erroneous idea and one that needs to change and this is why we always involve men as well as women in our conversation.

We are acutely aware that a contributor to the barriers that women face in their professional progression when it comes to recruitment, promotion and retention.

On this basis, I commissioned bespoke training on gender diversity and inclusion and specifically on unconscious bias for both the public and private sectors. I am delighted to say that the response to the training was extremely successful with 100 attendees from the private sector. I believe that this engagement is telling of the business community's desire to ensure that women are more equitably represented in their workforce and to harness the potential of all their employees. The training was also delivered to over 140 public sector officers, including the uniformed bodies. All who attended are eligible to sit on recruitment boards and panels, this represents approximately two thirds of people involved in public sector recruitment.

Challenging gender stereotypes is also an intrinsic part of our gender equality strategy, it is particularly crucial when advising on professions and career paths available. Women are under-



represented in certain STEM fields and we are working with the Minister for Education, Department of Education, private sector entities and NGOs to address that.

At the Ministry of Equality we are used to dealing with matters that are innovative and ground breaking.

Another of our latest ventures in the quest for challenging gender stereotypes and advancing equality is the consideration of introducing statutory paternity and / or parental leave.

Traditionally, women disproportionately take the majority of the responsibility of childcare. This is one of the contributors to the gender pay gap, where the gap widens around the age that most women have children. Furthermore, it is important to make the rights that are available to mothers equitable with fathers so that fathers can play a more active role in childcare from an early age and effectively give couples more flexibility at an important time in the family's life to choose who looks after the children. Introducing parental leave would also benefit those in same sex relationships.

After extensive research on the matter having been undertaken by the Ministry of Equality, we are now ready to commence a consultation to introduce proposed changes to maternity leave to explore the options of paternity or parental leave which will be undertaken as soon as the consultation paper is finalised.

We will be consulting with all stakeholders including the private sector through the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses as well as consulting with the Trades Unions.

The Government is clear, we must move away from maternity leave to parental leave. Our consultation will be on how.

The local political arena is another area where women are under-represented and warrants attention if women are to consider leadership positions and participate more actively in the democratic process and this house is to be more representative of our community. As I always say, there is nothing that I would like more than to see a more gender balanced Parliament. I am hoping that the proposal to extend Parliament to include Backbenchers will also assist in this, and that is not to say that I believe that women should not be on the Front Bench alongside male counterparts.

As Minister for Equality, and also as Ambassador of the Girl Guiding movement, it was lovely to invite guides to an Equal-i-T at my offices ahead of International Women's Day this year. The aim of the event was to promote discussion of gender equality, as well to provide insight into the workings of Parliament and of women's suffrage in Gibraltar and the UK. Another aspirational measure as I hope that I may have planted a few seeds in the minds of these young ladies and I will continue my work with them on this front.

Challenging gender stereotypes through raising awareness and information events is also central to the work undertaken by the Ministry for Equality. Marking International Women's day with A level students is now firmly established in the schools' calendar. It is a combination of their expression of the issue through speeches as well as through art, it is very important that the younger members of our community are given an opportunity to reflect upon and articulate their



views on gender equality. This year we extended our traditional Gender Equality Art Competition and used the winning images to create Gibraltar's national stamp for International Women's Day. It gives me great satisfaction that their message, in the form of stamps, is literally travelling around the world. I also promote the concept at every opportunity that I have when I travel, particularly since the majority of my travels since the issue of the stamp have been on the topic of gender equality. I am also particularly proud to say that they are also in Royal hands as I was able to present a first day cover of the stamps to Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Wessex, when we met a reception in New York recently.

We know that a world free from gender stereotypes would allow each individual to develop their full potential, free from limiting roles and expectations. The worst we can do is to narrowly demarcate and rigorously police what women and men can do, say or aspire to become.

Some may say that a lot of gender stereotypes are imposed on us from a young age, even in the way that the general theme in fairy tales where the girl is either a hapless victim or a beautiful princess waiting to be rescued by Prince Charming. On this basis, and for these concepts to be given some thought, I am arranging a short story competition where I will encourage such stereotypes to be challenged by our community.

We should never be complicit in limiting the full range of human emotion for women and men. The worst that we can do is to create, believe in and perpetuate hyper feminine and hyper masculine stereotypes that do not reflect the full range of human experience, that is a type of control that can prove to be very damaging, even fatal.

Consequently, challenging gender stereotypes is extremely important as we know that these can have an impact on the specific physical and mental health challenges for the men in our community.

This is why the Ministry for Equality has also marked International Men's Day at the comprehensive schools in the last few years. Additionally, last year we also celebrated International Men's Day by organising an information and awareness raising event, together with the GHA mental health and public health services and local charities Prostate Cancer Support Group and GibSams on the 19th November for the first time. We look forward to building upon this initiative in the coming year and would like to galvanise the entire community to support our endeavours.

On a more social side of gender equality, last year I also amended the legislation in order to provide for breastfeeding in public places so as to support and protect mothers who choose to do so without discrimination.

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is something that has been at the forefront of my equality agenda.

Early on in my tenure I set up a working group with a view to producing a national strategy on domestic abuse that would deal with the issue in a coherent and consolidated manner.



The working group is made up of the heads of key stakeholder Government departments. The role of this group is two fold, to ensure that as government departments they have robust internal policies to deal with instances of domestic abuse and that their policies are aligned in a way that they work together in a co-ordinated fashion as it is likely that those who encounter abuse will require the support of more than one service and ensure that there are proper referral pathways so that they are afforded the best protection available. Those who suffer domestic abuse are entitled to feel safe.

I am acutely aware of the issues as well because I am constantly being approached by individuals who have suffered domestic abuse and they tell me their stories first hand. Only in this past week I have seen two such individuals.

This strategy is working well, but of course is under constant review because there is always room for improvement.

Over the past few months I have personally met with the heads of the relevant departments so that they can update me on the progress being made.

One of the focus at the moment is to better gather statistical data in a holistic manner between departments.

Of course, continuous training is fundamental to strengthen the understanding of the subject matter. Indeed, some representatives from the working group will be attending a domestic abuse conference on this in London next week.

Awareness is key and we have run a very successful awareness campaign by way of an information clip, posters in public sector offices and now even on the back of buses.

Additionally, the Department of Equality work very closely with the Department of Education and deliver the 'Respect' programme in schools in an age appropriate way, another successful Multi Agency initiative that is also going from strength to strength.

Support is also paramount and Minister Costa's announcement yesterday of two additional counsellors in the Care Agency will also go a long way to help tackle the matter.

I chair the working group and the strategy is co-ordinated from my office. In addition to thanking those involved in leading on this in their respective departments, I would like to single out the staff in my office who drive this, Crown Counsel Karina Khubchand and my personal assistant Donna Mcleod, who in addition was responsible for our very effective awareness campaign.

The throw away comments made by the Leader of the Opposition on Monday demonstrate not only how little he knows about the subject, but also how little he has sought to learn, because despite the announcements that I have made on progress he seems to just refuse to even acknowledge them. If anyone is out of touch, it is them.



MAPPA

Making our community safe through effective public protection has been one of the highest priorities throughout my time in office.

I chair the Strategic Management Board of a multi agency public protection partnership that is responsible for the assessment and management of the risk posed by registered sex offenders and persons of interest in our community.

Designated trained professionals from each of the partnership agencies have undertaken specialist training which is commissioned annually and takes place over the course of couple of weeks in Gibraltar.

As chair of the Strategic Management Board I have made it a point to ensure that no stone is left unturned when it comes to public protection of this nature. It has been a priority that all the partner agencies understand that the work of MAPPA is crucially important.

Prevention and reduction of risk is paramount and this rehabilitation is achieved through intervention work. The risk managers are all highly trained in intervention work and this allows them to provide specific behavioural therapy and sex offender specific rehabilitation programmes.

I wish to thank everyone who is involved with MAPPA at every level, it is indeed very difficult. I would also like to thank the Commissioner of Police who I recently appointed as the Deputy Chair of the Strategic Management Board.

Disability

There can be no doubt that this Government has done more to promote inclusion of people with disabilities than any other before.

The Ministry for Equality has been extremely busy since its inception, the most landmark progress being the introduction of the Disability Act, passed last June.

The Act changes the dynamic and disability and inclusion really have a priority focus throughout the public sector in a way that is unprecedented.

Naturally, legislation underpins rights, but that is only part of our approach. We have always taken it further by developing policies, promoting good practice through training and awareness.

The Disability Act was quickly followed by the passing of the Building Rules Approved Document R Regulations, which is similar to the Part M in the UK and gives the Department of Town Planning and Building Control the tools it needs to ensure all new building projects are as accessible as they can be.

We have drawn a line, and we have set the standards now needed to ensure Gibraltar is more inclusive in future.



For existing buildings, we heard the Chief Minister announce relief to incentivise businesses and encourage more inclusive spaces within the next 36 months.

Even before this landmark piece of legislation was passed by this House, we were preparing the terrain by ensuring that enough training opportunities were given to the relevant authorities and Heads of Departments within the Public Service. Indeed, much of this training was also offered to the private sector.

Since we took office, it was already the policy of the Government, ahead of the legislative changes, that all our new projects were accessible. Many existing premises were also refurbished to make them accessible too.

It is therefore safe to say that we have changed the landscape on equality, and I mean this literally as well as the philosophy.

No sooner had we announced our intention to pass the Disability Act, that the Ministry of Equality was already making the necessary arrangements to provide familiarisation training for the new Act to all heads of the public service. Indeed the private sector has also had a chance to learn more about the new Act at our recent Disability Symposium. A symposium, aimed at local businesses and also portrayed the benefits to a business that is inclusive.

This Symposium on disability is a first for Gibraltar, and included professionals who spoke about the law and disability, making premises accessible, interacting with people who have learning or communication difficulties and there was also a part on appropriate language and etiquette. All in all, a very varied programme which was very well received.

The Ministry of Equality has, of course, continued to provide training during the last financial year. Last summer, the Disability Language and Etiquette training that already forms part of the Government's Human Resources' training programme, was delivered to all Lifeguards and Beach Attendants employed that year as part of their training programme. This training was also extended to toilet attendants serving the public beaches and bathing pavilion. This same training had already been delivered the previous year to parts of the civil service, employees of both bus companies that provide our public bus service and private events organisers.

We have already seen the benefits this training provides. This House may remember the initiative introduced a couple of years ago at the Gibraltar Fair, where sensory adaptations were made for the first couple of hours to allow access to people with autism, photosensitive epilepsy and visual or hearing impairments. Also, the sensory performances made available by Leisure Cinemas and by the Gibraltar International Magic Festival. These initiatives came about because of the training and learning opportunities the Ministry of Equality has organised and Gibraltar is all the better for it.

During the last financial year, the Ministry of Equality has also continued to provide training on Autism. The latest seminar of our Autism series, "Working with Families" – the fifth in the series – was once again very well attended by the public and workers from the Department of Education and Care Agency. Further training and awareness on learning disabilities and Autism was also given



to NGOs that already attended the Tier 1 training the previous year. We are planning a further seminar on autism in the autumn.

The result is that since the inception of the Ministry of Equality, there are now more professionals, NGOs and family members aware of Autism and learning disabilities in general. This awareness leads to a better understanding in your role as a parent, professional or leader and this in turn leads to a more inclusive society.

This has always been my aim, to open up Gibraltar for the benefit of all who live in or visit it.

This is why under this Government our beaches are some of the most accessible in the world. This is why we have provided platforms and stands for our major events so that people can join their family and friends and not have to stay at home, this is why this Government continues to invest in training and continues to try and make Gibraltar more inclusive.

Indeed, it was our Government who introduced the changing places toilets. For those who may not be aware, this is larger than an accessible toilet as it needs room to cater for people who have severe mobility impairments and may need the use of a hoist and an adult changing mat. Gibraltar already has a number of changing place toilets, in fact more than what is usually found in cities much larger than us.

I still wish to improve further and my Ministry is liaising with the Department of the Environment to get this off the ground as soon as possible.

The Ministry of Equality is also in consultation with their colleagues at the Department of Education in order to include disability awareness in the classroom. This is an important step in ensuring that inclusion becomes second nature to future generations. I would like to add at this point, my thanks to the Minister for Education, teachers and staff at the Department of Education who, from the very beginning, have shown to be eager to attend all of the training and informative seminars we have provided and have supported us and our message all the way. It is thanks to the feedback we have received from them that we are now working together to identify relevant training that will enable them to further foster inclusivity in the classroom.

As part of our objective to promote inclusion and independence, our latest progress is that the Ministry of Equality has launched the Disability Information Card. This initiative is purely voluntary, but will allow the user to carry a card that can be used as a discreet communication tool. In order to ensure that this project is as successful as possible, the Ministry of Equality consulted key stake holders, disability groups and charities at the beginning of the planning procedure.

This card, will be especially useful to people with invisible disabilities that may need to communicate their needs in a discrete way and could be particularly useful to users that may find themselves alone and in a situation where they would otherwise find it difficult to communicate to others. The information contained in this card will also be beneficial in an emergency situations as all emergency services were consulted at the planification stages and are aware of its use.

All in all, it is abundantly clear that our Government's commitment to equality has naturally resulted in remarkable progress in achieving an inclusive society and is a recognition of modern Gibraltar.



I am extremely proud of the work undertaken by the Ministry of Equality, a department that I have seen grow and are in no small measure responsible for such progress because of the true dedication of a small and hardworking team headed by Sabina Guillem.

HOUSING

I will now turn to my housing responsibilities.

Housing is a fundamental cornerstone of our community.

It is without a shadow of a doubt that our Government has a track record in the provision of housing needs for Gibraltar at every level.

Providing affordable housing to a high standard is a top priority for us, not least because of its natural consequential effect on the demands on the overall housing waiting lists.

In our first term in office we provided almost 1000 new homes by building two new estates at Beach View Terraces and Mons Calpe Mews. Add to that a further 161 homes that were formerly MOD premises.

In this term we have announced three new housing estates, we have already launched Hassan Centenary Terraces and Bob Peliza Mews. At the end of this month we shall be launching the third estate on the site of Westside School. In all, these estates will provide a total of 1365 homes.

I know that there are many families who are very excited at these new opportunities.

In relation to Hassan Centenary Terraces alone, we have received 2341 applications. That is almost four times the number of flats available and therefore proof as to the interest in acquiring these properties.

Importantly as well, we have introduced stringent measures to do away with speculation and abuse and excess profits on resales in future to ensure that affordable housing continues to be available and affordable.

The Leader of the Opposition acknowledges that this is a good thing. He did however describe it as a minor adjustment. This is anything but minor, it is a fundamental shift, but I suppose that offering a double congratulations is too much, even for him. This review is a real game changer, and on the whole, the response to it has been overwhelmingly positive. There may be some who don't like it, but all that belies of them is that they did not purchase for the right conditions.

I have one further new announcement in relation to changes made to the resale of affordable housing, and that is in relation to those who own property on co-ownership terms, yet up until now the practice has been to sell them on terms as if there were owned on a 100 per cent basis, having acquired the remaining share from the proceeds of sale, but before completion. This is not what was intended in practice and we will be writing to practitioners setting out the new mechanism



whereby homeowners must purchase any remaining share in their properties with their own funds before being able to sell on a 100% basis.

So, in our two terms in office we have offered a total of 2181 affordable homes for sale. Compared with a total of 807 flats offered by the GSD in their four terms in office. Essentially we have provided over 2 ½ times of what the GSD did in half of time.

I make this point because yesterday the Leader of the Opposition said that housing in Gibraltar was broken. Nothing could be further from the truth, what was broken was their systems and not providing a constant flow of homes, and what was literally broken were the blocks at Nelsons View, Bayview Terraces and Cumberland Terraces that they built, and where this administration has, as we heard the Chief Minister say on Monday, had to invest hugely in remedying the defects.

They make a lot about the fact that they built an estate for rental at Mid Harbour Estate, guess what? The ONE estate they built, is broken, literally, as well, due to faulty construction too, and the tax payer will have to remedy that too. I am awaiting to hear the full extent of what is required in that respect.

In addition to the construction of affordable homes for purchase, we have also built purpose built flats for the elderly. In our first term we built Charles Bruzon House and Sea Master Lodge. I have already announced that we will be constructing further purpose built homes for the elderly in the new affordable housing estates, replicating the successful model at Mons Calpe Mews. Both new estates will therefore provide additional rental flats which will also have a knock on effect on the rental stock available by releasing rental accommodation.

It is clear that by constructing affordable housing, there will be a direct knock on effect on the demands of the housing waiting list for rentals.

The GSD have a one track mind, they continuously repeat their mantra of demanding means testing for housing, which shows just how out of touch with reality they are as this just does not work. Another baffling argument that they propose is that young adults should be precluded from joining the housing waiting lists, essentially preventing them from the chance of getting into the system, again demonstrating the GSD's little understanding of how the system works.

By providing a continuous stream of affordable housing, people aspire to purchase in such schemes and this has a much better net effect on the waiting lists for rental for those who cannot afford to purchase, it is very simple.

A broken housing system is one where you don't provide sufficiently, that's what they did, and that's a real legacy problem that we had to inherit but we have turned around.

That is why we have carefully thought out the categories to achieve the fairest all round allocation priority. In the first round of applications for Hassan Centenary Terraces we have at present received applications from 130 people who would release vacant possession of Government flats on completion.



In addition to this, I am happy to announce a new initiative in relation to elderly people who have purchased their homes. We have had many approaches from people, most of whom live in the first wave of affordable housing schemes and, such is their age now, that they have expressed that they wish to surrender their own homes in order to take up the opportunity to live in rented purpose built accommodation for the elderly. On this basis, I can announce that those who wish to do so, may surrender their flats to Government in return for being able to avail themselves of rental flats for the elderly on basis that the property being surrendered is worth at least the development value of the rental flat.

In addition to this, let's also recall the number of post war rental accommodation that were sold off under the GSD policy. We stopped this practice but in the end there were 183 flats sold in total. This was a bad deal for everyone involved and I am often contacted by those who regret having purchased, particularly more elderly people because they would much rather avail themselves from moving into our purpose built flats for the elderly instead. We heard the Chief Minister announce on Monday the rate at which the Government will reimburse everyone who has changed their mind for having purchased these post war flats. If everyone returned their flats, and I sincerely hope that they do, we would have a further 183 flats returned to the rental stock. Essentially that is the equivalent of building a small estate of rental flats.

It is painful to hear the GSD say that housing is broken, if anyone broke it, it was them, and they did so for sure. They cannot hide from that fact.

They just don't seem to understand the consequences of their neglect of our community's housing needs and still don't understand how they should be met because they continue to insist that there should be construction of homes for rental to tackle the waiting lists.

So let's do the numbers and demonstrate how by constructing affordable housing and rental homes for the elderly, as well as the return of post war flats sold, we have increased the rental stock with its consequential effect on the housing waiting lists, without having to construct additional flats for rental:

130 who have applied for Hassan Centenary Terraces who would give up vacant possession. No doubt that there would be more in the other two upcoming developments, but let's stick with that figure for now.

119 homes for elderly rental accommodation in the new affordable housing developments

add to that

142 from Charles Bruzon House and Sea Master Lodge

add a further 183 post war sales, which should never have been sold and lost from the rental stock, if all were to be returned, and I hope that they all are.

That in total is effectively an additional 574 homes returned to stock for rental so far in our two terms.



That provides just slightly less of in our two terms in our two terms in office than they built with Mid Harbour Estate, Bishop Canilla House and Albert Risso in their four terms.

Needless to say, that the additional construction of affordable housing will also alleviate the remainder on the waiting list.

The mathematics just could not be clearer, I cannot understand how they can be so blinkered so as not to see it.

And that it in just allocations as a direct result of our construction alone. We must add to that the allocations of rental stock by way of the normal turnover of the housing department rental flats. And when I say normal I mean anything but normal, and I must congratulate my department as this year we have had a record turnover of rental stock which is anything but normal.

Furthermore, insofar as providing rental accommodation for those on the waiting list who are unable to afford to purchase, I am extremely proud to say the Housing Department is providing a turnover of refurbished flats for allocation at record fastest rate ever.

This is one of the real successes of the housing department and the figures prove the unprecedented performance of this department which is serviced by truly dedicated, professional and hard working team.

A total of 265 allocations have been granted since 1st April 2018, to date, and of these, 37 have been to senior citizens to flats purposely built for the elderly.

This is an incredible achievement and a record high considering that there is no longer the direct knock on effect of the Beach View Terraces, Mons Calpe Mews, Charles Bruzon house and Sea Master Lodge allocations, the benefit of which we mostly took last year when we had a high 312 allocations. There were 109 in 2016 and 127 in 2015.

The evidence is that this year's figures are a true testament to improved workings of the department and we are seeing the results of focused changes that we have made.

Since 1st April 2018, the Housing Department has received a total number of 662 applications for Government Housing.

The Reporting office continues to process reports and forward these to the relevant department and authorities; they continue to obtain feedback for clients on the progress of works by way of counter, telephone calls and emails. They have established a good proactive working environment with a large number of entities such as; HWA, GGCC, GJBS, the Environmental Agency, Gibelec, AquaGib, Technical Services, Britannia PLC, RGP, Gibraltar Car Parks, GHA OT Department, Care Agency etc.

In 2018, the Housing Department reporting office received a staggering total of 15,287 reports for repairs and refurbishments to flats.



The Reporting Office now has a more leading role in the managing of work orders and flat refurbishments. In order to accelerate the allocation of flats a tight deadline is set for the refurbishments of flats, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) have been set taking into account the works that are required, and the Reporting Office is a key player in ensuring that the Departmental KPIs are met. They liaise on a daily basis with the HWA and the subcontractors in order to achieve this, by ensuring that refurbishment works are carried out within their scheduled dates, by having HWA allocating a traffic light system which allocates the works required to a set number of days. On average a refurbishment takes roughly three months whereas in the previous administration, this period was more like two years.

All information on refurbishments is updated daily and all information is correlated from all of the above mentioned entities.

Arrears

The Housing Department continues its hard work in the recovery of rent arrears. Since the Department commenced its concerted effort of recovery in 2016, it has to date reduced the outstanding amount by a staggering £1.3m and more importantly, it has put the brakes on to the pace of which arrears were being accumulated. This has been achieved in a using a multi-faceted approach.

By expanding the options available in which to make payments of rent, it allows the tenant the flexibility to be able to pay in their preferred option, whether this is online, by way of standing order or via deduction from their salaries, or pensions, payments are easier than ever before. I am pleased to say that 65% of rent is now collected by these secure methods. We therefore ensure that rent is paid.

We are now also engaging with the private sector for employers to offer this facility to their employees who are Government tenants who may wish to take this up.

The Department has also ensured that the correct systems are in place and notifications are received to alert the department of any tenant who commences to default in their rent. This process enables them to contact the tenant far sooner than ever before and engage with them before any debt begins to build up and becomes a further burden to the tenant.

The Department continues to meet with tenants on a daily basis to arrange a repayment plan or adjust an existing repayment plan, to meet both, their needs and ours.

These meetings are very useful as they allow the department to identify those tenants who have genuine hardship and are unable to pay their rent. All cases are looked at on a case by case basis, careful consideration is given to those who may have social or medical aspects. This helps the Department determine those who genuinely can't pay and those who do not want to.



Since June 2018 to date a total of 283 interviews have been held with tenants in arrears. They have made agreements with the Housing Department in order to repay the outstanding debt. The amounts secured via agreements as a result of these meetings this year is £606,362.27

Significantly, the Housing Department has a total of £2,034,655.35 secured via agreements. This is important, and while not currently reflected in the balance recovered, it is extremely important to have managed to secure this sum.

Despite all of the initiatives and as the Department continues to strive to engage with all those in arrears there is, regrettably, a minority of tenants who can pay and do not pay. These tenants have no social or economic hardship, which would qualify them for rent relief and yet they continue to default. For these people, the Department has therefore been left with no other option but commence legal action to recover the unpaid debt and to this end, the cases are already with the Director of Public Prosecutions to pursue recovery of arrears in Court.

As you can see the Housing Department as a whole have taken a very proactive approach in ensuring that, none of its tenants either fall behind in payments causing an increase of arrears and certainly not at the unprecedented rate pre 2011.

The reality is that it is very difficult to recover arrears after 20 years of no action whatsoever. As an example, there are 231 tenancies who owe rent, and whose tenants passed away prior to December 2011, in situations like this, it is obviously very hard to recover.

We have a very close working relationship with the various tenants' associations and the help and guidance that they offer us in relation to issues in their particular estates is always incredibly helpful.

Refurbishments

Turning to the refurbishment of housing estates, last year I was honoured in declaring that both Glacis Estate and Moorish Castle Estate were both virtually complete. The morphed changes to these estates, has most definitely boosted the living standards of tenants and visitors alike. This is more noticeable at Glacis Estate and Laguna Estate, Estates which have made a big positive impact on the skyline in the area, being one of the main access arteries into Gibraltar. First impressions are of paramount importance, and when you provide a much needed mega-uplift to existing buildings in estates that were once considered the forgotten estates, you end up with two brand new estates.

These estates will not be maintained by themselves. That is why Government of will be further exploring the implementation of maintenance and repair programmes so that these estates do not fall into disrepair once again.

It must be further expressed that the magnitude and success of this Government's enterprise, is down to the sheer determination of all those involved with the project, from the Ministry for Housing by way of the Housing Department and Housing Works Agency to the contractor GJBS, to



all those Service Providers and subcontractors. The three Projects have gone beyond their original and pre-determined scope but this has also been due to additional works and other significant variations and will complement the overall appearance of the Estate.

The Government will also commit to the refurbishment of other rental estates that form part of its remit. There are many refurbishments that we have already commenced and are close to completion, Alameda Estate, Bishop Canilla and Catalan Bay which will look glorious when completed very shortly.

In addition to all this, we have also set out on an ambitious project of urban renewal of Government pre-war properties in the upper town. We have been very proactive in identifying many properties that were empty during the GSD years and many have been sold to provide further housing, already 20 tenders have resulted in over 120 dwellings.

We continue to develop urban renewal and in addition, there is a specific project where pre-war dwellings continue to be strategically decanted so that tenders can be done in clusters. The majority of the void properties referred to in the auditor's report relate to properties that are vacant because they have been identified for the urban renewal projects.

As a result of this, we are about to issue a tender for the next one, the renewal of the Old Married Quarters, next to Moorish Castle Estate, this building consists of 10 apartments of varying sizes. A tender notice will be issued shortly.

Controlled rent

I have already announced that I have set up a working group to undertake a thorough review of the Housing Act. This commitment arises out of the need to make necessary changes so that the legal framework works more efficiently for the Government as well as those who we serve.

The review also includes the provisions that relate to private residential landlords and tenants, and particularly controlled rents.

The review, has already highlighted a number of amendments which would be required. These have been drawn up as a result of a consultation process, which is of course ongoing.

The latter is something that has been ongoing with successive Governments but I believe that this is the first time that a review including professional advisors and stakeholders has occurred.

I have personally met with representatives of the newly established Landlords Association on a couple of occasions and we have agreed on a couple of principles going forward.

I have also received representations from Action for Housing which are most helpful.

The key is to find a balance that is realistic in this day and age, while maintaining to protect tenants with particular rights, we need a fair resolution to the problems and issues that are currently faced.



It goes without saying that decontrolling rents is not an immediate short term solution and there is no need for concern by those who are afforded statutory protections.

The Government's approach is a long term holistic and integrative one to deal with the problems that arise from the Housing Act and balance this with the Government's drive for urban renewal, particularly regeneration of the upper town.

The Government has a duty to ensure that tenants who have the benefit of controlled rents are not rendered homeless, however, it is equally acknowledged that extremely low rents are no longer sustainable in the long term as this makes it almost impossible to maintain. At the same time, tenants cannot continue to live in substandard conditions. I am committed to changing the law to achieve a fair outcome. On the basis of the representations from stakeholders that I have received, I have already commissioned a thorough study of rent controlled properties in Gibraltar and will issue a consultation paper as soon as this is concluded.

An immediate change that I have already commissioned is the creation of a register specifically for controlled tenancies so that there is a clearer picture of the situation and will also protect from the abuse by fictitious tenants.

Finally, on Housing, during this year, Mrs Geraldine Reading has been appointed Principal Housing Officer, my congratulations to the leading lady of the Ministry for Housing on her promotion, my thanks as well of course to her truly dedicated team at the Housing Department. My thanks also of course to my team at the Housing Works Agency led by Ruben Rodriguez, not least for the continued changes in working practices which we have implemented and given effect to the changes we have seen.

I wish to thank all the groups and voluntary organisations that we work with and provide us with invaluable advice as we strive to reach our common objectives.

Last but by no means least, I must thank the team in my ministerial office led by my Private Secretary Audrey Vella for their indefatigable dedication to the work that we do on a daily basis and to their commitment, on some days it seems days it feels as if the whole of Gibraltar calls our office, but they will always endeavour to help everyone with the dedication and the passion that they always do.

Mr Speaker I wish to thank yourself, the clerk and your team here in Parliament and especially the Clerk who looks after me so well on our CPA travel.

It has been a year where the Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister and have once again proved their unstinting dedication to our community navigating the treacherous waters presented by Brexit, but with their leadership and our Government colleagues working together as a team we have provided our best for our Gibraltar.

Thank you