

2017.11.27

3.5 Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour of the Chief Minister regarding the reinstatement of an all-weather lifeboat service: [1(621)]

Further to reports that the all-weather lifeboat, the George Sullivan, has been sent to the U.K. and the crew stood down, what action, if any, is the Chief Minister taking to ensure the reinstatement of an all-weather lifeboat service?

Deputy S.G. Luce of St. Martin (The Minister for the Environment - rapporteur):

The Government have been working behind the scenes for many months in an attempt to improve relationships between the former St. Helier crew, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and indeed all providers of search and rescue assets. Since the withdrawal of the lifeboat, George Sullivan, we have had meetings with all concerned, including the ex-crew of St. Helier lifeboat. I have been in constant contact with the search and rescue community in Jersey with the aim of restoring stability as soon as possible and I will continue to do so. Getting properly accredited lifeboats back in St. Helier is my one and only priority at this time, regardless of where those assets might come from. It is a great relief and I am encouraged that the R.N.L.I. (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) have announced their plans to return to full capacity with a new local crew for both the inshore and all-weather lifeboats as swiftly as possible. It is vital that search and rescue assets are able to work collaboratively together to continue to provide the best lifesaving service possible for our Island.

3.5.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I am aware that talks have been going on behind the scenes, but the first priority of any government is the protection of its citizens. At sea we have fishermen, private yachts, merchant vessels and passenger vessels. An all-weather lifeboat on standby in Jersey is absolutely essential. We may not get the main lifeboat back for many weeks to come, but Jersey has a very long association with the R.N.L.I., and if this goes badly it will leave a scar that will take decades to heal. I just believe it is not too late and if we have a lifeboat already in Poole, we have a very experienced crew, surely we can all get around a table and sort this out. It is not too late. Does the Minister not agree?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

This is a very sad and difficult situation that we find ourselves in, but I have to say to the Deputy that I fear we have been in this situation before and not very long ago. Government worked behind the scenes very hard to make sure our lifeboat crew and our coxswain came back together and we all put out hands up and said we could have done better. The Institution issued a public apology, something I am not sure they have done before. Government, for our part, alongside Ports of Jersey and the Coastguard, said that we could have done better. The crew accepted, with the coxswain, that we could all have made the situation better. We decided to move forward, to put the past behind us and we very much look to the future. Fortunately, that situation has not continued and once again we find ourselves in a situation where we are not aligned. The Institution have made a decision and they have also assured us that the inshore lifeboat will be returning literally within weeks. They have also said that the all-weather lifeboat will be returning before the end of December. We have at this very moment members of the Fire and Rescue Service and other R.N.L.I. volunteers who are already trained to man the inshore lifeboat at St. Helier. Those people this afternoon are training to get that service back on station as quickly as possible. I am sure, as Members will know, the Institution have already had a number of volunteers who are prepared to brave the elements and put themselves forward for training on the all-weather lifeboat. Those people, along with others who will be recruited as part of a drive which I think the Institution are announcing today, will be the crux of the crew moving ahead with the all-weather boat.

3.5.2 Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier:

For somebody who has come to this row quite late and not fully understanding, I would just like some clarification from the Minister answering the questions. If the crew that have now been stood down were employed, would this not be what is considered, under employment law, constructive dismissal? Can the Minister explain why it seems that the Ministers who are dealing with this are backing the R.N.L.I. and not backing the local crew? Just simply I would like to understand more about it, as it has not been explained. But this is what I am being told, the States are backing the R.N.L.I. Is this true?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

Let me be very clear with the Deputy. The States are backing anybody who is prepared to come forward at the quickest possible moment with a lifeboat, with a trained crew with the right kit, with the certification, coding, licences, everything that is required by the Harbourmaster. In that regard, last week I met not only with the Institution, I met with the ex-lifeboat crew. On both occasions, support was offered to whatever is necessary to get lifeboats back in St. Helier just as fast as we can. My one and only priority at this moment is not to look back and take sides. My one and only priority is to get lifeboats back in St. Helier for the benefit of our local maritime community.

3.5.3 Deputy J.A. Martin:

A supplementary then, Sir. The Minister said "lifeboats". Does the Minister think then we need to have 2, because there seems to be another ... the Minister knows which crew I am talking about. We have one boat and we have one crew at the moment and now we are going out for another crew to do the same boat. It is very simple to me. Is there enough? The story I receive is the support is going to the R.N.L.I., which is not ... because they have taken the boat away.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

To be clear with the Deputy, at the moment St. Helier has no lifeboats that are operational and no crews that are trained to operate those lifeboats. What we are trying to do here in the quickest possible time is to get lifeboats back into St. Helier so the Deputy and others benefit. That is 2 lifeboats, an inshore lifeboat and an all-weather lifeboat. We want those boats back in St. Helier from wherever direction, crewed by whoever, as long as they are proper lifeboats with properly-trained crew with the proper equipment. The quicker somebody comes forward with those boats, the happier I am.

3.5.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

I thought it was going to be the Chief Minister, but it appears to be the Minister for the Environment. Perhaps the Minister for the Environment could explain why the Chief Minister agreed to the removal of the George Sullivan at the meeting on the Thursday before the boat was removed on the Friday. Could he explain, please?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

It is not really a question of agreeing or disagreeing with the removal of the George Sullivan by the R.N.L.I. That lifeboat is an asset owned by the Institution and at no point has it ever been described as other than it will be used at the Institution's behest to go where it is best suited. I can appreciate that everybody concerned must have been extremely disappointed. It was a very sad day that they took the boat away, but their reasons were clear. They have tried on a number of occasions to resolve the issues they have had with the ex-crew and it has not come to fruition. It is very disappointing; it is very sad. The Institution have been on the Island for over 100 years and they

have a great tradition on the Island of providing us with state of the art equipment and training their crews as best as they can at no cost. The decision cannot have been taken easily, but I feel that things had got to the point where we had to stop and start again. We had to draw a line in the sand and say that things have to change in the future and we cannot continue. We could not have continued in the way that we have been going and the Institution took that extremely difficult decision. I would stress to the Senator that the decision would not have been taken without consulting with other members of the La Manche plan, which we are part of. We share assets when it comes to search and rescue with Brittany, Normandy, Channel Islands and the South Coast. We have planes, helicopters, lifeboats, all-weather lifeboats, inshore lifeboats, Fire and Rescue Service, all these assets at our disposal and we swap them in and out. Indeed, there is a meeting of that group on Wednesday of this week in Southampton, where I am sure they will be updated on the situation, but I can only stress, Senator, that we have put an enormous amount of work in trying not to get to the situation we are in now, but now we find ourselves here, we are now putting even more work and more resource into making sure lifeboats are back in town just as quickly as possible.

3.5.5 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

A supplementary. The Minister says the provision of an all-weather lifeboat at no cost to us. Does he not realise that the local volunteers raise something in the order of £300,000 a year, I understand, of which only £200,000 goes to cover the cost of the lifeboats and the balance is submitted to R.N.L.I. headquarters?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

The Island has a great tradition with the Institution and it is clear and everybody knows that we are a great source of funds for them. The Islanders donate very, very generously to the Institution, as they do to all charities on the Island. But I must say to the Senator, this is not an issue about money, this an issue about lifeboats and providing cover for the maritime community.

[15:30]

3.5.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister have the support of the former crew for his interim plan?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

My interim plan is quite clear. I have said my only priority at the moment is to provide lifeboats back into St. Helier as fast as possible. In that regard, I met with the ex-crew and looked at a presentation that they gave. They explained their ideas and how they wanted to move forward. The Harbourmaster in particular was crucial at this meeting, because he explained quite succinctly the difficulties and the technical challenges that will be faced by the independent crew as they try to reach their aspirations. Placing an asset into the Coastguard's hands, a declared search and rescue asset, is massively technically difficult. We wanted to be very clear with the ex-crew that while we would support them in any way we can - and we offered help with our own States surveyor and other technical assistance - they must realise that this is a huge undertaking, to try to start an independent lifeboat, especially so if they do not go for a new vessel, if they go for a second-hand vessel or a vessel which is quite old. The coding, the surveying work and the technicalities in getting that vessel up to speed and up to a specification to go to save lives at sea will be huge. The Harbourmaster has explained this to the ex-crew at the presentation and we offered all the technical support we could.

3.5.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

That is a very long answer, but it still has not answered my question, which is does the Minister have the support of the former crew for this proposal?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I apologise for not answering the question. I am not quite sure what proposal the Deputy means. My proposal is to get lifeboats back in St. Helier just as quickly as possible. I expect that if that includes the R.N.L.I., then the ex-crew will not be supporting it. The ex-crew seem very keen and they have expressed their desire to have an independent lifeboat, but as I have said before - and I say it again - I do not mind where this lifeboat comes from. Anybody who wants to come forward with a lifeboat that is properly coded with a properly-trained crew with the right equipment that can be declared to Coastguard to save lives at sea will be supported.

3.5.8 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Can I just commend the Minister here for extolling the virtues of diplomacy I did not realise he had? **[Approbation]** He has done a tremendous job to try and bring all parties together. I have heard that from all sides, so I thank the Minister. But could he explain what assets the Coastguard has which can fill the gaps to a certain extent with vessels that are already in our possession, in our ownership, that we can deploy on occasions? Could he explain to Members what those assets are?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

There is a slight technical difference, and I hope Members will bear with me. One of those assets that the Coastguard can call on, on top of the search and rescue assets that I have already mentioned, would be our own fisheries vessel, but there is a great difference in the fisheries vessel responding to a mayday while at sea. At all times they would do that and do everything they could to assist. There is a massive difference in having that fisheries vessel tied up in a harbour and then deployed as a specific search and rescue asset by the Coastguard. That is a difference in coding and training. The boat would need to be looked at again. But notwithstanding that, the Coastguard Harbourmaster obviously has at his disposal, in addition to the rescue craft that I have named, the tug, the pilot boats, the fisheries vessel and some other small assets within the harbour. We do have a number of vessels around the coast that could go to the assistance of anybody in distress.

3.5.9 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Could the Minister clarify therefore that those assets he just described, in an emergency, could they be deployed easily and quickly?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

In the recent incident last week, where a large speedboat/pleasure boat had the unfortunate incident with a buoy in the middle of St. Aubin's Bay, the pilot boat went out almost immediately in conjunction with the search and rescue lifeboat to the assistance of that casualty. In the future, it would be expected that that would happen again. I know the Harbourmaster has already increased the rotas for pilots in the pilot boat crewing so that those boats could be used more often, if required. Obviously the tug is now back on the Island. That is a great asset to the Island and that could go out in all sorts of weather as well.

3.5.10 Connétable C.H. Taylor of St. John:

Does the Minister agree with me that the move by the R.N.L.I. to remove the all-weather boat from Jersey showed an unacceptable level of contempt for the safety of mariners around our shores?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

No, I cannot agree with that. I will tell the Constable why that is the case. At the last States Assembly sitting on the Thursday afternoon, just after the Chief Minister summed up in a rather long debate that went over some days, he, I and Senator Routier met with the Institution about their plans and how they were going to respond to the letter from the ex-crew, which said quite clearly that the relationship between the ex-crew and the R.N.L.I. was broken, to quote the letter. The answer to that was they told us that it was very likely that their lifeboat, the George Sullivan, will be taken back to the U.K., where it would be serviced and made ready to come back again, but it was not a definite decision at that time, because they had further meetings to hold that evening. Those meetings would have been with other people, who would have helped to provide cover for the removal of the lifeboat. It would have been absolutely wrong for the Institution to have taken that lifeboat away if other cover had not been provided. The Harbourmaster was crucial again in this and the Harbourmaster is crucial in many of these things, because he co-ordinates assets for the saving of life at sea, search and rescue assets, and he would have been in consultation with the other members of the La Manche plan, as I have stated, in Guernsey, in Alderney and the other French ports, where there are lifeboats, to see if there was cover sufficient for his needs. While our lifeboat cover is less than it was and it is not where any of us would have it, we do have sufficient lifeboat cover at the moment. It is not ideal, but it is sufficient. If it was not sufficient, the Harbourmaster would have told us and I am sure the Institution would have taken a different view.

3.5.11 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I know, like most Members, I am trying to understand what is going on here and we are only hearing part of the picture, so it is very, very difficult. Just to fill in some other gaps, can the Minister tell me whether there is any agreement or memorandum of understanding between the R.N.L.I. and Jersey? Is there any written documents or any written commitments or obligations on either party, and if so, what are they?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I am not aware of any written agreement. Certainly in the U.K. I think there is a charter, which says that the Institution will provide lifeboats as and where they feel necessary, but as I said previously, the Institution will be 200 years old in 2023 and it has been in Jersey for over 100 years now. In many of these things, we have never had an agreement. The Institution turned up 100 years ago and they put a lifeboat here, it was crewed by local volunteers and we have moved forward since then. They have always provided an asset, always provided lifeboats for this Island, always provided the training and the kit for the crew. They have provided replacement lifeboats when lifeboats were out of service. It is just something we have all grown up with, but I am not aware that there is an actual formal agreement between the Institution and the Island to provide cover at sea. The Institution, as a charity, has Channel Islands Air Search, for example, who provide a plane to search for people at sea. The Institution, as a charity, provides an asset, a search and rescue asset, to the Harbourmaster. It is verified and coded, it ticks all the boxes and the Harbourmaster, when he needs it, uses that asset and deploys it for search and rescue at sea.

3.5.12 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Regardless of any disputes that may or may not have taken place between the crew and the R.N.L.I., the calibre of the crew is such that if there was a callout now - or as referred to, a shout - the Minister knows that they would put to sea in whatever weather. If the R.N.L.I. are so worried about security, I am quite prepared to make them an offer that if they return the George Sullivan to Jersey with immediate effect, I would quite happily volunteer to sleep aboard until such time as the dispute is resolved. Would the Minister pass that on, please?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I will pass that on, but I can only reassure the Deputy that the Institution have already committed to bringing the George Sullivan back before the end of December and we are working towards that.