

3.12 The Deputy of St. John of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services regarding the Connex bus service provision in snow conditions:

Given that Connex have cancelled Island bus services on a number of occasions in 2010 because of snow and left children stranded on routes and at schools, what action, if any, is the department taking to ensure that the service continues for as long as possible in times of bad weather? Is the Minister satisfied that the Connex provision is robust enough to deal with snow conditions?

The Connétable of St. Brelade (The Minister for Transport and Technical Services):

In the event of snow and ice T.T.S. are responsible for salting and gritting the main roads and ensuring they are as safe as possible for traffic. During the worst of the adverse weather last week T.T.S. staff worked 24 hours a day in extremely challenging conditions to ensure that priority routes remained open to vehicles and to provide timely highway condition information to the travelling public and commerce. By and large they were extremely successful in this end and should be applauded. However, there is an inevitable lag between snow falling and T.T.S. being able to treat roads where conditions are marginal and T.T.S. communicate closely with Connex to ensure sufficient information is available for informed decision-making. However, it nevertheless remains Connex's sole responsibility as bus operator to make the final judgment as to whether to suspend services and to liaise with schools, customers and the media to publicise the decision. In making this decision Connex must also take into account the general limitations of their fleet in view of the conditions and their duty of care to protect passengers and other road users. My offices have been in constant communication with Connex throughout the period of snowy conditions and have now started to conduct a thorough debrief of events. This will consider all options available to maintain services during adverse weather in the future including alternative bus routing and timetabling, driver training, improvements to existing communication procedures and contingency planning for significant bus pickups and destinations, particularly those at schools. The experience of the last 2 weeks has been vital in informing the development of a more resilient contingency strategy for the Island in the future.

3.12.1 The Deputy of St. John:

This would have been useful if we had a Teletext working. **[Laughter]** Will the Minister explain if the Connex contract contains bus use in inclement weather and, if it does, will he please tell Members why people were left on the side of the road? We listened to what he said about what his department have done and they did an excellent job but I am talking about the responsibility he has for the fiasco that we had in Jersey. In Jersey terms, it is equivalent to the Eurotunnel fiasco of England and France over the last couple of weeks. Can the Minister tell us, within the contract, if it covers inclement weather?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I am unable to respond to that particular question because I have not got the answer but I would also point out that it is very easy, while one is sat in an armchair at home, to comment on why the buses should or should not be running. But one has to consider the responsibility of the driver who must not only have responsibility to his passengers on the bus but other road users and to have 18 tonnes of bus charging

around down a slippery slope is quite a responsibility, which I would not wish to have myself.

3.12.2 The Deputy of St. John:

Will the Minister agree that having hundreds of additional motor vehicles on the road going to collect children at school is far more unsafe for the travelling public and the children in those vehicles than it is having one properly-prepared or a number of properly-prepared buses?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I wish it was such an easy thing to say and regrettably I cannot define nature. The fact is that ice comes and goes in these conditions and we have to be prudent in our approach. Notwithstanding that comment, I would say that it is imperative that my department liaises closely with Connex and schools to ensure we keep the buses running as long as possible and perhaps longer than took place over the past few days.

3.12.3 The Deputy of Grouville:

Given that on one of the days last week children had lessons cut short, schools closed early and then the buses refused to even let them sit on the buses to wait for a decision to be made, does the Minister believe this constitutes a good public service and good co-ordination with the schools?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

No, the Deputy is quite right and I am aware of that situation. I am also aware that my Chief Officer spent a considerable amount of time resolving that situation on that day. Clearly there are lessons to be learned. I believe we are learning them and we are in the process of robust discussions with Connex to ensure that these situations do not arise in the future.

3.12.4 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Can I add my congratulations to the Minister for Transport and Technical Services for his staff's efforts during the period of icy snow and for the way that they conducted themselves and kept the roads as safe as possible. **[Approbation]** That bouquet I do not offer to Connex. Does the Minister share my view that Connex took a belt-and-braces approach to stopping their services when, quite frankly, on many occasions, certainly on the last occasion on which they suspended services, it was nothing more than rain? When Connex suspended their services the drivers were invited to pull over. They created huge amounts of havoc. Is the Minister aware that buses just pulled on to the side of the road, creating one lane of traffic for people leaving St. Helier and will he undertake, during the review with Connex, to give them a firm warning that this type of public service is not acceptable to the Jersey taxpayer?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I confirm that robust discussions have already taken place regarding these matters and will continue to do so to ensure it does not happen in the future.

3.12.5 The Deputy of St. John:

Will the Minister explain what has now been put in place so that if schools are closed early over this winter the parents will be told and how is he going to produce that information?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

The communication channels are being discussed in conjunction with my department, Connex and Education and we will come up with a suitable channel, I am sure, which will be acceptable to all parties.