

3.3 Deputy S. Power of St. Brelade of the Minister for Treasury and Resources regarding the serving of disconnection notices by Jersey Water following non-payment of utility bills:

The context of this question is that I am a committee member of the J.S.P.C.A. (Jersey Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). In light of the receipt by the J.S.P.C.A. of a disconnection notice from Jersey Water dated 28th April 2014, which was sent in relation to an invoice dated 27th March 2014, would the Minister, as representative of the shareholders, state whether all States-owned or controlled utilities send disconnection notices after 30 days and, if so, is this appropriate when certain consultations have to take place before any disconnection is allowed?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf (The Minister for Treasury and Resources):

Sir, I am asking my Assistant Minister to answer this question; he is in charge of credit control.

Deputy E.J. Noel of St. Lawrence (Assistant Minister for Treasury and Resources - rapporteur):

We are unable to comment specifically with regards to utilities' individual client situations. Jersey Water would be unable to share this information with us for data protection reasons, however, I am advised that Jersey Water have attempted to make contact on a number of occasions since the 30-day notice with the J.S.P.C.A., and indeed with Deputy Power, and have not been successful to date. I am further advised that at Jersey Water there is a robust procedure in place for debt recovery; further, that in no circumstances would an account be disconnected when just 30 days overdue without further efforts by Jersey Water to contact the account holder and establish the reasons for the late payment. With regards to the other utilities, none of them disconnect after 30 days and they all have varying terms of credit control.

3.3.1 Deputy S. Power:

The Assistant Minister may not be aware of it, but the Chief Executive of the J.S.P.C.A. and myself have spoken to Jersey Water briefly. Would the Minister agree that there is an element of aggression now creeping into payment collection within States utilities and that that is not appropriate in the case of certain bills served on people who are not on the same scale of operation as the J.S.P.C.A.? Does he not think that the serving of a disconnection notice within 30 days is utterly inappropriate?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

With all due respect to the good Deputy, if people paid their bills on time then 30-day notices would not be issued, but I must reiterate the utilities do not disconnect ... for example with Jersey Water, their policy is very successful in the sense that the amount of actual disconnections out of the 120,000 users on their database is a mere 170 per annum, which is 0.01 per cent. So their systems are robust, they have been like this for some time, and it really is up to their customers to ensure that, if they have difficulties in making payments, they contact the various utilities to discuss effective ways of paying their account.

The Bailiff:

I will come back to you, Deputy. Deputy Baudains?

3.3.2 Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

The Assistant Minister spoke about people paying their bills on time, but if I look at these dates, I notice the invoice was dated 27th March, so the organisation would not have received it possibly until the end of the month. As a businessman, I am used to paying my accounts at the end of each month, so that would have rolled over; in fact, it would probably only have just been paid by the time that the utility was sending the disconnection notice out. Does the Assistant Minister think that is reasonable?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

As I have explained, the system is a robust system, it allows an adequate notice, and therefore customers can pay in a timely fashion.

Deputy G.C.L. Baudains:

Is the Assistant Minister familiar with business?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Probably more so than the Deputy.

3.3.3 Connétable P.J. Rondel of St. John:

Given we are talking about a quango, call it what you will, it being one of our responsibilities, do the States themselves - their departments - pay their accounts within the 28-day period?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

All States departments operate within the terms and conditions they have with the utility suppliers.

3.3.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

When somebody has their water cut off because they do not have enough money to pay the bill and then they are asked to pay an additional sum in order to get reconnected, how does that help the individual get out of their debt and also be able to drink, wash and feed their children with water?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

The Deputy makes a good point but, in reality, that circumstance is highly unlikely to happen because the utilities, and particularly Jersey Water in this case - providing there is a willingness to pay, on even on a structured payment system - would not cut-off those individuals. There is protection there, they are not going to see Islanders, with families or without families, cut-off for the inability to pay. There is a safety net there.

3.3.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

A supplementary: I certainly know of cases, as I am sure we all do, where that has happened and families have called us up and had to borrow water off neighbours, *et cetera*. Will the Minister answer a more fundamental question as to whether he thinks access to clean water, drinkable water, is a basic human right?

[10:00]

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Of course I agree it is a basic human right, no one would say otherwise, but what the Deputy is neglecting to mention is that we have an income support system and part of those income support payments are to cover people's utility bills. There is a safety net there; Islanders should be encouraged to use it.

3.3.6 Deputy S. Power:

The Assistant Minister should have told Deputy Tadier that Jersey Water cannot disconnect without the consultation of local Constables and the Health Department. My final question is this: the Assistant Minister stated that if people paid their bills on time they would not be served final notices or disconnection notices. As Deputy Baudains pointed out, this was served on Thursday, 28th March, which was at a weekend, and we did not receive it until later. Does the Minister not agree that serving a disconnection notice within the 30 days of a month-end is inappropriate? Would he not agree that this aggression in States utilities is utterly inappropriate? Answer the question, please, Assistant Minister.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I do not believe it is aggressive, it is good business and perhaps, if the body that the Deputy is a trustee of would care to switch to a direct debit basis, then they would not have this problem.