

2019.09.10

3 Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier of the Minister for the Environment regarding the monitoring of air quality: (OQ.203/2019)

Further to the answer to Written Question 282/2019, in which it was stated that real-time air quality sensors would be in place at every school before the start of term in September, will the Minister confirm that these sensors are in place; and will he give an update on the wider air quality project involving Environmental Health, Digital Jersey and AirSensa to install 300 sensors across the Island?

Deputy J.H. Young of St. Brelade (The Minister for the Environment):

The first batch of 12 AirSensa real-time air quality sensors arrived in the Island at the end of August. The Environmental Health team have been working with all head teachers and school site managers to identify locations for those sensors and the units are being fitted at the moment. The installation plan prioritises all schools and St. Helier town centre schools are in the first tranche. This will ensure there is focus on air quality where children are particularly exposed. The first 6 units are now successfully communicating live real-time data to Digital Jersey and AirSensa, while the remaining 6 schools are undertaking small works to fit units in suitable locations and we are advised that the next batch of units will arrive next week. I looked on the website and I could not see this myself and the answer is after installation each sensor has to undergo a period of calibration and data quality checks before those reliable measurements can be gathered and analysis and publication, and that work will be ongoing as soon as we can.

3.3.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is sort of supplementary, but the second half of the question was about the wider air quality project involving 300 centres, as well as the schools. We can see that the project with schools has slipped slightly and I can understand and I am glad to see that 6 of them are in place. But can we get some sort of update on the wider setup of the centres across the Island, which will be so important if we are going to monitor air quality in a meaningful way for Islanders?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Yes, a good question. The remaining 6 schools, I hope, will be on soon, so we end up with 12 schools now. I think the question is, there is no question this is a project which is pretty ground breaking. It is going to have to build upon the early work, the pilot work and, of course, the contract is with this private firm, AirSensa, one of the leading players in the field and Digital Jersey. I have not looked at the contract myself, but my expectation is - and I will undertake to the Deputy to keep the flow of reports going - how the project goes because it is the intention of trying to extend this system out as much as possible. Just for the Deputy's interest, I understand that communication takes place through cloud technology and so that is quite obviously a sophisticated thing to bring it all together. But, at the moment, that is the intention and if there are any snags or things that prevent that happening I will make sure the Assembly are told.

3.3.2 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:

While some progress is to be noted, does the Minister believe that the Council of Ministers is doing enough to tackle air quality, particularly around schools, when we consider the steps that are being taken in the United Kingdom around schools by local authorities? We are not tackling, as far as I know, idling vehicles, diesel vehicles being allowed to penetrate close to schools and poorly-tuned vehicles across the Island, especially H.G.V.s (heavy goods vehicles). Is the Minister going to be talking to his fellow Ministers about really upping our game, as an Island, on air quality?

Deputy J.H. Young:

The honest answer is: no, I am not. I do not think we are doing enough at all. I think we are very fortunate that we have got a very enlightened Environmental Health team, who have advanced on this question and taken this forward. But I think there are massive issues still to deal with the issues that the Connétable raised about vehicle pollution. Of course, as the Members all know, at the moment the responsibilities are divided. My role, as the Minister for the Environment, does not extend to regulating on that matter; we do not have a Jersey clean air law. But certainly I will undertake to carry on pressing and try and do everything I can to make this Government Plan, which looks lovely and lots of commitment, deliver and things happen.

3.3.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Can the Minister clarify; it was my understanding from the original commitment that it was every school that was going to be having one of these monitors? Secondly, I might have misheard him, but I heard him saying that St. Helier schools were being prioritised. Are St. Saviour schools also being prioritised, because I believe we have extremely heavy traffic as well?

Deputy J.H. Young:

A good question. I think the best thing I do is give the list. The 6 that are in are: Plat Douet, St. Mary, Beaulieu, Janvrin, Mont Nicolle and St. Clement. The ones that are still to find a site are Hautlieu, Les Quennevais, St. Michael's, Rouge Bouillon, St. Saviour and Grouville. Obviously, they are looking at that list, they seem to be all urban schools to me and obviously the additional schools will be in the next batch.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

My question has been answered.

3.3.4 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:

Does the Minister think that he has enough tools in his toolbox to be able to deal with the issues relating to pollution and, more generally, to traffic control in the Island? If not, what powers would he like to be brought into his own portfolio and from where?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Absolutely not. I feel that, as the Minister for the Environment, the community as a whole are pressing for urgent action in a number of fronts on pollution, not only on air quality, but the pollution of our water supplies. Of course, the solutions to those do not lie with the Minister for the Environment. They may do in some cases where we have got a law where we can use the heavy hand of regulation and at the extreme enforcement through action in the courts but, frankly, that is not good enough. I know other jurisdictions do these things in different ways; they have stronger laws, different structures. I hope, in the fullness of time, that what I consider the unsatisfactory allocation of responsibilities in the setup of the Council of Ministers will, in fact, address those things in time. I had hoped that it would have happened by now, but I think it is a work in progress for the future to try and make sure, as I said, the plans that we have and the really good objective we have got we can deliver them.

3.3.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

Could I push the Minister further on what he sees as the unsatisfactory set up in the Council of Ministers for him to be able to deliver on this key area and what changes he would make to that system for the betterment of the Island?

Deputy J.H. Young:

We have got a problem now; we have got a mismatch between one government structure, Government of Jersey and new executive machinery and the ministerial responsibilities, which makes it very difficult to ensure that we can progress those actions. Personally, I would like to see that resolved. I asked for it to be resolved when I got elected back in 2018, it has still not happened. It is still a problem. It is a priority, as far as I am concerned.

3.3.6 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I have been asking about this question really since I started here about measuring air quality and would the Minister not agree that unless we have the sort of detailed information - both in urban and non-urban areas - about the quality of the air that we are breathing, any policy made for the future would be policy in the dark and will not be informed well enough to make the sort of changes, which may be difficult, particularly in urban areas, to make the changes we desperately need in order to protect our population, particularly our young children around schools?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Yes, I think the Deputy is right. I think in the area of environment and particularly environmental regulation, we have to make sure that our policies are based on actual factual information. For example, when we decide whether to ban agricultural substances, we rely on scientific evidence and that scientific evidence needs accurate information. I think I have demonstrated in my time, but I think I have been the first to publish the detailed results of water pollution measurements, so that people can see it. Here is an issue where the subject is a little bit more difficult; it is in the air and, therefore, we need the best technology to do it. But, of course, it is important that these programmes are properly resourced, which is where, obviously, the Government Plan comes in and I will leave that to others.