

21.11.02

12 Deputy M. Tadier of the Minister for the Environment regarding Air quality monitoring (OQ.223/2021)

Further to the answer to Written Question 170/2018 in which the Minister stated that air quality across the Island is generally very good, will the Minister state the locations at which real-time air quality monitoring is currently being carried out around the Island?

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

Firstly, the Deputy's question gives me a chance to correct really I think my written answer. It should have said it is generally very good but there are exceptions in our urban areas. So I apologise for that omission there. Now the answer is there are 2 real-time air monitors located at Halkett Place above the market and at Howard Davis Park. These units have a monthly check to ensure they are working properly and they need to be sent to the U.K. annually for calibration and repair. We have that relationship that is longstanding and it works very well. Unfortunately, there are only a further 2 real-time monitors that remain working out of the 46 that we installed in schools and this was under an arrangement by a firm called Air Sensor who supplied these monitors to us free of charge. That is very, very disappointing. The data that we have is on the websites. There are 3 websites and the public can get them and, obviously, air quality monitoring is vitally important for Jersey but particularly around schools and congested streets. Obviously, the areas that we would like to do more monitoring on is around Rouge Bouillon, Helvetia, St. Luke's, those on Wellington Hill because obviously the evidence is that children's lungs are susceptible to poor air quality and it can negatively impact on their health as an adult. Of course that is one of the reasons why I think as well, in our climate change work, the removal of polluting vehicles in the streets is an issue. Anyway, so what I am going to do is I am instructed there is going to be a new programme of monitoring that will be risk-based and done with a U.K. company with experience in this and that of course means money and therefore I am exploring the Climate Emergency Fund because, at the moment, there are no monies available for the project in the Government Plan.

4.12.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

That is all very interesting. I thank the Minister for the detail. The question arises in the context from not a town resident but a resident of Mont les Vaux in the St. Aubin/St. Brelade area who have pointed out to me that if there are only 2 live monitors and they are in town, how can the Minister assert that the air quality in the Island is generally very good? So he has possibly answered that indirectly but my supplementary would be to ask, first of all, is it necessary to get a U.K. company to come in to do air quality testing? Is this not something which should be within the remit of his department to do on the Island from within budget and, if not, why not?

Deputy J.H. Young:

As I said, my written answer should have had clarification. The wind speeds in Jersey are generally very high. Open areas generally enjoy better air than the urban areas so apologies for that. Can we do this ourselves? Well, if we get funding for it, then we will have to go to tender and I would be delighted if there is a local company that are prepared to help us with this but I have to say the resources are not cheap. It is important, if we are going to publish this data, that it is accurate, calibrated and reliable and that requires quite a lot of scientific skills. For example, it was recently pointed out - just to illustrate things that can go wrong - the monitor at Howard Davis Park is being affected by rain and upon checking that, it was found out that the unit was faulty. So this is the kind of specialist work and so I think I can tell Members that I am looking at the moment at around about

£200,000 to set this up and so on. When we get things setup, I am sure we can run it within our own resources.

4.12.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Minister expand on this company that was monitoring the air around the schools when they stopped recording the information or when the machine stopped working and why no action was taken to ensure that schools were being monitored?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I think the Deputy raises a good point and it may be something that the Public Accounts Committee will need to look at if they are able to. I was informed about this project, as you know, early on in my Ministry and I was informed that this company had been introduced through Digital Jersey. I do not understand these terms. They call it a sandbox project, which is the idea that you can offer a firm to come along and trial technology free of charge and obviously it gives them a good test bed. Unfortunately, the project found that the pieces of equipment were not robust enough. They did not work. They were adversely affected by weather. Apparently they said: "Well, there are high winds and salt spray in the Island and that is just not good enough. We just cannot get them to work." I know that the director general has been communicating with a company. I think at the moment it is fair to say that we agree to disagree. I understand that the contractor or at least the firm is looking for a payment of £160,000. There was never a contract signed in order to be able to sort this out and my view is we should do this properly. Do it properly and restart the project, so I am sorry that I have been quite open about it but that is the position.

4.12.3 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Minister again tell us when it was discovered that the thing was not working and why steps were not taken immediately to try to get monitoring again of the schools?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I cannot be exact on the date. I will have to come back but I do believe that I have answered questions in the Assembly before on this. I think I have pointed it out at least 6 months ago, if not, longer. The contractor I think has put forward the reason that they could not get the engineers to the Island during COVID and so on. There are all these excuses flying around but, nonetheless, that is the case. The action that I want to take - and I did ask the officers - is I want a new programme because Deputy Tadier is right. This is vital work and I have this week said: "This has to be an integral part of climate emergency work because it is a by-product." When we deal with vehicle issues, we deal with the air pollution issues. At the moment, none of the monitoring shows us that we are above the E.U. (European Union) limits but we know the E.U. limits are going to be tightened. My assumption is that Members will want to tighten Jersey's air quality limits even if we are not in the E.U. nonetheless, so that is still the direction of travel. At the moment, I am afraid it is about resourcing and money, I am sorry.

4.12.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Could I urge the Minister to just take it as read that something needs to be done about air pollution around schools such as Rouge Bouillon, Springfield, First Tower, town schools, Janvrin, the colleges during drop-off and all of the schools there because of the number of vehicles that are travelling to them? Unless the Minister can sit there and guarantee us that our children are breathing air that is safe for them, then it would much better to take action now to stop cars idling outside schools, for

example. Would the Minister at least commit to make that sort of action and perhaps, for once, support a free bus service so that children can go to school without being dropped off?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I might as well be open on this. I will be supporting a free bus service. I think we have messed around on this too long. I also think we need to connect to a school bus service for free but I will deal with that on another day but, nonetheless, yes, I will go with that. Now what can I do here? I have tried to be careful because this is a project that has gone wrong. We have to get it back. We do not have a law at the moment and I think the Minister for Infrastructure and I will work closely together on this because of the question of emissions standards in vehicles. We have polluting vehicles by the tonne in Jersey that would not be allowed anywhere near an inner-city area anywhere in Europe but nonetheless I think I can commit to doing that to see what we can do within existing frameworks to do something about school drop-off areas. It is not within my powers but I would like to see an arrangement where people do not sit there with their engines running, polluting playgrounds and the rest of it.

4.12.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I say to the Minister that I promise I would never be critical of you if you erred on the side of caution, took action and made the air cleaner around schools without the evidence that you are looking for because it would be better for our children. Can I ask whether the Minister would just get somebody in government somewhere to start a campaign about idling around schools and educating parents about polluting around schools as a matter of urgency because we are not taking any steps? We are waiting but we are not acting so could I urge the Minister please just to say: "Yes, I will take some action tomorrow"? I am happy to come and support and knock on the car windows and say: "Please stop your car idling" as I have done a number of times and nobody has hit me yet.

Deputy J.H. Young:

I will commit to working with the Minister for Children and Education and the Minister for Infrastructure. I do not see any reason why we could not have a campaign. We have a big comms team. Let us get them on the task.

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

The Minister is right in saying that he has told the States before that these air quality monitoring sensors are not working but does he not think that it is a shocking indictment to this Government that here we are with the C.O.P. 26 (Climate Change Conference) thoughts happening in Glasgow and, in Jersey, we cannot even do air quality monitoring? They have been doing it in other urban centres for decades and we are talking about having a test bed. Will the Minister not treat this as a matter of absolute priority to work with the Council of Ministers so that Jersey can get its act together on air quality monitoring particularly in the urban areas.

Deputy J.H. Young:

I absolutely agree.

4.12.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

We already know the place in the Island which has the worst air quality, and that is the tunnel, and my question to the Minister as the final supplementary is if, when we know the information about where the air quality is bad, he does not do anything about it and the department does not do anything about it because they allow people to walk through the tunnel perhaps 4 times a day with a

pram and they think that is okay, what is the point in spending £150,000 and giving that to the U.K. company to tell us where the air quality is bad if the Minister is not going to do anything about it? Would it not be better to spend that money on doing what we know needs to be done in the Island?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Of course the Deputy is right. One of the frustrations in my job is the legacy of complete laissez-faire about our environment. We have seen change in recent years, thankfully, but trying to turn around a situation where we do not have laws, we do not have the resources, we do not have the people in place, it is not going to happen straightaway. One of the things that I am committed to doing is I will do absolutely everything I can during my tenure and my plan is to produce a legacy report with the priorities for Members. I am open to Members bringing amendments to the Government Plan. There is an invitation on this because I think it is crucial.