

23.10.17

## **11 Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier Central of the Minister for Justice and Home Affairs regarding Government response to the recent gas outage (OQ.196/2023)**

Given the public criticism of the Government response to the recent gas outage, will the Minister advise what consideration, if any, was given to the Government developing a plan to inform and support affected households and businesses; and if this was not considered, why not?

### **Deputy H. Miles (The Minister for Justice and Home Affairs):**

Government worked alongside Island Energy during the course of the gas outage. There was regular contact between the Strategic Co-ordination Group in government and the chief executive of Island Energy throughout. Government sought to ensure that it was kept informed at all times and that Island Energy was communicating directly with affected households and businesses. Island Energy are the data holders for their customer base and led the reconnection response in accordance with their technical advice and safety procedures. In the circumstances, it would have been inappropriate and unhelpful for government to insert itself over the top of that plan and attempt to contact customers directly, and may have interfered with the response from Island Energy.

#### **4.11.1 Deputy C.D. Curtis:**

The Minister stated in the media recently that she was very concerned about vulnerable parishioners without hot water or cooking facilities, so could she detail what she did to ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable parishioners during day one of the gas outage, day 2 and any other day?

#### **Deputy H. Miles:**

As I said previously, Island Energy is a private company and they are responsible for their customers; we therefore encourage them to identify and react very quickly to vulnerable customers. At the same time, in the media I asked neighbours and friends to look out for each other in the way that Jersey does best. But we focused our support in 2 ways: we cascaded the information we received from Island Energy via social media, liaising with other services, including Jersey Electricity, who offered assistance to Island Energy and its vulnerable customers. Secondly, in ensuring the welfare provision that the Government itself put in place, as well as all the others of the Parishes, was made widely known, and this included the States of Jersey Police offering to support engineers in their house-to-house visits. The States of Jersey Fire and Rescue Service provided safety messages for the public and accompanied Island Energy on visits to key gas supply points around the Island, and we were ready to stand up a government helpline to offer further support for Islanders. We did not do that because it was reported that there was a very low level of calls going into Island Energy, and we also phoned round a number of charities to see whether they needed any support and they said that they did not. We put contingency plans in place to provide additional support for heating and hot water should it have been required, and we also opened up Les Quennevais Sports Centre to the public and non-members who needed access to hot water and showers.

#### **4.11.2 The Connétable of St. Saviour:**

I do not necessarily go along with the premise "it is a private company"; it is part of our essential infrastructure, so, Island Energy, when the first outage happened, there was a lot of confusion. Does the Minister not believe that we should have an emergency number run by the States for any kind of emergency, including gas, so that public can ring and get assurance from a bank of people who will answer the phone?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

In times of a major incident we set up a helpline. We had done the same for COVID, and we have done other things for other major incidents. Again, I have some sympathy with the view that although Island Energy is a private company, the States are required to step in and do more, but as I have articulated in the previous questions this morning, it is extremely difficult to do so, given the legal framework that currently exists. Ministers are giving consideration to how utility companies and other critical national infrastructure partners can assure us that they have appropriate communications in place. As I previously mentioned, it is likely that we will be bringing forward legislation to ensure that happens before the introduction of the resilience law, which will not come into place until the middle of next year.

**4.11.3 The Connétable of St. Saviour:**

On the Saturday that the incident took place or loss of gas, should I say, that I did ring on behalf of our constituents the gas company, the number that was provided was their standard number and you had to press 1 for this, 2 for accounts, 3 to listen to some dodgy music and nobody answered any of them. I had to ring the emergency, if you smell gas ring this number because none of the other numbers were being answered; I had to ring the actual emergency number before I got somebody. Does the Minister think that we should assist Jersey Gas in any way we can with an answerphone centre that could take over in such an event?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

I completely understand that this is a concern for Islanders and now that the immediate situation has been resolved, we will review the lessons learned. Most certainly one of those lessons is going to be around the way that the gas company have communicated. We did have some discussions about stepping up a helpline, and that was initially at the C.O.M. meeting that we had on the Sunday. One of the issues that it is not for Government to offer safety advice and what we would have been doing is acting as a signpost into Island Energy. Island Energy assured us that they had a phone service that was operating, that they had 14 operators and that what they had was sufficient and that they would not welcome the use of a States helpline in that way.

[11:00]

**4.11.4 Deputy M.R. Scott:**

Given that there already exists a Jersey Resilience Forum, a States of Jersey Emergencies Council, an emergency planning officer, could the Minister explain why the only offer of hot water was in the form of Les Quennevais Sports Centre and no helpline was brought into place in the actual circumstances and what difference the resilience law that she mentions is expected to make in terms of overcoming such difficulties?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

I think I have answered some of the Deputy's questions in previous answers. As the Deputy will know, other private organisations offer the provision of hot water and shower facilities. At the beginning of the incident we certainly were not expecting it to go on for as long as it did because we were receiving assurances from Island Energy that, hopefully, the supply would be up and running and back to consumers by Tuesday; that clearly did not happen. In discussing what is going to be moving forward with the resilience law, as with the resilience law in Guernsey and the Isle of Man, there is provision for the Government to compel public utilities to provide them with information

that enables them to plan for incidents such as this. As I said earlier on, we have written to the gas company to ask them voluntarily to share that information.

**4.11.5 Deputy M.R. Scott:**

Could the Minister please advise: what is the difference between the civil contingencies law of which we have heard report and the resilience law that she has mentioned?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

It is important that I make the qualification. At the moment we have an Emergency Planning and Procedures Law; we are going to bring forward a law that will provide for resilience around civil contingencies. There is no agreement at this point what the law is going to be called. When I refer to civil contingencies and I refer to resilience, I am referring to one and the same.

**4.11.6 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:**

Given that we have a well-staffed Communications Unit, why was it that many Islanders only discovered what was going on through social media? Does the Minister not think more should have been done by Government to take control of this in terms of communications?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

I reiterate that Island Energy are a private company and the role that we took was to forward their communications and disseminate the communications. At the beginning their initial communications were not good enough, they did improve and were supported by Government. I have no doubt that there are significant lessons to be learned. I think we understood at one point that Island Energy only have 40 per cent of their customers' email addresses. They only had 20 per cent of their customers' mobile phones; that is a lesson that they need to be learning. As you know, they engaged the services of Jersey Post to write to each of their customers with specific instructions and offers of support.

**4.11.7 The Connétable of St. Helier:**

Has the Minister discussed the impact of the outage with the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture because clearly there was an enormous impact, not only on householders but also on local hospitality businesses who found themselves unable to cater for their guests and restaurants of course having to turn away hundreds of bookings?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

Yes, I have spoken to the Minister for Economic Development, Tourism, Sport and Culture and I think if you look at the very helpful written question provided by Deputy Tadier, we are unable to quantify the economic impact to businesses. Island Energy have said that they will be operating a compensation scheme, that they will be doing that commercially on a one-to-one basis, so I am hopeful that businesses will be able to be compensated in at least the majority of their losses.

**4.11.8 Deputy L.V. Feltham:**

Given the effect that such an outage of gas supplies or any other power supplies would have on both households and also essential services provided by the Government, what plans were in place within Government prior to this outage happening in order to deal with such an occurrence?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

As I have previously mentioned, the powers to Government have been limited. Public utility companies, such as gas in the U.K. (United Kingdom), are regulated by Ofgem. In Jersey that regulation comes through our Health and Safety at Work Law. While we have been doing the work around the crisis civil contingencies law and the resilience law, it has become apparent that we need to take greater steps so that we have greater power, greater control and greater enforcement and that work is ongoing.

**4.11.9 Deputy L.V. Feltham:**

I just want really a yes or no answer from the Minister to this. Is the Minister saying that the Government has no plans in place to deal with such an outage of such an essential service for our Island?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

The Minister is absolutely not saying that. We do have plans in place, as I articulated earlier today. I have written to Island Energy to ask them to provide me with information that will permit us to plan for contingency. In the absence of a satisfactory reply, I am able to exercise my Article 7 powers under the Emergency Planning Law. Also, we have sought legal advice and are preparing drafting instructions to make a change to the gas law in order that Government can have a better handle on these situations should they occur in the future.

**4.11.10 Deputy C.D. Curtis:**

I thank the Minister for her answers, nevertheless, it seems the public did not consider the communications and support from Government to be adequate. The Minister stated that she has been gathering information from Island Energy about the supply of gas and any risks which should help too in a plan of support and communications in the future. Why were not the risks associated with utility supplies examined previously, for instance, when drafting the Crisis Resilience Improvement Plan?

**Deputy H. Miles:**

I just need to make it clear that we have requested that information from Island Energy. We do not currently have that. In response to the Crisis Resilience Improvement Plan, it was published at the end of July and it has an action in there on improving crisis communications and creating and implementing both a crisis strategy and a recovery communication strategy. This work is still underway and it is including the involvement of experts in that field.