

STATEMENTS ON A MATTER OF OFFICIAL RESPONSIBILITY

5. The Minister for Transport and Technical Services - statement regarding snow and ice procedures

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

The Island has recently experienced the longest sustained period of snow and ice for many years resulting in significant disruption to the Island's roads, schools and businesses. My department is responsible for salting and clearing the main roads and ensuring that, where possible, severe weather conditions cause the minimum amount of disruption to the Island. Transport and Technical Services has a set of established procedures for dealing with snow and ice events. These procedures are activated by an early warning weather alert system which has been developed with the airport's meteorological office. This system has been in place for a number of years and allows T.T.S. to mobilise and react to predict severe weather conditions. If snow and ice is not predicted by the system then this significantly limits T.T.S.'s ability to deal with the event. However, the system has worked well since its inception and unpredicted weather events are, thankfully, rare. These procedures include liaising with Connex and the Education Department in the event that snow and ice is so severe that schools need to be closed. Again, the system has worked well in the past but the recent prolonged period of cold weather has resulted in a review of these procedures to see if any improvements can be made. Current procedures dictate that a decision is made at 6.00 a.m. as to whether the school buses will run and whether the schools will open. This decision is made based on weather and road conditions being experienced at the time of decision making. This decision closes the schools for the full day, regardless of any improvements in the weather that may occur. Following the recent extended cold weather period where schools were closed for a number of days, my department has liaised closely with Connex and officers of Education to develop an improved procedure which aims to be more flexible and take account of changing weather conditions during the day. These improvements are: a decision will be made at 6.00 a.m. if there will be no school bus services and the schools will be closed for the day. This is no change to the current procedure. If it is thought that weather might improve during the morning, a final decision on whether schools will open or close will be made at 8.00 a.m. The school start time will then be delayed until 10.30 a.m. with the school bus service running 2 hours later than scheduled to suit this revised opening time. This new procedure will allow for parents and the school community to function as normal, albeit with a delayed start to their day. If weather conditions deteriorate during the day, a decision will be made no later than 11.30 a.m. if the schools are to close early. The schools will close at 1.30 p.m. and the afternoon school bus service will run early to suit the school closure time. The new procedure allows the afternoon school bus service to run and get children home safely in changing weather conditions. These procedures have been developed with and agreed in conjunction with Connex and the Education Department within the operational constraints of the schools and bus service and are intended to improve the flexibility of the current procedures. However, as weather conditions are constantly changing and all scenarios cannot be planned for, there may be times when variations to these procedures are required. Hopefully these conditions will be rare and the procedures listed above will assist parents, pupils, schools and road users in the event of prolonged snow and ice conditions. My officers will keep these procedures under review and will strive to continually improve them where possible. Following this statement, the Education Department will issue a letter to all parents detailing the above procedures.

The Deputy Bailiff:

There are now 10 minutes for questions. I call on Deputy Maçon.

5.1.1 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

A comment from one of my constituents over the period did comment how the website gov.je was not updated. Can the Minister give an undertaking that when these decisions are made that the decisions are promptly updated on to the website?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Yes, I shall ensure that happens.

5.1.2 The Connétable of St. Mary:

As a working mother with children at school who use the bus service, I find the idea of perhaps a delayed start until 10.30 a.m., with announcements being made at 8.00a.m., to be quite concerning. What parents need is a certainty, they need to be able to plan their day; we are talking about parents who need to not only change the time they get their children to the bus stop, we are talking about parents who need to arrange alternative childcare, parents who need to contact their employers to make their own arrangements. Surely it is much better to bite the bullet and to say: “No, the schools will not open” if there is any doubt and to make that decision as early as possible in the day. Will the Minister comment?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Yes, I think, unfortunately, the weather is not as predictable as we might like and there are variable conditions and I think it really would not be acceptable to close schools if we just get the slightest flutter of snow. We are often criticised, and Education is often criticised, for doing that and I think there has to be a balanced judgment on this. In the event of extreme conditions, the parents will have their own difficult issues in getting to work and, clearly, decisions on the hoof will have to be made on the day.

[12:30]

5.1.3 The Connétable of St. Mary:

The last time this happened, we had had a forecast which forecast the snow closing in between 1.00 p.m. and 2.00 p.m., we had had that for the last day and a half, and still the schools did not take an early decision. Parents need certainty. The loss of productivity must surely outweigh this. This does not happen very often. The loss of one or 2 school days is to be lamented but, put against the rest of the problems that arise, surely the Minister can see my concerns.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

The department feel, in conjunction with Education and Connex, that the procedures put in place are, on balance, the best and one hopes that the events that we experienced last month will not be repeated but we feel that this is the best route forward.

5.1.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

In contrast to Deputy Maçon’s technically savvy constituents, I wonder if the Minister could, with the Education Department, liaise to ensure that at predictable and certain times people can tune into the steam Radio and get a clear announcement.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I agree; that would be most appropriate.

5.1.5 Deputy A.K.F. Green of St. Helier:

I am a little bit confused because we talk about extreme weather conditions. It is my experience over here, 2 snowflakes and we are off the road. Procedures are fine but what plans does the Minister have to equip the bus service, not excessively, but with better equipment so that they can cope and we could have some buses running rather than everything off the road at the sign of the first snowflakes?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

The department has had robust discussions with Connex on the matter of the experiences over the last month and it is considered that there should be an encouragement course, perhaps driver-training in snowy conditions and the equipment of a few key buses on key routes with suitable chains.

5.1.6 The Connétable of St. Mary:

[Aside] Notwithstanding what the Minister has said, my ultimate concern from my own point of view as a parent was the safety of my child, bearing in mind that where we are there are no bus shelters; the children are left on the main road in what is bad conditions. Because of a failure to crystallise a time for deciding whether to open or close the school, I was left with a child 5 miles away from me, the opposite end of the Island, and was told suddenly: “And the bus will not come.” So I really do think the Minister needs to think this through a little bit more carefully.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Is that a question?

The Connétable of St. Mary:

Will he undertake, before he totally revises policy and gets the Minister for Education to write to all parents, to give this one more thought?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I am not clear quite what the Connétable expects me to achieve. We feel that our revised procedures, as outlined, indicates to parents what decision is going to be made and when and procedures for promulgations to the public I think are crucial. I picked up the comments of Deputy Maçon and Deputy Le Hérissier. I think that is probably, on balance, the best we can do and there has to be a degree of communication with the parents by the schools and I think we will achieve what needs to be achieved by following this route.

5.1.7 The Deputy of St. John:

Will the Minister review the Connex contract in relation to snow problems? But also, when the new contract for a bus service will be put out in the next few months, will you assure this House that a portion of that contract will also cover bad weather conditions within it?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Yes. The department is focused quite clearly on ensuring that takes place.

5.1.8 The Deputy of St. Peter:

In the Minister’s robust conversations with Connex, can he give us some indication as to how they reacted to the idea of putting on chains and driver training?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Yes. Connex is keen to work with the department to achieve what has to be seen to be a satisfactory arrangement, not only with the schools but also the public, and I would add that all the T.T.S. Department vehicles are, in fact, fitted with chains so there has to be a bit of a balance on cost. This is possibly a once in 7 or 8-year incident and we have to balance the amount of chains that need to be kept.

5.1.9 Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Bearing in mind the Minister’s answer to the last question, yet this appears to have happened consistently for the last 3 years that I know of.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Is that a question, Deputy? Was there a question there?

Deputy D.J. De Sousa:

Sorry. Will the Minister not agree that it is a bit more than just a one-off?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

No. The prolonged snow conditions were very unusual this year and certainly we have had the odd dusting over the past 3 years but it has not led to the disruption we had this year.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Very well. If there are no other questions, I call on the Chairman of the Privileges and Procedures Committee who wishes to make a statement concerning the absence of Senator Syvret.