

2025.01.21

**Deputy K.M. Wilson of St. Clement of the Chief Minister regarding the safety of the gas network (OQ.17/2025):**

Following recent incidents in St. Clement and St. Saviour, will the Chief Minister advise what actions, if any, the Government is taking to ensure the safety of the gas network and to address any current and potential future risks to Islanders?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham of St. Mary, St. Ouen and St. Peter (The Chief Minister):**

Yes, of course public safety is paramount. Every reported incident receives an immediate response as a priority and is investigated by the Fire and Rescue Service, working in conjunction with Island Energy. Residents are evacuated without delay, as they were in the 2 recent incidents. Ministers met the new chief executive of Island Energy before Christmas and had constructive discussions. Since the new chief executive has taken over we have seen a marked improvement with their communication, both with the Government, with officials and with the public. Safety of the network was and is and remains a main issue and the chief executive can confirm that I.E.G. (Islands Energy Group) are accelerating its renewal programme and doubling their investment in the gas infrastructure. This as well as following the U.K. best practice on protocols on disconnections, so they have carried out a thorough review. We are in more regular and direct contact with the management of I.E.G. now and they too recognise with Government the need to provide greater reassurance to the public moving forward. The Council of Ministers receives regular updates ,and another one is due in 2 weeks. The chief executive is committed to a briefing for States Members, which we will organise in the near future. In addition to the Island Energy work, the Infrastructure and Environment Department has undertaken its own assessment of drains and tunnels throughout the Island with over 1,000 measurements taken in the past 2 years. We will continue this monitoring programme to reduce the risk of further gas leaks or certainly an early warning system.

**The Bailiff:**

I have to ask you to bring your answer ...

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

I am sorry this is taking long, Sir. I wonder if I might have leave to ...

**The Bailiff:**

We are over 2 minutes and against allowance of one minute 30 seconds, Chief Minister.

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

I understood, Sir, but it is such an important issue. I wonder ...

**The Bailiff:**

I think Members would say all issues are important issues, Chief Minister. I am not sure that is a judgment.

**3.10.1 Deputy K.M. Wilson:**

Does the Chief Minister believe there are more accidents waiting to happen? Does he now think this is a matter of urgency for Government to intervene and get some independent assurance to assure Islanders that all steps that he has just outlined that are being taken are the right steps?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

The Government has been aware this is absolute top priority since the terrible tragic incident at Haut du Mont. The previous Government took the lead in moving things forward to put us on a much firmer footing in relation to how not only we respond but how we perhaps look to improve things, so we can take pre-emptive action wherever possible. We are working to provide greater assurance to ensure that things are as safe as they possibly can be. Jersey Gas, as I said, doubled their investment and the new management team are placing this firmly as a top priority. I suppose one of the consequences, as we have seen when infrastructure utility companies are privatised, we do not see the investment in the infrastructure network that we should do. Here is a prime example and I am pleased to say they are taking that far more seriously now. The Emergencies Council also receive regular updates. Every meeting we have has also led work to update the gas legislation, giving the Government more powers, including to request information from the gas company to reflect more modern practices and this is due to be lodged imminently. We are doing everything we can. Of course in any sphere of life we can never guarantee that accidents will not happen but we are doing everything in our power to reduce the risk.

**The Bailiff:**

I have a number of Members who wish now to ask questions in relation to this. At the moment I have noted down interest from Deputies Ozouf, Jeune, Renouf, Tadier, the Connétable of St. Saviour and Deputy Gardiner. That is simply too many to allow a reasonable time for each question. But I do remind Members that the Chief Minister is answering questions without notice and any difficult questions that are left over can be asked at that point. I will, therefore, allow another 4 questions; Deputies Ozouf, Jeune, Renouf and Tadier. But then I have to draw the line I am afraid and move on from there and then a final supplementary.

**3.10.2 Deputy P.F.C. Ozouf of St. Saviour:**

I am grateful for my colleague in St. Clement asking this question and the Chief Minister said he remembers us being here since 1999. He will recall then that this has been a regular refrain of mine in relation to the problems that Jersey Gas had. I do not like saying it, but I worry that there is not another accident waiting to happen. Nothing that I have heard from the Chief Minister is going to help my constituencies and those parishioners of St. Clement and across the Island.

**The Bailiff:**

I have to impose a discipline on asking questions as well.

**Deputy P.F.C. Ozouf:**

Fine, okay.

**The Bailiff:**

Would you just ask the question?

**Deputy P.F.C. Ozouf:**

Yes, Sir. Will he recognise the absolute importance of people understanding that we are dealing with Jersey Gas with L.P.G. (liquid petroleum gas), propane and butane versus L.N.G. (liquefied natural gas) that is natural gas in the U.K. and there are significant problems? This is a legacy system and does he really think that it is appropriate for more investment in a legacy system because it is, effectively, a past system? Does he not agree that we need to deal with Jersey Gas in the round and take some courageous decisions before there is another accident?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

No, I do not fully subscribe to that. We have spoken over many years about how we might manage the gas situation and what that looks like, how that relates to our Carbon Neutral Roadmap, whether we are going to continue with the use of any form of fossil fuels and such like into the future. Of course it is not that easy. There are many households and businesses and Government buildings that rely on this live gas for various reasons. I think, as I said before, we are seeing an accelerated programme of expenditure and renewal of the gas infrastructure, which should provide some reassurance to Islanders. The Infrastructure Department have, I believe, over 1,000 monitors deployed or have taken over 1,000 measurements and continue to do so to monitor the potential for leaks. We are updating the legislation as well to give the Government more power, which is outdated. With hindsight, that should have been done a long time ago. There is no simple solution and no Government can give guarantees that there will not be further incidents or accidents, not just with gas but with any emergency in the Island. This Government will continue to do everything it possibly can to reduce the risk and provide greater confidence to the Island. I am not surprised that confidence ...

**The Bailiff:**

Sorry, Chief Minister, I have to ask you to bring ...

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

... is shaken by recent incidents. But I want to reiterate we are doing everything in our power to reduce the risk.

**3.10.3 Deputy P.F.C. Ozouf:**

Sir, we are not going to do justice on such a matter of public importance in question time. I understand your frustration. Indeed, the Chief Minister is not really going to be able to answer questions fulsomely. He did say in his question that he is going to get a briefing from the chief executive on this. I would ask and encourage the Chief Minister, in my final supplementary, would he accelerate that and let us have a discussion? Because some Members have been raising concerns about this and I am afraid words are simply not going to be enough when there is another fatality that could happen, and it is a real risk. Could he bring forward that so that we can have an urgent debate either openly or privately to discuss these issues? It is really serious; does he not agree?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

It is a cluster of accidents. Yes, the chief executive will be holding an open forum with States Members as soon as possible, so we can have full and frank discussion; we will get that arranged.

**3.10.4 Deputy H.L. Jeune of St. John, St. Lawrence and Trinity:**

The Chief Minister has listed an impressive amount of changes since the new C.E.O. (Chief Executive Officer) came on board but is this not a concern that it just takes one person to create confidence or not in the system? Does the Chief Minister believe that there needs to be firm action by the Government to assure the Jersey public that they are getting an appropriate and safe gas service and what could these be?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

As I stated in my earlier answer, I believe the most important work for Jersey Gas is to continue to accelerate the renewal, the updating of the gas infrastructure, and that is what they are doing. We have seen a significant improvement in the commitment to that and to the resources deployed by Jersey Gas's new management team that have taken over. The Government has deployed monitoring units throughout the network to provide an extra layer of safety. We are updating the law to give the

Government more power and we are doing everything we can to reduce the risk. I look forward to the forum with States Members because we will have officials there and the senior management team from I.E.G. to explain in more detail what that looks like and to provide greater reassurance to members of the public.

**3.10.5 Deputy J. Renouf of St. Brelade:**

In most jurisdictions the major utilities are regulated. Does the Chief Minister believe that Island Energy should be regulated, and this would give us the levers that we need and the assurance that we need to deliver a safe and effective service?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

I think that is a matter for further debate. Certainly not ruling out regulation of Jersey Gas in the first instance. We are going to be strengthening the legislation to give the Government more power and let us see what that looks like before we discuss regulation further. But what I am sure of, if Members agree, is we need to see this improvement to the gas infrastructure, this increased expenditure, this work to continue to be accelerated so we can be sure that our gas network is safe.

**3.10.6 Deputy J. Renouf:**

I am not quite sure if we are dancing on a pinhead here but when he talks about bringing forward further laws and powers, could he give us any detail on what those powers are because that sounds like the beginning of regulation at the very least?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

For example, in certain instances we cannot even request information from the gas company. The Jersey Gas Law, which is looked after by the Minister for Infrastructure, is badly out of date and it needs updating to give the Government more powers; they might be regulatory powers. But the Government needs to be sure that it has the power and the authority to hold the gas company to account and to force it to take action more quickly than it has done in the past and that is what we are looking at. Whether we do that in legislation or we need to go into regulation is another matter.

**3.10.7 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:**

Let us put this in context. Jersey Gas put their prices up 12 per cent last year, 7.5 per cent they are going up this year, for what many people in the Island think is an unsafe service. I get contacted every time there is an incident. It was not just St. Clement and Le Geyt, there was an incident on 5th December on the border of Trinity and St. Helier. I get contacted by relatives of the Haut du Mont disaster asking: "When are we going to get closure?" In June last year and in November last year: "Will we get any closure?" Can the Minister say that he will take this issue very seriously? It is a matter of life and death. It is about people feeling safe in their own homes. Will he say whether he considers that an independent inspection of the gas infrastructure in Jersey is something that he could back and something that needs to be done urgently?

**Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

I cannot reiterate the seriousness of this; the Government takes it seriously. It is discussed at every Emergencies Council meeting. I am not sure what more can be done. We have been working closely with the Health and Safety Inspectorate, who are independent and who are reviewing it independently. We will have further discussions on whether we need a complete independent review of the gas network. But we have infrastructure officials and Jersey Gas work closely together, again with the Fire and Rescue Services but in relation to the network; that is being thoroughly reviewed and updated. But I undertake to continue with those discussions and take whatever action we need to provide that reassurance. It is not so simple. In a simple world we might say: "Well, let us just

eliminate the use of gas altogether.” But of course that is not easy or straightforward and that would take time. Of course you have the hospitality industry rely on gas to run their businesses. Then there is a capacity of transferring all of that business to our electricity grid, which at the moment could take many, many years to achieve.

[12:15]

It is a complex issue. I would like to reassure Members that we are doing everything we can, not only to reassure the public but to provide greater powers for the Government and a safer and a secure network with the caveat that we can never rule out incidents happening across any sphere of the public realm.

### **3.10.8 Deputy M. Tadier:**

I pick up on the point that he said it is not easy, and it is not straightforward, and that is probably exactly why the Government needs a policy and a strategy in this area. Can the Minister confirm, given the fact he said that environmentally and from a safety point of view, probably the lifespan of gas is limited? Rather than investing more money, either customers' money or taxpayers' money in updating a dilapidated infrastructure which may not be long-term viable, will he bring forward a policy and strategy in short order and bring it to this Assembly?

### **Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

The policy and a strategy on gas is a work in progress and we are bringing that as soon as it is ready. Do not mistake necessarily the work on updating the gas network with the fact that it could be here for ever or it could expand. We know it is a challenging circumstance for them because we are seeing a reduction in the use of gas. More people are coming off it and switching to other sources of power. But either way, whatever we do, gas will be with us for a number of years and it is important - whether it is with us for another year or another 10 years - that the existing network needs to be repaired and updated, regardless of that. That is why we are pushing that work forward.

### **3.10.9 Deputy K.M. Wilson:**

I think certainly this question was asked because of the considerable emphasis that people are placing on their individual and also corporate and business safety. One of the questions as a final supplementary I want to ask is: does the Chief Minister have any intelligence as to where there are key areas of risk that the chief executive and the Infrastructure Department are focused on in particular, so as to give some confidence that there is some proactive activity going on to manage the risk, rather than waiting for incidents to happen?

### **Deputy L.J. Farnham:**

Those areas have been identified by the measurements we are taking, and most measurements have been well within safe levels. But we do occasionally see a spike here and there and the measurements we are doing are enabling the Jersey Gas and the authorities to get to it before it does become an issue. Also, in light of the public concern, the terrible tragedy we had and the recent gas leaks, the public themselves have been far more aware and reporting even the most minor potential smell of gas. I am pleased that is happening because it means we are being very, very careful, a lot more mindful and also that we are carrying out evacuations now where there is a problem, where there might not be a risk of exposure or further, think that we are carrying out evacuations regardless just to make sure that public safety comes first. When we do the presentation with Jersey Gas and officials, I will ask that all the detail in relation to your question is discussed at that meeting.