

21.04.20

6 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for the Environment regarding Island-wide air quality monitors (OQ.91/2021):

Following his answer to Written Question 303/2020 in respect of air pollution monitoring, will the Minister advise how many of the proposed Island-wide air quality monitors are currently in place and what is the timeline for full implementation of the system?

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

Of the air quality monitoring to which my previous answer referred, 57 of those units are now in place, which is 46 of them at school sites and 11 at other places. Of course these are in addition to the static air quality diffusion tubes deployed in St. Helier and real-time sites in the market and how thus far. As regarding the timeline, this is what the experts call a sandbox project, which I understand is the testing of environment by Digital Jersey with new technology and it is dependent on the sensors working, communicating correctly, analysing the data and then having a U.K. (United Kingdom) academic institute to assure the data accuracy. When that phase is complete we will be able and in a better position to determine the timeline for seeing the project through. But of course those steps are within the control of the supplier at the moment.

3.6.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Minister then what data is being currently produced and what communication is happening between his department, the supplier and others involved, such as Digital Jersey, in order to ensure that this project happens in time for the Island Plan, for example?

Deputy J.H. Young:

The current status is there are issues. As I look myself, the data is not yet available to the public. At the moment we cannot confirm that the information that it is producing is accurate and I think it is true that there are often numbers of the 46 I spoke of; 18 of those are working and 24 are not. There is one unit waiting installation and 4 calibrated units have been replaced. In terms of the contractual relationship, the firm that is handling this is a firm called AirSensa. I personally am not familiar with the terms of that contract but, nonetheless, it is a commercial contract by Digital Jersey and so there are communications going on. I just only undertake to produce a written report because it is a very technical and detailed matter but it certainly will not be left.

3.6.2 Deputy I. Gardiner:

The Minister just mentioned AirSensa and I would like to bring the Minister's attention to his answer to written questions from 21st May 2019, which we are talking about a year before the pandemic. It is written Environmental Health signed memorandum of this then deal with Digital Jersey and AirSensa to install 200 sensors. Are we still planning to install 200 sensors and what has happened in 2019; why did this work not progress in 2019?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I think it is a very, very good question and absolutely spot on in terms of the work of the Public Accounts Committee. The 2019, yes, if that was the intention of 200, clearly one cannot go further until we can get the units that we have had working calibrated and reliable, then I think decisions can be made about whether to continue. Certainly, I think it also is true that the team that has been handling this project has changed. As we all know, we have COVID and the Chief Minister spoke about that. Digital Jersey have had to do an awful lot of work, work was switched off for this project

on to other things. Of course the Environmental Health staff have changed and they have been badly affected as a result of staff numbers during the COVID pandemic, which we are recovering from. Certainly, I am afraid it is true that this is a project which has not gone to plan and we need to find ways of getting it back on track, albeit I accept there are contractual issues at root which will have to be looked at. I am sure the report I spoke of to the Deputy will be available to the Public Accounts Committee and the officers, I am sure, will be available to talk about it.

3.6.3 Deputy I. Gardiner:

Thank you, Minister, it is appreciated and we look forward to receiving an update. I would like to raise another point from the same answer. We had a special event of lodging around the school on 20th June 2019, coincidence with the Clean Air Day. Is it any special event or new air monitors can be installed in the Clean Air Day 2021, to have a special event like we had in 2019?

Deputy J.H. Young:

On a more positive note, obviously we have done a lot of work on air quality monitoring using the previous technology of air quality diffusion tubes. There are 19 sites, including 7 new ones, testing for oxides and nitrogen. There are 6 sites for volatile organic compounds, including at various locations and real-time monitoring at 2 sites and there is now what is called an Osiris particle monitor being calibrated and delivered. I think there is progress, albeit on different technologies, I think, which will give us at least an improvement in the information available; at the minimum I hope it is better than that.

3.6.4 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Does the Minister consider that there is a potential issue with some of the big development schemes that are being planned in town, such as Limes, the Ann Street Brewery site, Play.com warehouse site, *et cetera*, where there is a risk of creating wind tunnels in busy traffic areas that could transport polluted air around? Does he not think that it ought to be a greater priority to understand the implications of the air quality monitors, to understand what health and well-being impacts this could have for people living in those areas if there are unacceptable levels of pollution there?

Deputy J.H. Young:

It is a very good question. Sadly, we do not have an air quality law. There is no question if one looks at the monitoring information that we have got published in the annual reports; you will see maps of where the high levels of pollution are. Absolutely in the centre of town you can see them highlighted as red areas where they are subjected to unacceptable levels of contaminants and so there is no question.

[10:45]

What we have to have, I think, is that we need to fast track or at least progress air quality legislation, which we do not have; other societies have it. Of course I am seriously resource constrained at the moment, as Members know. It is not the only project. We got held up on the Environmental Health team. I really want to see in future States a much stronger investment in environmental health, biosecurity and other matters so that it does need to have greater priority. Part of that will be planning policies that I hope the new Island Plan will help that.

3.6.5 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Following on from the final point that the Minister just made then, how, if at all, does he think the Island Plan will help ensure that when there are planning considerations in the future that air quality

is something that is taken into account properly and that they have the right data at their disposal to be able to come up with some sort of safe predictions on the impacts of polluted air on the people who will be living in those areas, especially given that it seems the theme of the Island Plan is to focus on heavier development in town?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Also, I think we have got the policy principles in the draft Island Plan. Of course they are not in force until they get before the States. Obviously there is work to do in terms of the scientific methodology, which is way beyond my competence to work out how one does monitoring predictions of buildings and situations that have not been built. But, nonetheless, I think that is something that we will have to do and it will be crucial to how effectively we can make those judgments more reliably when making planning decisions.

3.6.6 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Is it the case in the Minister's judgment that most negative quality air in terms of poor quality air is generated through the motor vehicle in Jersey? Also, how much is the department spending on monitoring the air at these sites around the Island?

Deputy J.H. Young:

On the second part I am afraid I cannot answer that question. I do not have that information and I will arrange to circulate it to Members. I am certainly not aware of what I regard as the level of resources being available within the regulatory budget, which the Deputy knows is precisely zero. Because we have to recover all the costs at the moment under costs of fees and charges. But I will circulate an answer to the level of investment on that. Sorry, the first question: was it traffic related? I do not think it is just my opinion and I think if the Deputy reads the expert reports, which are produced annually, they are all on the website. It is quite clear that the contaminants are linked to multi-vehicle usage.

3.6.7 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Given the currently unknown cost but also given that we all know that it is the motor vehicle creating the air pollution, would the Minister agree that a more cost-effective method to protecting Islanders, particularly young Islanders' health and their lungs, would be to engage seriously with the safer routes to schools programme and to proactively cut the amount of traffic passing by schools and through busy traffic areas of St. Helier?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Absolutely. I certainly have put pressure on my colleague, the Minister for Infrastructure and his officer team, to progress schemes under that. I had the privilege of attending Mont Nicolle School, I met the staff and the pupils and parents and they have been campaigning this for years. I am delighted to say we have now achieved a breakthrough in a barrier, a new crossing on Petite Route Des Mielles where the railway crosses over, to deal with the safety hazards on that which stood in the way of that. I expect to see that is an example of things going well. We really have to proceed and accelerate the programme that the Minister for Infrastructure has to try and do something about the menace of pollution from vehicles.

3.6.8 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Would the Minister advise Members whether the readings from the various monitors are publicly available and, if so, where?

Deputy J.H. Young:

Unfortunately, the readings on the experimental ones are not because they cannot be published because they are not validated and they are not considered accurate enough. There is a website which I tried to access myself, it is called Digital Jersey, Choose Jersey, Sandbox Jersey, presumably where AirSensa report that stuff but I cannot find it. The States website, there is an air pollution website. I do not have the reference number, where all the reports are available and the monitors that I have spoken to, the information from those is on there; there is regular reporting.

3.6.9 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Would the Minister tell Members whether he in fact has the staff to continue this project? He indicated that he had had problems during COVID, we understand that but has he got resources to continue it?

Deputy J.H. Young:

I think the honest truth is we have seriously struggled with Environmental Health resources. The team was down to 50 per cent, as the chairman of the panel knows, at its most severe impacts on COVID. We lost a number of qualified Environmental Health officers who went back to the U.K. We were not able to recruit them because licences were not allowed because of the target operating model that we have all had to cope with. Finally that has now been solved. I am hopeful we will get those officers that will give us some progress. But I do not think that is going to be enough in the long run. We have to give greater emphasis to our Environmental Health resources.

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, Connétable of St. Saviour, I cannot call upon you. I have already called final questions for this particular one. Final supplementary, Deputy Ward.

3.6.10 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank other Members for asking questions and widening the topic. I would like to ask the Minister: is it not the fact that the lack of genuine monitoring of air quality, particularly in central St. Helier and built-up areas in St. Helier where most development is planned in the Island Plan, run some coach and horses through the planning of the Island Plan because we simply do not know the long-term effects on young people's health who are living there of air pollution, which is a serious danger to many people's health if it is poor?

Deputy J.H. Young:

We certainly need to do more, which is why this project was attempted. Clearly, it has not gone successfully thus far. I would not write it off at the moment but I am not able to be positive about that. But what I can be positive about is we do have real-time monitors in place in 2 sites in town and you can look at those and see those results. They give you an immediate readout and you can see the trends and then of course the diffusion tubes, which are not immediate real time but they are used in the reports which go out; quarterly reports I think they are. You can see that the information is there; that is accurate and very fine information. But obviously we need to do better and extend that work.