



Department for Energy Security & Net Zero

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Laura Church
Chief Executive
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Our ref: MCB2024/20248

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17 February 2025

Dear Ms Church,

Thank you for your letter of 9 December, to the Secretary of State regarding the tragic events that occurred at Cleat Hill, following ground-source heat pump drilling. I am responding as this matter falls under my Ministerial portfolio. I apologise for the delay in response, your correspondence has only recently been brought to my attention.

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere condolences to the families of Paul Swales and Julia Harris, who sadly lost their lives as a consequence of the explosion. My sympathies also go out to all of the families who have been affected.

Natural gas pockets are not generally found close to the surface, and are typically found many hundreds or thousands of metres below the surface. In the UK, shallow gas is mostly connected to areas with mine-workings, landfill sites and made ground (i.e. not naturally occurring, like a brownfield site that has been levelled and topsoil added), which were not present in this case. Therefore, though it may be of little comfort to those impacted, incidents such as the tragic events in Cleat Hill are extremely rare and we understand that this is an isolated incident.

Though this is an extremely rare and isolated incident, we will consider whether further action, such as changes to standards or regulations, could help prevent such a tragic event from reoccurring when ground-source heat pumps are installed in the future, in light of any findings from the investigations by the Police and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

The Borehole Sites and Operations Regulations 1995, which is the responsibility of the HSE, ensures that any drilling within a mining area and below 30 metres is done safely and the HSE is notified of any intention to drill. The HSE has no current plans to bring drilling for the installation of ground-source heat pumps within the scope of this regulation. The HSE considers the overarching Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and other existing regulations to be sufficient to ensure that the hazards of drilling for the installation of ground source heat pumps are managed appropriately.

In addition, all borehole drilling should be subject to a thorough risk assessment to ensure drilling is conducted safely and in compliance with the relevant regulations and standards, and all ground-source heat pump installations should comply with the Ground Source Heat Pump Association Vertical Borehole Drilling Standard, which provides information to installers relating to the design, installation and materials used in closed loop vertical boreholes. It also covers the regulatory and safety requirements of vertical borehole drilling. When a vertical borehole is drilled the drillers should conduct a site survey and consult geological records to determine whether there are any risk factors, such as whether the borehole is being drilled near a former

landfill site or coal mine. I understand that the Ground Source Heat Pump Association is already reviewing the Vertical Borehole Standard to cover any future incidences of gas encounters.

My officials and I will continue to work with colleagues across Government in dealing with the incident and we will consider whether and which authority would be best placed to lead and support a local response were a similar event to occur. I have contacted the Minister for Rail regarding East West Rail's plans to drill boreholes in the area and we have shared your suggestion of considering change to Permitted Development Rights with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as the policy leads.

I await the outcome of the Police and the HSE investigations before taking any further action, because I do not know the exact cause of the explosion, the extent of liability or criminality, or what mitigations might be needed to prevent something like this happening again.

Thank you again for taking the time to write. I hope you find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

DR MIATTA FAHNBULLEH MP
Minister for Energy Consumers