

Channel Islands: Up to 12 people killed in explosion at Jersey apartment block

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As many as 12 people are thought likely to have been killed when an explosion collapsed a block of flats in St Helier, Jersey. At the time of writing, five people were confirmed dead, and four residents were still unaccounted for. An uncertain number of visitors were still thought to be missing.

The huge blast, captured on CCTV and heard across the island, occurred at 4am Saturday morning. Social media clips and press photos show the modern three-storey Haut du Mont apartment building, off Pier Road, as completely destroyed, with debris scattered and cars damaged over a wide area. Neighbouring blocks of flats have also been damaged. Pockets of flame continued to burst from the wreckage for hours. Residents in nearby flats have been evacuated to St Helier Town Hall.

Chief Fire Officer for Jersey's Fire and Rescue Service, Paul Brown, told a press conference Saturday that the fire service had been called out to the building the previous evening. The island's police chief, Robin Smith, confirmed to the *Jersey Evening Post* that the callout related to reports of residents smelling gas at the property, owned by state-controlled housing provider Andium Homes. Gas on the island is provided by Island Energy. Investigation of the incident is likely to take weeks.

Should a gas buildup be confirmed as causing the tragedy, it would not be the first major gas related emergency on the island. In 2014, Jersey Gas, forerunner to Island Energy, pled guilty in health and safety breaches after a huge gas holder fire in 2012, also in St Helier. The fire, which started during repair of a gas leak, resulted in large scale evacuation of nearby streets, a 400-metre exclusion zone, and the eventual demolition of the gas holder. Jersey Gas were found to have sent poorly trained and equipped workers, lacking even a fire extinguisher, to deal with

the leak in an area which had not been risk assessed. One worker suffered burns when their equipment started the potentially catastrophic fire. The company was fined just £65,000.

Three years later, Island Energy Group, which also provides gas on Guernsey and the Isle of Man, was taken over by infrastructure asset managers Ancala Partners. Ancala's "diversified portfolio" also includes solar, wind and anaerobic power generators, Liverpool Airport, the largest private rail company in Scandinavia Hector Rail, Portsmouth Water and the Holmleigh Care Group which runs 48 care homes and 3 hospitals.

The St Helier explosion, if gas is confirmed as the source, will be the latest in a series of gas related blasts across Britain and Ireland.

October 7 this year, 10 people died in a huge explosion in the tiny village of Creeslough, County Donegal, in Ireland. Eight more were injured by the blast which destroyed apartments that collapsed onto the Creeslough Applegreen service station. Among those killed were residents of the apartment, shoppers, a staff member at the service station and motorists parked outside. The youngest victim was only five years of age. Two teenagers died. The population of the entire village numbers 400.

While gas is suspected to have caused the disaster, a huge police operation has been launched into its origins. Donegal is one of only three counties in the Republic of Ireland not on the country's natural gas network. Liquid petroleum gas (LPG) is frequently used for heating and cooking. As of late November, gardai (police) are reported to have taken 300 statements and are following 500 lines of enquiry. DNV, a company specialising in testing energy systems, has been mobilised. A huge mound of debris and wreckage was excavated from the site to a nearby

undisclosed location.

While Northern Ireland has four natural gas operators, the main provider in the Republic, Bord Gáis Energy, does not offer a service to isolated Donegal. The company was owned by the Irish state until its sale was forced as part of the terms on the European Union/IMF bailout of the Irish banking system following the financial meltdown of 2008/9. Bord Gáis Energy is now owned by the British service giant Centrica, part of the former British Gas privatised in 1986.

On August 8, a gas explosion destroyed one house and damaged several others in Thornton Heath, south London. A four-year-old child, Sahara Salman, was killed. The explosion forced the evacuation of hundreds of people from the surrounding area and generated immense anger, particularly as many had called gas provider Southern Gas Network (SGN) to report a smell of gas in the area. On August 12, SGN operations director, Martin Holloway was shouted down at a meeting with residents who accused the company of having “blood on its hands”. ITV reported a resident telling Holloway, “A little girl lost her life because of you lot taking your time, and how many people have been telling you that there’s been a problem.”

On October 21, local Labour Party MP, Siobhain McDonagh, spoke in an adjournment debate in Westminster about the incident. She quoted Sahara's mother Sana, who was one of those who called SGN and was also injured. Sana said, “What did I get as a result of this phone call? I tried to help and warn of a possible gas explosion and my own daughter and in turn our family are victims of such an explosion just days later.” McDonagh said that insurers were refusing to compensate residents whose property was damaged. She noted that the 36-inch cast iron gas pipes in the area were supposed to have been replaced under an emergency programme following an explosion in Scotland. The work was stalled and many of the cast iron pipes due for replacement remain operational.

On October 18, last year, a gas explosion destroyed four houses in the Kincaidston area of the town of Ayr, Scotland. Four people were hospitalised and a large area cordoned off. After nearly a year, following a Freedom of Information request, the BBC reported that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) had found “numerous localised spots of corrosion” in pipework

under the destroyed housing. Damage on the plastic coating of the pipes, which dated from the 1970s, could have led to a gas buildup. The HSE found no blame could be attributed and speculated that the coating was damaged when the estate was built. Scottish Gas Network, also the owner of Southern Gas Network, has subsequently replaced all the piping in the estate.

In 2001, according to the *Daily Mail*, following a 1999 explosion in Larkhall, South Lanarkshire that killed a family of four, the HSE reported that 56,500 miles of metal pipework in Scotland, some dating to the 19th century, should be replaced with plastic piping. As of 2021, just 125 miles was being replaced annually, although SGN’s annual report claimed it had replaced 849 kilometres (527 miles). The replacements will take decades. In 2021, the group reported an operating profit of £526 million.



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