

2021.12.17

8.1 Senator K.L. Moore of the Chief Minister regarding ...

Thank you for allowing the question. Please could the Chief Minister explain the rationale and scientific advice for imposing new rules in relation to the Omicron variant?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (The Chief Minister):

In common with other jurisdictions, the Omicron isolation policy is designed to contribute to slowing the spread of the variant. It is intended as an early initial intervention to help give time for the crucial third dose to be delivered. If the U.K.'s rates were to be replicated in Jersey, we would reach an infection peak much higher than experienced last winter. I am talking about a timescale of January and February here. The latest published vaccination statistics suggest that less than half of Islanders have received the third dose so far and we have been very clearly advised by S.T.A.C. (Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell) that enabling protection by vaccination should be a priority. Currently we have only 25 direct contacts in self-isolation, many of whom are required to isolate for less 10 days, given the period begins at the point of their contact with a positive case. The situation continues to evolve and Members will have seen the revised position today based on medical advice in relation to the 2 hours of exercise. It was always our intention to step down the isolation requirement when it is clear it serves less purpose in delaying the spread and more harm by virtue of the Island's workforce resilience and personal well-being. I have also instructed S.T.A.C. to review the overarching policy on Omicron direct contacts on Monday, 20th December, and further updates will be provided next week. It is right that the expertise and evidence is brought to bear on this subject and Ministers are advised accordingly.

8.1.1 Senator K.L. Moore:

The Chief Minister is now almost 2 years into the ever-changing pandemic experience and should be well-aware of the various reactions of the public-to-public health indications. Therefore, I would ask him to describe to us the thought process that has led to these particular rules that were introduced yesterday afternoon in consideration that Christmas is a week away tomorrow and people will make decisions about the threat of isolation and that, therefore, has a bearing upon the livelihoods of others.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Can I just clarify when the Senator refers to "these particular rules", which rules is she referring to?

The Bailiff:

You can clarify that but really we must keep this as succinct as we can. Other Members wish to ask questions.

Senator K.L. Moore:

I am referring to the notice that was shared yesterday afternoon. He should be quite aware of them, the isolation rules.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The reason I say that is because if it was in relation, for example, to the policy around direct contacts, that was published on 30th November. I just make the point that it is 3 weeks today since the Omicron variant was identified as a variant of concern and, therefore, on this

particular area we still continue to respond accordingly. The scientific advice continues to emerge on a quite swift basis. That is why we have been putting out messages for a long time about the mask wearing and the vaccinations and I will just say, as I said, it continues to evolve. C.A.M. (Competent Authorities Ministers) will continue to meet regularly. We are meeting again on Tuesday. S.T.A.C. are meeting again on Monday. There will be more variants that come down the line in dealing with the pandemic and we, therefore, need to respond in a calm and controlled manner and not to go for knee-jerk reactions.

8.1.2 The Deputy of St. Martin:

As just was mentioned, yesterday afternoon at 4.00 p.m. we were told and confirmed that Omicron had moved to Jersey and the isolation rules would apply. On Wednesday afternoon, some 24 hours earlier, Deputy Pamplin had asked a question of the Chief Minister about the planning to prepare for and deal with a surge of infections. The Chief Minister informed the Assembly that on Wednesday afternoon he did not know that Omicron was confirmed and he did not know the isolation rules that would apply.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

On the first part I can absolutely assure the Deputy that we had not been told categorically or had not been told of any cases in the Island. Members will recall that I think in my responses to it we said it was very likely that there were cases on the Island but at that point we had not been notified, so that is absolutely the case. As I said in relation to the direct contact scenario, that was announced on 30th November and was in the press release of that date and was in the press conference.

8.1.3 Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier:

It has been announced that direct contacts of Omicron positive cases need to isolate. We know that the U.K. recorded the highest ever daily number of positive cases. I understand that we cannot test Omicron on arrival but we can test if a person is positive or negative with COVID. Will the Chief Minister explain why we are not testing on the border and creating direct contacts which will put a huge amount of the population in possible isolation during the festive time?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Firstly, just to be clear, there is still testing happening at the border but it is, in particular, under the present regime, which is in essence people who are not fully vaccinated under the previous definition. As I said to Members in the Assembly when I made my statement, firstly in anything to do with travel we have learnt our lesson, I would hope, over the last 2 years about making sure we give sufficient advance notice otherwise it does cause significant problems and, therefore, creates angst in a whole range of other areas. Secondly, as I have said on a number of occasions, and I have gone back to officers and verified it again, the technical changes that are required to amend the systems to allow an orderly testing regime at the airport will take a few days longer than we had hoped, and that is why we are bringing them in on 4th January. I think that answers the Deputy's question.

8.1.4 Deputy I. Gardiner:

It is clear from the U.K. statistics that Omicron, the double vaccination does not protect from COVID. Our testing regime at the airport currently, as students and other people coming to the Island will not be protected, will create direct contacts, why do they not bring it earlier than 4th January?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I think I have just explained that. It is just logistics.

The Bailiff:

Can I just remind Members that their questions should be as succinct as possible in order that we get through as many as possible?

8.1.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can I ask the Chief Minister, can he confirm that one in 10 positive cases may be sequenced for the Omicron strain, and if that is the case is there not an increased risk given its increased transmissibility of transmission through the population if we are only catching one in 10?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Two things: the sequencing is on this basis; I do not have the ratio, we were seeking to increase it and increase the speed and I did say I was going to come back to Members on that. I have not had a chance in the last few days with the Government Plan but I have asked officers to make sure I respond to all the questions that were asked if I said I would come back to Members. Secondly, do not forget, to be captured as it were under the Omicron sequencing those individuals will have tested positive anyway for COVID so they will, therefore, be isolating, and that is 100 per cent of those who test positive will be isolating, if that makes sense.

8.1.6 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I think it is the direct contacts; given that direct contacts of Omicron, that additional variable, does that not increase risk? Is there an issue around that?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

There are 2 sides to that. Bearing in mind that one of the issues that is coming out as well is the fact of the regime being too stringent and the consequences that has in other contexts, including mental health. So as we put those measures in place, as I said, it was in advance of Omicron being detected on the Island formally and, therefore, was an initial measure and in fact that is consistent with what I believe the U.K. did. Then subsequently the U.K. has released those measures over the short period of time. The intention, therefore, is just to try and slow that initial spread and once it is in the community there is no question it will spread. What we are also in the position of wishing to assess is obviously the scientific evidence is not quite bedded down yet. We know it is transmissible but it then comes down to what are the consequences, so we are adopting a precautionary approach, the evidence is coming forward every day and, as I said, we rely from that perspective on S.T.A.C. and S.T.A.C. will be meeting on Monday again. I think I have answered the questions hopefully.

8.1.7 The Connétable of St. John:

Could lateral flow tests be introduced in the short term at the airport, or at the very least offer arriving passengers lateral flow test kits?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I think I did answer that same question on Wednesday and I think my response is the same. But I do agree and I apologise, I cannot remember if the officers have picked up on it; yes, I would certainly look into getting the tests up there. But obviously lateral flow tests are available to anybody coming on to the Island anyway.

The Connétable of St. John:

I welcome the removal of the 2 hours exercise that has now been reintroduced. Can you confirm who authorised the introduction of no exercise?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I would have to say not immediately; I would have to go back and verify, but I will come back to the Connétable on that.

The Bailiff:

I have questions from Deputy Pamplin, Deputy Higgins and a final supplementary, Senator Moore. I will not be able to take any further questions.

8.1.8 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I would like to thank the Chief Minister and those who responded to my emails overnight about the communication of the update. Will he ensure going forward that any sensitive communication like that is vetoed by one or more Minister and also, if possible, shared with States Members before it is publicised, because there were certain elements - and I hope my contribution was helpful - that caused certain alarm in the public.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Yes, ordinarily they are definitely circulated to the relevant Ministers and ordinarily - in fact I would hope they were - they should have been circulated to Members in advance. We do try and do that and that is the general protocol. But I do thank the Deputy for his helpful suggestions.

8.1.9 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

As a follow up, will the Chief Minister ... as soon as that S.T.A.C. meeting is concluded the information will be passed to us in a much sooner process so we can help and assist and scrutinise if possible, especially where it comes to the public's point of view for reassurance that we can move swifter if need be.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

It will be, I suggest, after C.A.M. on Tuesday. Certainly what I would be expecting - as I think all Members would expect it - is that we will be offering I am sure an update to all Members remotely obviously, obviously before Christmas Eve. We will work out the timing on that, according to what the output from S.T.A.C. is.

8.1.10 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

It is possible the Chief Minister may have answered this. I got distracted earlier. I asked in a previous one whether we could acquire our own sequencing machine - Guernsey have one - and if necessary, the technician to be able to analyse the data. Has the Chief Minister had the opportunity to go back and speak to the appropriate people?

[16:30]

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Not directly. I had asked officers to make sure that any questions that I had not been able to answer in that statement that I would go away and look at, that somebody did a wrap-up to make sure that nothing had been missed. I am assuming that has been done and, as I said, now that we are out of the Government Plan I can then turn my full attention to this.

8.1.11 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can I just ask again, given the importance of this, is the fact that there are going to be other viruses, other than Omicron, that are going to be much worse? Thank you.

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I think the important thing here is - and in fact I did say this earlier on - this is obviously not the first variant and it will not be the last and, therefore, the important thing is that we tackle this calmly, in a considerate way and based on the advice that we receive. So we do not do knee-jerk reactions, we do move swiftly if we have to, and we always look at the context we are operating in Jersey and not any other jurisdictions, although we do try and learn from the other jurisdictions and their reactions. But at the moment the view is it is more appropriate to dial down the restrictions on the 25 people who are direct contacts in this instance rather than inflicting them too much more on the other 100,000 people. That is always the balance of risk that we have to take account of in dealing all the way through this pandemic.

8.1.12 Senator K.L. Moore:

The Deputy Chief Minister has this afternoon written to the hospitality industry, and I think his letter has been circulated wider, to reassure that industry that support will be put in place, but also to reassure the public that the isolation requirements for Omicron cases is likely to be lifted in the early part of next week. Will the Chief Minister reassure members of the public and the hospitality industry that those restrictions will be lifted in the early part of next week?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

What I can say is that we have asked S.T.A.C. to consider the matter and they will come back to us after Monday. What I can assure the public is that we will keep this very much actively under review. The whole principle is about slowing that early stage of the variant and it is at what point we, therefore, consider that the balance of harms is better to lift the restrictions versus maintain them. I do make the point, as I said, those restrictions were announced on 30th November and it is 3 weeks today since the World Health Organization declared this as a variant of concern. But we do want to do it calmly, we do want to keep it in proportion to the Jersey context, and as we said - and I think Senator Farnham has acted absolutely appropriate - but we have all had this in mind and I think I made it in the statement again earlier this week that if business support is required it will certainly be given.