

STATES OF JERSEY



ENHANCED COVID-19 EXIT STRATEGY COMMUNICATION

Lodged au Greffe on 7th July 2020
by Deputy K.G. Pamplin of St. Saviour

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

- (a) that a dedicated page on gov.je should be established and maintained for the Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell for the publication of the Cell's membership, its minutes, the evidence considered by the Cell at its meetings and the data and recommendations produced by the Cell for the Government of Jersey;
- (b) that the minutes of the meetings of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell, its membership and appointment processes, the evidence considered by the Cell and the data and recommendations which it produces, should regularly be provided to the relevant Scrutiny Panels;
- (c) that the only Ministers or Government officials authorised to attend meetings of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell should be those with responsibility for scientific, health or medical matters;
- (d) that the results of the 'Test, Track and Trace' undertaken by the Government of Jersey should be published and updated on a weekly basis on a dedicated page on gov.je, alongside any recommended isolation periods that apply in the event of a positive test for Covid-19 and any threshold applied by the Government for introducing a self-isolation measure for all new arrivals on the basis of turnaround times for test results;
- (e) that a weekly press conference should be held by the Chief Minister, and other Ministers, Government officials and technical experts (as required) to update Islanders on the implementation of the Covid-19 Strategy and the Safer Travel Policy; and
- (f) to request the Chief Minister to take the necessary steps to ensure these measures are in place by 1st August 2020.

DEPUTY K.G. PAMPLIN OF ST. SAVIOUR

REPORT

Introduction

Since March 2020, the Assembly has been pushed to the limit in approving urgent emergency legislation in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, to safeguard Islanders' health, safety and wellbeing.

I hope members will now accept the urgent need for a Proposition to enhance Government communication and transparency around the Covid-19 Exit Strategy and agree to reduce the lodging period so that these proposals may be debated before the summer recess.

Communications around Covid-19

As the Vice-Chair of the Health and Social Security Scrutiny Panel, I have been scrutinising all aspects of this pandemic with a special focus on health since the Covid-19 outbreak began. Both as Vice-Chair and in my capacity as a non-executive States Member, I have worked constructively with Government to establish trusting relationships with the relevant Department to act as a 'critical friend' and secure better outcomes for Islanders. I have also sought to ensure that evidence gathered as a Panel, or in my capacity as an independent Member, is presented in a timely, transparent and straightforward way for the benefit and reassurance of Islanders.

Being transparent and presenting information in a clear and consistent manner during a crisis is fundamental in establishing trust. This has never been more important than now, especially as we navigate the Covid-19 Exit Strategy. Social media has taken the notion of 'garden fence' gossip to a whole new level, where opinion is viewed as fact and misinformation is propagated in a way that often dilutes the important factual messages. Rumours and leaks passed to Islanders and the media have caused distrust and anxiety at a time when we desperately need confidence and reassurance. There is a sense that communication is not joined up and that there is a disconnect between the Government and the day to day reality of Islanders' lives.

Re-Opening Borders

It was inevitable that news of the first positive test resulting from an inbound passenger airline following the re-opening of our borders was going to spread rapidly. This happened on Sunday 5th July 2020, when an information snowball originating on Twitter became an avalanche. Again, this exposed again a weakness in the Government's approach to communication control and saw this information weaponised to suit the agenda of a wide range of individuals.

Whilst I recognise that the Government's Communications Team has worked tirelessly and, like the rest of the Island's civil service, has gone above and beyond during the Covid-19 outbreak, incidents like the above illustrate why we need an enhanced communication strategy that anticipates and responds to what the public need to know in a timely and transparent manner. It's in the name of all their hard work and that of Islanders who've acted in large numbers in selfless ways, is the heart of this proposition.

The Proposition

As time is against us, I have grouped the parts of the Proposition together rather than dealing with each one separately. We cannot delay when so much is on the line in terms of the mental and physical health of Islanders, the vulnerable elderly members of our community, for parents and children, as well as those local businesses who all need reassurance and up-front transparency for the challenging months ahead. This is especially critical as travel restrictions lift and more changes approach as we move through the Safe Exit Strategy.

I will now break down each part for Members –

Part (a)

Part (a) is straightforward and simply requests that Jersey’s Scientific, Technical and Advisory Cell (“STAC”) follows the example of the UK Government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (“SAGE”) in publishing its work, reports and minutes (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/scientific-advisory-group-for-emergencies>)

To quote the Chair of SAGE, Sir Patrick Vallance –

“During a response to a virus of this nature, it is imperative that the public is confident the government has based its decisions on a representative range of the most up-to-date science advice. In the case of COVID-19, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has been providing ministers and officials with free and frank advice throughout, based on external scientific evidence and a wide source of essential information.”

In fast moving situations, transparency should be at the heart of what the government does.

“We have therefore published the statements and the accompanying evidence to demonstrate how our understanding of COVID-19 has continued to evolve as new data emerges, and how SAGE’s advice has quickly adapted to new findings that reflect a changing situation.”

This approach should be adopted by the newly formed STAC urgently so that key evidence and information used in the formation of policy is available to both members and the public. When the Government uses the phrase “based on medical advice”, the public will be able to see that advice and evidence for themselves and better understand the rationale behind the strategy. Making STAC output publicly available also enhances scrutiny, thereby fostering greater public trust and confidence.

Data Released by SAGE

Contained within SAGE’s releases are the methods and findings that have informed advice provided by SAGE to the UK Government on the COVID-19 outbreak. Among the papers referenced are ‘pre-prints’; these are academic papers that have not yet been through the peer-review process – which can take months – and have been drawn upon by SAGE to ensure that the most current evidence is being reviewed in order to provide rapid advice to policy makers. Some of the bespoke new modelling that SAGE has drawn upon to formulate its conclusions has not yet been published, but

this is indicated clearly in their public communications. This is to allow scientists time to publish their research through the right academic channels.

As their understanding of the virus grows, SAGE and other groups will continue to feed into the essential scientific advice required by governments to respond to the virus. In the case of Jersey, it is imperative that advice provided by STAC is updated via the [gov.je website](http://gov.je) as it is on the SAGE web-pages. Collating the evidence in this way keeps the public informed whilst also continuing to provide frank and transparent advice to policy makers.

Minutes for SAGE meetings, along with the evidence used to inform SAGE advice, has always been published at the end of any event or emergency that it has convened for (e.g. the near collapse of Toddbrook Reservoir in 2019 or the Zika outbreak in 2016). Given the exceptional nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, SAGE and its participants have ensured that there is as much evidence and material available to the public as possible to demonstrate full transparency as to how scientific advice is being formulated and deployed. Ministers receive advice from SAGE in the form of minutes and verbal contributions to [COBRA](#) and other ministerial meetings. The publishing of such materials MUST be adopted by STAC here in Jersey and they must be publicly available as well.

Part (b)

Part (b) aims to clarify the flow of information from STAC in terms of priority recipients. In the recent rush to pass emergency legislation under extreme time pressures there has often been a degree of tension in securing the proper scrutiny of key proposals. I am proposing that information released by STAC should be first made available to the relevant scrutiny panel and then to States Members in a return to the normal processes involved in scrutinising the development of Government policy.

Part (c)

Part (c) is again a matter of reassurance as to undue Government influence over STAC advice and guidance. I only have to reference the issue that was widely reported in the UK with regards to the Prime Minister's Chief Advisor allegedly being present at SAGE meetings. There is no evidence that this has been the case locally, but we do need to make clear to the public and to all States Members that STAC advice is free from political interference or influence from Ministers or officials apart from those with specific scientific or medical oversight or responsibilities until after the Medical Officer of Health or the Chair of STAC have presented their advice to Ministers.

Part (d)

Alongside the continuing public health measures, the Test, Track, and Trace programme will be crucial in achieving a successful Safe Exit. Communications around this programme must be clear, timely and show the latest data in an easy to understand manner that is available to all. Furthermore, it is crucial that the public are given assurances as to what will happen should cases occurring in new arrivals from the UK and elsewhere rise exponentially, including the scientifically-informed threshold for introducing a self-isolation policy for all new arrivals. Which we could still have now.

Part (e)

Part (e) I believe speaks for itself. While I agree that daily press conferences are not currently required at this stage of the Covid-19 response, now is not the time to reduce the flow of information needed to reassure Islanders. A weekly press conference attended by the relevant experts to provide an update of anything pertinent to the Covid-19, Safe Exit and/or Safer Travel strategies is so important for the wellbeing of Islanders. Communications around the Safer Travel strategy is particularly important for vulnerable or high-risk Islanders, who need to have confidence in the isolation policy for new arrivals from outside of Jersey, as well as a clear understanding of the Government's strategy in the event of a sudden surge of new cases of Covid-19.

Briefings could also cover Covid-19 hospital data, support for school children the summer months, and regular updates about the continuation of the Exit Strategy. I propose this is held either on a Tuesday or Wednesday at 12.00 p.m. to allow all media outlets to report live and later that day, as well as to meet overnight broadcast deadlines. Questions should be allowed from the media present which will mutually benefit the public and the media and improve overall confidence in government strategy. Again, let me stress this NOT a criticism of the amount of work and change of direction that has been seen in Government communication for example on social media updates. We owe a great deal of thanks for the dedication and long hours put in behind the scenes and this enhances the end result directly speaking to the Island.

Part (f)

Part (f) requires that these proposals are implemented as matter of urgency as we cannot afford a summer of inaction. Whilst it is important that there is a way for all of us to find the balance to rest, recharge for all our wellbeing needs and for our loved ones while supporting each other into the 'new normal', direct communication is still required to help boost confidence and provide reassurance of the continued strategic response to Covid-19. You can't beat the 1-2-1 moment looking folks in the eye truthfully.

We are in a good place because of the hard work put in by so many Islanders, but we are still all in this together, now more so than ever. I believe that this proposition provides enhanced reassurance to Islanders, bolstered by medical advice and scientific data, which will in turn improve adherence to public health advice. After all, it is only as one that we can start to reshape the island in the wake of Covid-19. Once again, I finish by quoting Dr. Michael Ryan with his now infamous word's back in early March

"The greatest error is not to move. You need to engage with communities very deeply, you need to be coordinated you need to be coherent. Be fast, have no regrets.

Speed trumps perfection. The problem in society we have at the moment is that everyone is afraid of making a mistake. Everyone is afraid of the consequence of error. But the greatest error is not to move.

The greatest error is to be paralysed by the fear of failure."

I hope Members will support this proposition and I look forward to the debate.

Financial and manpower implications

The financial or manpower implications arising from the adoption of this Proposition are not significant, but any expenditure related to it should be prioritised in the interests of the public.