

20.09.22

3 Deputy D. Johnson of St. Mary of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the gathering of choirs and singers (OQ.244/2020):

Will the Minister advise whether there are any plans to review the present restrictions applicable to the gathering of choirs and singers on the basis that, by using large spaces, proper ventilation, shorter rehearsal periods, strict hygiene protocols and distancing, small groups of singers could potentially rehearse with very little risk; and, if not, why not?

Deputy R.J. Renouf of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

We have already made changes to guidance at Level 1 to support children's music education and at the end of last week, with the support of the Minister for Education, I also tasked officers to work with colleagues in Education to develop a way to safely allow singing in early years and also in primary school age children, recognising the important role that it plays in learning and development in young children. As with all areas, the public health team continues to review emerging research and modify the guidance where it is felt appropriate to do so, taking account of the current infection rate, both on-Island and in our close neighbours. The U.K. Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, S.A.G.E., completed a review of current research on singing on 12th September and provided a series of recommendations. We are considering those recommendations and have commenced a review of our guidance to identify potential ways of easing the existing restrictions on singing in the lowest risk scenarios. As per the S.A.G.E. recommendations, a variety of factors to mitigate the spread of infection will be considered and we will be engaging with choirs, music schools and others who have contacted us, and that work is going on right now.

4.3.1 The Deputy of St. Mary:

I thank the Minister for his reply and I note the discussions going on with children and schools. My real concern was in respect of the adult population where there are small groups of singers who are effectively prevented from even meeting. Could he ensure please that that further review does proceed at pace otherwise we are in danger of losing these choirs?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I understand the point made by the Deputy and we will engage with those choirs, and we are now considering how singing might be permitted in the case of adults and not solely children.

4.3.2 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I do want to thank the Minister and his officers, and the Minister for Education and her officers, who met with myself and campaigners in this area at the end of last week. We have made some progress, as the Minister referred to, in terms of allowing singing in early years and primary school. Would the Minister agree to prioritise children in secondary schools and find a way that they can access singing and music lessons? I am of the view that it does not need a review to do this and the same protocols could be followed that are being followed with early years and primary. Would the Minister agree to this please, recognising that music is important to older children as well as younger children?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I recognise the developmental aspects of singing. I will not at this stage say I am prioritising children over adults. I think we can look at the whole community together and look at how S.A.G.E. has

come forward with its recommendations in the U.K. and apply those to our Jersey situation in the case of older children and adults together.

4.3.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Would the Minister also agree to ensure that research on the benefits of singing, physical and mental benefits, including benefits to the immune system, that all of those pieces of research are taken into account and that singing is recognised as being an essential activity, not just a nice to have?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

That case has been very well made by the Deputy and others who have contacted us. We recognise the beneficial and therapeutic effects very often and if the Deputy has further studies that she wishes to present to the public health team we would be pleased to receive them.

4.3.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Does the Minister believe that music from bands using amplification provides the same dangers as large choirs?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

That is a technical issue. I would not want to give a firm opinion on that because within the S.A.G.E. recommendations, there are a variety of factors which should be considered, including amplification, including limiting the length of the activity, the size of the room, the ventilation of the room is also very important, as well as the physical numbers involved in playing in the band or the audience surrounding them. There are a number of factors, and that will be just one. I cannot at the moment prioritise one above the other.

4.3.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Does the Minister feel perhaps there could be a little more clarity given, and it is summed up a little simpler for those who are thinking of trying to get live music back on stage, given the complexity of the answer that he has just given? Is there a way of making that a simplified set of guidelines for people?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Very happy to consider that. Of course it is important that guidance should be as clear as possible but then there are very many scenarios in which people may wish to sing. For example, in a night-time venue, it may be problematic for a group to be playing in an enclosed environment and have their music amplified, because that would generally mean that if people are talking and drinking at the same time they will be talking loudly or shouting. But if it is a concert hall, that may well be different because generally an audience is there to listen to that music and can be well physically distanced. So the context has to be considered. But the question of amplification is part of the scenarios that we will be considering.

4.3.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

On the Government's own website, when it comes to talking about singing, wind and brass instruments, the words used are "strongly discouraged" and there is also talk about it being particularly important to implement these when music is an indoor setting. It talks about being advised as well. Can the Minister state whether he thinks that there should be some kind of

compulsion rather than just advice, and does he need to bring more clarity to groups when considering these issues?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am not sure what the Deputy might envisage by compulsion. At the moment, the Deputy is right, the guidance is as he has said. That recognises the real risks there are. Singing has been identified as one of the major vectors of the spread of the disease but if sufficient and adequate precautions are taken the risks can be mitigated, and it is that work that we are doing now.

[10:15]

Considering very significantly the S.A.G.E. advice in the U.K. I think that is all I can say on that for the moment.

4.3.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister agree that because there is a lot of room for manoeuvre within the guidance and there is no compulsion under law either way, and there is very little clear advice, some would-be music providers have put a blanket ban on things like having live music at all, even where there is no wind, singing or brass instruments involved? Even this week there has been a directive that busking should be banned, even though that does not seem to have been done in a joined-up fashion. Would the Minister consider issuing more detailed guidelines but in conjunction with talking to his ministerial colleagues who have a responsibility at Culture for this issue?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I will talk with colleagues and they are welcome to contribute, as is any States Member, and those with an interest in the subject. The guidance will be more detailed because we have seen that happen in the U.K., and I consider that we will be trying to adapt those mitigations to our situation in Jersey.

4.3.8 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Would the Minister give a timeline for when new guidance is expected to come out with regard to singing and playing instruments? Would he also accept that current guidance prevents brass bands, marching band and wind instruments from even rehearsing? Will he ensure that guidance is brought out, which enables rehearsals to take place as soon as possible before these plans again find it impossible to carry on?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I cannot undertake that the guidance will enable certain activities because the study is going on at the moment, and we will consult with bands and other groups as to exactly what is safe. At the end of the day, we will be guided by the medical opinion. I am sorry, I have forgotten the first part of the Deputy's question.

4.3.9 Deputy K.F. Morel:

I will use it as a supplementary. Do you have a timeline for when you expect this guidance to be published?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

We are working on it at the moment. We recognise that this is a concern to many people, so we are doing that as quickly as possible. It would be wrong to give a precise date because that would rush

things perhaps when we have not consulted, as we should be. We want to get that consultation in but still, as quickly as possible, introduce the mitigating facts.

4.3.10 Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier:

Live music, including karaoke, is permitted within strict guidelines, including low noise level only, where the audience are seated and able to have a normal conversation. All music is safe outdoors. Why is karaoke still permitted but not choirs?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am not sure if karaoke is permissible, if it is amplified. Again, it might depend on the context and the venue. That is a detail. If the Deputy would like to discuss it with me or the team outside of the sitting, I will be happy to try and explore any specific instances where she has concerns.

Deputy I. Gardiner:

It is within the guidelines and it will be good to discuss this.

4.3.11 The Deputy of St. Mary:

I thank the Minister for his replies to various questions. I appreciate he said he is not able to give a precise timeline at the moment but given that the present rules are such that it appears that some choirs are ignoring them completely, does he recognise that there is an element of urgency and, in drafting those guidelines, will he take account of the fact that Jersey's situation is not the same as that in the U.K. and that accordingly some greater relaxation might be appropriate?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do recognise the urgency. I am regularly contacted, as are other Ministers and members of the team, by those who wish to see some relaxation of the guidance. So we are working as quickly as we can to get this in place. I would be cautious about saying that we can relax because we are not affected in the same way as the U.K., the risks are the same whether in the U.K. or here. I would not want singing to be so relaxed that it runs the greater risk of introducing infection. So it is finding that balance and recognising the therapeutic effects of singing and the pleasure it gives to so many people, but also balancing it against the risks of spread of infection. So we are working on that very hard.