

2020.11.30

## **6.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of the Chief Minister regarding the recent reported spike in positive Covid-19 cases:**

May I also thank the Greffe and the Bailiff's Chamber for allowing the speedy process of this urgent question? Given the reported spike in positive COVID-19 cases following recent events, which has led to many Islanders isolating, more and more children having to be removed from schools and demands on the Island's testing centres, what is the Government's response to deal with these concerns?

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

As the Deputy will know, we provided Members with a briefing at lunchtime, obviously before I was aware, I think, or almost probably at the same time as I was aware of the Deputy's question, regarding the rise in active cases and the various groups and clusters of transmission that resulted in the increase. While the current measures to date worked generally quite well, suppressed the growth in overall cases, with the exception of the last 2 or 3 days, we are obviously pretty clear that further measures will be needed to help interrupt transmission. Members were briefed on those at lunchtime and obviously they will be publicised with a press conference this evening.

#### **6.1.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:**

Given now we have broken the 1,000 barrier for active cases and positive COVID-19 in Islanders and now more than 2,000 people identified as contacts of current active cases and, most worryingly, the majority of those are now symptomatic, will the Chief Minister also be aware of the anger of Islanders being pitted against Islanders in communication with Islanders, that the Chief Minister and the Government will take also responsibility for recent decisions or exemptions being made where these incidences have been allowed to happen?

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Just to start correcting the Deputy on his premise, we do not have 1,000 active cases, we have 1,000 accumulated cases, which is the point I made at the briefing, which is, as I understand it, from day one. It is very, very clearly not 1,000 active cases. The slides that were given to Members and the provisional figures, I have yet to see the final figures, which I think are probably due imminently, are 246 active cases. That is obviously an increase from where we were last Monday, Tuesday, which, from memory, was sort of mid-140 to 148 and that demonstrates the increase that has taken place from a certain number of events - and I use the word in plural - that have contributed to the cases basically since approximately Wednesday, Thursday of this week. That is why not only with masks legislation, I believe the Minister either has or is about to sign off on the order and with the other measures that we briefed Members on at lunchtime, are critically important. If Islanders act responsibly, then we can avoid going to lockdown. If they do not and if the new measures are not seen to work, then we will have to take stronger action. But, as I said, we will be briefing the public on that at 7.00 p.m. tonight.

#### **6.1.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:**

Given the significant increase over the weekend, which will be announced soon and the pivotal point we are at with COVID, does the Chief Minister believe that the practice of workers coming from France, having a test and then going straight to work without any isolation is something that needs to be stopped in order to prevent any possible transmission?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

I think the point we need to make, and I was just turning to a slide that Members will have seen, is that the bulk of the recent increases we have seen have been through hospitality; they have not been through essential workers coming in. Mostly the measures that were put in place around essential workers coming in, and the Deputy has used French workers, I do not think that is the only nationality that is involved or the only scenario but it is essential workers that we are talking about, are very clearly acting in an isolated bubble. They literally commute to the building sites where they interact only with each other. They are in the hotel they are in and only interact with each other and the minibus they drive is driven by one of those workers. That means that certainly the medical advice we received at the time that these measures were approved was that the scope for transmission is negligible. I really think we have got to be careful, and if I can take the opportunity, not to develop into a sort of lynch-mob mentality. We have got to require responsibility from all Islanders without picking on certain areas, if we can avoid it. But also having said that, identifying irresponsible behaviour rather than necessarily irresponsible individuals. If we can identify that behaviour and get the changes that we need and so, hopefully, we will start seeing some of these numbers coming down. As I said, that is what we briefed Members on earlier today, I think I will stop there.

**6.1.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:**

Is it not the case that there are also some clusters that are not traceable and so we are not sure as to the origins of them? Is it not time to stop looking to pass the blame on to population alone and take responsibility for some of the Government decisions like the allowing of what you call ... point out the same sort of isolation measures that people who live here and are working here have to undergo?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Certainly to date on the information we had, which is what we shared with Members at lunchtime, we are not seeing, for want of a better expression, clusters originating from essential workers. We have also identified that we have got some transmissions in the community but the exact source is not known but those tend to be individual cases. What I have said is the measures that we have put in place were specifically designed to ensure ... interesting comment in the chat, that essentially there was limited, if not any, contact between the bubble and external people outside that bubble in their period of isolation. But the period of isolation is also being allowed on the building sites.

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

To ensure all those or at least as many of those who wish to ask a question can do so, I do not propose to allow any more supplementaries until we get near the end of the list of those who wish to ask a question.

**6.1.4 Deputy M.R. Hegarat:**

What investigation is being carried out in relation to the hospitality venues where these matters in the last few days have alluded to, and by whom are those investigations being taken?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

My understanding in terms of the “by whom”, it is by the Environmental Health team and, as I understand it, the first priority is to do the contact tracing, which, as far as I am concerned, is a different team. Then the Environmental Health team will be going in to determine whether laws or guidelines were followed or not.

**6.1.5 Senator S.Y. Mézec:**

Is the Chief Minister aware of reports of traffic backing up around the testing centre today because of increased demand following results over the weekend? Would he be able to confirm that he has looked into this and ascertained whether the testing centre is able to cope with this demand and what plans he may have in place to ensure that it is not overwhelmed in the coming days if these trends continue?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Just to correct something the Senator said, he is right about traffic backing up, it has been because of an I.T. (information technology) glitch at the airport drive-in centre, which is mainly about day-5 and day-10 tests, and I have not had an update since lunchtime. The update I did have was that the I.T. engineers are working on the issue and we are hoping to get it resolved later on this afternoon. I have not yet had it confirmed whether that has been resolved or not. It is mainly around the booking system, i.e. I believe it is the fact they are having to manually process bookings for day 5 and day 10 rather than the I.T. The actual testing has been unaffected and the rest of the Island's testing capacity is also unaffected and is functioning as normal. That is where we have got to be quite careful, it is not because of additional demand, it is because of an I.T. glitch. Certainly, the Islanders who were affected then this morning were being advised to go back to the airport testing centre this afternoon. They were expecting normal service to resume. I have not had it confirmed whether that has been the case. It was open until 4.30 p.m. and affected Islanders obviously will not need to rebook an appointment; that is the latest information I had had. That was put out as a note to press earlier in the day.

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

Thank you. You will see the request in the chat from Deputy Pamplin. In the circumstances I do propose to allow a little extra time so that those listed in the chat have the opportunity to ask a question.

**6.1.6 Deputy I. Gardiner:**

Over the last 3 to 4 weeks on a weekly basis there are questions as to next week we will have a lockdown. Some Islanders are thinking 200 is the high number, some Islanders are thinking 400 is the high number. I know that the number is not the main issue. Can the Chief Minister arrange a clear communication to the public what criteria are taken into consideration before we all go to the full lockdown? We have been informed but it would be good to have clear communication. Would the Chief Minister consider clear communication to the public how the decision is taken and it is not based on the numbers?

**Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

In fact I think one of our other colleagues asked in the press briefing very similar. I will arrange something for Members before we are going to put it out publicly. But to re-emphasise what I have said on a number of occasions, and what Dr. Ivan Muscat said at the briefing at lunchtime, and I think we have all said at press conferences again over the last month, if not longer, to reiterate what Deputy Gardiner has said; it is not a specific threshold, it is a combination of factors that we look at and what the medical advice is around potential future trends, which is a subjective element. But it will be looking at what is the positivity rate, what people are seeing either in hospital or what they think they are concerned they might start seeing in the next few days, obviously rates of increase and other factors. But I will arrange, as I said today, for, essentially, some greater clarity to be offered on that. It is difficult. It is really trying to say in an uncertain time one cannot put an absolute measure that says if we have got 250 cases now it will be 255 is when we go into lockdown because it will very much depend on each individual circumstance that we are assessing at the time. But the short answer to the Deputy's question is, yes, we will put some words out.

### **6.1.7 Deputy M.R. Higgins:**

Just following on from that, 2 weeks ago I was given an answer by the Minister for Health and Social Services on the criteria for a lockdown, so Members can look at that. My question to the Chief Minister is: the Chief Minister has stated that they are investigating the recent spike in COVID-19 positive cases and that he is trying to ascertain whether the law or guidance had been broken. I believe he has also said if the law was broken they will be referred to the courts but he was less forthcoming about breaches of guidance. Will he be prepared to name and shame in cases of breaches of guidance as an example in the public interest because the public are very concerned?

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Can I be just very clear about if the law has been broken? Obviously I do not decide to prosecute. There are various other people, one of whom may well be sitting in the Assembly, who decide on that, namely the Attorney General.

[17:30]

That is not something that politicians get involved in fairly obviously. But my clear view is that if a law was broken then I would expect the relevant measures to be followed. In terms of guidance, what we have got to be careful about, and let us try and be as clear as possible, I am not happy, I am very disappointed, I am very concerned, I have yet to get to anger because I try to not get too angry too quickly but we are about as strong as we can possibly be and be diplomatic about it, that we are very disappointed in the increase in numbers that we are seeing over the last few days, which seems to be coming from people who have not ... in some shape or form they have contributed to the spread of the virus in the community. What I think what we have got to be careful about before we get into ... quite a number of people do not, knowingly or recklessly, go out and spread the virus. We do know, equally, there are some behaviours that sometimes we see in the pubs where people are ignoring the guidance. I think that is where everyone has to be very careful about developing what I would call ... I will use the word "lynch mob" and I am not suggesting the Deputy is saying that in any shape or form because sometimes, particularly with social media, and we have seen it recently as well, the toxicity of the remarks that comes out, and I have had all sorts of emails that come through deploring and decrying and all the rest of it certain behaviour which, to my knowledge, they are wrong, which might inhibit people coming forward and saying: "Yes, I have just tested positive, this has happened" and that enables us to deal with that cluster speedily. It is the balance between identifying behaviour that is not being responsible and not adhered to the guidelines versus naming individuals who may or may not have realised what they were doing and that has a negative impact on our ability to then manage the virus in the future. I think that is the balance we are trying to make. I do share the Deputy's concern if guidance was knowingly breached.

### **6.1.8 Senator K.L. Moore:**

A report published today identified that only 42 per cent of people in Jersey agree with the Island's strategy for coping with COVID, compared to 80 per cent in our sister isle. While it is understood that the actions of individuals is partly to play in the current spike in cases, does the Chief Minister take some responsibility for his actions and, in the words of one insider, that he and his Government have had to be dragged kicking and screaming through this process? Does he take that responsibility for his actions and slow decision-making that has failed to bring the public with him?

### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

Frankly, I disagree with pretty well everything the Senator has just said. I do not recognise the comments. I do not deal with anecdote. I do not deal with surveys, which are possibly done at a point in time of which I do not know what the sample is, whether it is representative and I have certainly not even seen the results. I also challenge the issues around slow decision-making or anything around procrastination. If anything ... I will not say those remarks, I think I have said enough.

#### **6.1.9 Deputy K.F. Morel:**

Given that COVID-19 is having a disproportionate effect on the economic future of young people in Jersey, would the Chief Minister explain what measures the Government will be taking to ensure that there is no brain drain from the Island as young people look ahead and realise that job prospects, wages and the unaffordability of housing is making Jersey a less attractive place to live?

#### **Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:**

In terms of job prospects, I would not envisage that our job prospects are going to get significantly worse compared to any other jurisdiction because I think globally this will have an impact. This is why, at this point in the middle of a crisis, it is sometimes difficult to predict where we will be, hopefully, by Easter or coming out of it and what then the future looks like. We are obviously putting a lot of effort into planning for economic recovery and there is money in the Government Plan for that and also for fiscal stimulus, which obviously the Assembly approved previously and for maintaining as many jobs as we can, which have been all the measures that we have put in place to date and obviously I would suggest we act quite swiftly on. Looking ahead, the other point in terms of education and skills and retraining, there is obviously a significant investment in education proposed in the Government Plan. It is a matter for the Assembly as to whether it approves it or not. That does also include, I have forgotten the correct expression but, essentially, trying to allocate some extra resource to pupils who may have suffered as a result of COVID in terms of bringing their education or their learning because of delays or because of lessons have been cancelled because of COVID, to make sure they catch up to where they should be if we had been in a normal year. There has been quite a lot of investment in that side and we will continue to do so. Obviously unaffordability, that is a problem that the Island has had for a long time and obviously we are behind on that because of COVID but we, equally, are going to be looking at things like supply side, as well as the report from the Housing Policy Development Board, which I have still not had the time to digest yet, which then in the longer term we will hopefully start addressing some of those issues. The supply side I have addressed on a number of occasions both to the Assembly and to Scrutiny as to some measures that, hopefully, will contribute to the supply in the longer term and, again, will assist in the affordability side.