



Senator John Le Fondré
By email

22nd December 2020

Dear Chief Minister,

Scrutiny Liaison Committee (SLC)

Covid Escalation

The decision to tighten border controls with the UK is welcomed. However in view of the seriousness of the position the island is in, with the number of active cases at the worst case scenario, five days ahead of prediction, I am writing to you in an unprecedented manner at the request of the SLC to express our collective frustration at your mismanagement of the pandemic, which has led to a sudden and avoidable escalation in infections.

Throughout the pandemic Scrutiny has worked in an effective manner with the aim of assisting the development of policy and the Government's general response to this unprecedented situation. For example bringing amendments to improve the Safer Travel Policy, albeit the Assembly did not support our suggestions of enforcing the mandatory isolation until the first negative result and dedicated transportation to a traveller's destination, it did adopt the traffic light system which has served us well.

In addition, we have had to write before regarding the standard of communication with the public and internally with staff on the front line, particularly those handling phone calls, in relation to the Covid 19 situation. We deeply regret that our advice has not been taken seriously by you. Our displeasure appears reflective of increasingly strong public opinion.

The press conference on Friday was hastily organised and, inexcusably given the seriousness of the matter at hand, it took States Members and the public by surprise. The advice given in the press conference was not clear, leaving many people unsure as to whether they should go to work, or attend appointments the following day. Indeed, by way of example the Chamber of Commerce had to step in and some Ministers took to social media to assist groups such as hairdressers and retailers given the ambiguous nature of the Government messaging.

Due to the Government's inability to communicate effectively with the public there is a heightened level of concern and failing trust, and we are aware of considerable numbers of people who are choosing to isolate to protect themselves and vulnerable family members. Although you have claimed that polls or surveys have no value, they do identify issues with public sentiment. One example, run by Channel 103 last week, had over 1200 people engaged with it, and 76% of those islanders wanted to see tougher restrictions. Furthermore, Island Global Research have tracked public sentiment throughout the pandemic, at every point public confidence has been low and significantly lower than it is in Guernsey.

Additionally, an Order in relation to Workplace restrictions was published, indicating that the decision had been taken at an earlier point in the day or week. It is not at all clear why no warning was given that it was coming, and at the very least shared with the relevant Scrutiny Members for constructive peer review.

States Members received a briefing on Thursday early evening and were told that a decision would be made on Monday regarding the imposition of stricter measures. This would be based on the weekends results. We were told that the advice was to "hold steady." It is not clear who

gave you this advice. That approach was borne out in the single announcement yesterday that the whole of the UK would be treated as a red zone.

Now that STAC minutes are available, albeit only up to early September, we can see that STAC recommended a more robust approach for the winter on the 2nd September, including a requirement for masks to be introduced in October. In your press conference you placed the blame on the Legislative Drafting Office being unable to complete this work in time. Had you properly implemented the advice from STAC when it was given it would have been possible to have this work done at an earlier point. In fact, we are now many months into responding to this pandemic and experience should go hand in hand with better decision making. It seems quite inexcusable that you continue to lead a politically reactive approach on this critical matter, rather than a pro-active response that anticipates situations and, informed by expert medical advice, acts decisively. The issue of masks being a prime illustration.

Competent Authorities Ministers were told that case numbers were rising on 7th September, as STAC noted that transmission on island was higher than inbound travel. Regrettably your failure to step up measures in the Island at an earlier point, despite requests from ministers and states members has led to the position we find ourselves in today where the virus is out of control and the internal economy is not able to function normally at an important time of the year. The active cases were 939 yesterday, almost half of the total (2024) since July 1st.

We urge you to act immediately, decisively and unambiguously. Steps should include:

- Share in full the recent advice (which prompted your announcements on Friday afternoon) with States Members and the public
- Deliver clearer measures, particularly regarding travel, backed up by regulations.
- Identify an effective political spokesperson to front the Government response and to engage with the public as soon as possible
- Ensure businesses are provided adequate time to prepare for and adapt to Government directives affecting them
- Set a strategy for both children and teachers to feel valued and safe when they return to school in January
- It is imperative that a change of tone and pace happens now. If not too late already, if this virus is to be properly contained again in the Island we implore you to take our advice on board

Yours sincerely



Senator Kristina Moore
President, Scrutiny Liaison Committee