

Chief Minister

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Senator Kristina Moore
President, Scrutiny Liaison Committee
By email

7 January 2021

Dear Senator Moore

Covid-19 Escalation

Thank you for your letter of 22 December welcoming the decision to tighten border controls with the United Kingdom, but raising certain concerns.

In response, and as well as providing further detail below, we would like to again stress that as a Government we have consistently implemented, in our view, the right measures at the right time, based on the best expert advice (rather than unscientific surveys as referenced in your letter).

Indeed, rather than being mis-managed as you say, we believe the Government, the public service, the Assembly, and of course the community, has responded admirably to this crisis.

Indeed, since your letter, and appreciating that there is a lag between any measure being implemented and its impact on the virus, daily positive results and active cases have fallen. You will recall that we were very clear on several occasions that such a lag did exist, and indeed the 22 December, the very date of your letter, saw the first decline of the numbers which has continued thus far. This was in line with our expectations. We would also note that up until 26 November our numbers were starting to drop, and it was within 7 days of the next increase that we announced the hospitality circuit breaker and other measures.

We are very concerned all the same about the number of deaths that have taken place, but we are not in the same position as the United Kingdom, and despite the extreme challenges the virus poses, and, contrary to the unsubstantiated assertions in your letter, we are very much in control of the situation having adopted a careful, whilst decisive, approach.

Having stated this position, the detailed points in this letter should be helpful to the Committee in engaging constructively on the issues. As we have publicly said, the role of scrutiny is strengthened when it engages constructively, forensically, and based on the available facts rather than opinion. We hope the below helps in that regard.

Covid-19 Winter Strategy

The *Covid-19 Strategy Update: Preparing for Winter* published on 2 November, outlined the challenges that were expected to arise as we moved into the Winter. The Strategy was considered by the Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell (STAC) and contained a statement of their advice. The stated aim of the Strategy was to avoid quarantining society as a whole, but rather to target measures firmly and quickly in response to specific threats.

The Strategy highlighted eight main actions over Winter to keep Islanders secure, safe and well:

- 1. Increasing on-Island testing**
- 2. Continually updating our classifications of countries and regions to keep Jersey safe**
- 3. Introducing mask policies for indoor public spaces**
- 4. Adopting shielding programmes to keep people at high risk safe but connected**
- 5. Vaccinating for flu and when possible, for COVID-19**

6. **Making sure all of Government is prepared, especially in supporting care, health and economic interventions**
7. **Being ready to escalate if needed, but using the 'least overall harm' principle**
8. **Communication about sensible behaviour, backed with enforcement.**

We have rapidly implemented all these actions, following the principle of least overall harm.

Face Masks

Contrary to your assertion, the advice of STAC was properly implemented. As you will be aware, face masks were first strongly recommended on 6 April. This strong recommendation was repeated most recently on 23 October. In discussion with sector representatives, guidance to wear masks in indoor public spaces was implemented on 26 October. The published minutes of STAC from 2 September show clearly that the advice was not to mandate at that time: *"It was important not to mandate the wearing too early, but to find an appropriate point at which to emphasise that they should be worn."*

The issue of face masks was also considered by Competent Authorities on the 14 October, and we were clear that drafting should commence, so that when it was needed, we would be ready to implement mandatory wearing. We do look forward and plan within the constraints under which we all operate, and this is an example. Consequently, and despite inevitable challenges caused by workloads, face masks were subsequently made mandatory in indoor public spaces from the 1 December, which was the appropriate time for this measure to be introduced.

There was of course a short period of time required for legislative development. Throughout the pandemic, the Island has been very well served by a team of committed policy officers, legal advisers and legislative drafters, who have worked tirelessly to develop this sort of novel legislation at pace. We are sure that the Committee would wish to join us in thanking them for their impressive work and dedicated service.

Test, Trace and Isolate

Jersey has a world class test, trace and isolate capability. This means that we can 'see' far more of the virus than most other jurisdictions and so our actions are being taken at an earlier stage than elsewhere. Over recent months we have also expanded our capacity, through on-Island testing, the deployment of c.100 contact tracing staff, and a significantly expanded workforce testing programme. Given the high volumes supported by this service during December, there have been occasions when someone has needed to wait a little longer to be contacted and we thank Islanders for their patience.

Our ability to test, trace and isolate at scale has been essential to the ongoing suppression of the virus and the Island is very fortunate to have such committed public servants in our testing and contact tracing teams, who have worked right through Christmas and New Year to help keep us all safe.

Safer Travel

The Safer Travel Policy proves a clear framework of measures to manage the risk from travel. These measures are underpinned by legislation and infractions of the isolation requirements have been dealt with robustly by enforcement agencies and the Courts.

The Countries Risk Assessment classification we introduced as part of the Safer Travel Policy enabled a swift response to the news of a more transmissible variant of the virus. By classifying all UK arrivals as Red, travellers are now subject to triple testing and a minimum isolation period of 10 days. We will continue to monitor the situation in the UK closely and our border measures will be kept under active review.

Schools

Following clear advice from STAC and the States Assembly debate, the position was confirmed regarding schools remaining open to pupils. We have since also confirmed that students will have their Christmas break extended to ensure that schools have adequate time to prepare for the new school term. As the Education Minister has stated, we are of course closely monitoring the situation and if

changes need to be made to these arrangements, we will notify schools, parents and students at the earliest opportunity.

Rapid Escalation

The Strategy laid out an escalation framework and highlighted that urgent and difficult decisions may be needed to deal with heightened risk. We have made and implemented a number of such decisions during December, informed by advice from STAC and in accordance with the actions contained within the Winter Strategy, and will continue to do so. These have included:

1 December	Compulsory mask wearing in indoors public spaces
2 December	Escalated shielding measures for high-risk Islanders Hospital visiting suspended to protect patients and staff
4 December	Hospitality circuit breaker starts Gyms and indoor sport and fitness classes closed 2-metre physical distancing back in force Flu vaccine made available to Islanders between the age of 50 and 64
7 December	Work from home commences Care home visiting suspended
8 December	Pfizer vaccine received into the Island
13 December	Vaccine programme starts in care homes
17 December	Vaccine centre opens at Fort Regent 300 people apply to be part of the vaccination programme
18 December	closure of cafes and other food premises Islanders warned against visiting other households No more than two gatherings on Christmas Day and Boxing Day
21 December	classifying all UK arrivals as 'Red' (now also extended to transit passengers) Vaccine administered to all care home residents (over 1,300 Islanders)
23 December	closure of non-essential retail from 18:00 on 24 December 'rule of ten' extended to outdoor gatherings and controlled events.

At times we have rightly needed to hold position for a few days on the advice of STAC to enable them to better understand the trends and to provide sound advice. Winter has been a highly dynamic new phase of the pandemic, with few certainties, so STAC need to understand the effect of interventions before advising on further measures. We have then implemented measures rapidly once that advice has been received. This is the best way to make escalation decisions.

To assist States Members, STAC minutes will continue to be provided to Scrutiny and to be published in accordance with the Terms of Reference. Briefings for States Members will also continue, so that Members have regular opportunities to directly question public health officers and the medical advisors who participate in STAC.

Your letter highlighted the Channel 103 survey from the middle of December where a majority of respondents were in favour of tougher Christmas guidance and of course, following further STAC advice, more restrictive measures were announced at the end of that same week. Your letter also mentions Orders to underpin these measures. These Orders have indeed been made, in accordance with the requirements of the relevant Regulations, in relation to Safe Distancing, Workplace Restrictions and Gathering Controls.

Community response to changes

We appreciate that the need for rapid action sometimes limits the time available to prepare for changes, but Islanders have responded promptly and shown a real understanding of what we need to do as a community over this difficult Winter period. There is a good understanding of what we need to do as a community and so the communication is clearly reaching the majority of Islanders.

Your letter references one of our Friday press conferences. Far from being hastily organised, this particular conference was planned since the preceding Wednesday, publicised widely on the radio and on social media, and followed a States Members Briefing on the Thursday evening where it was also referenced.

All the same, the imperative is always to act quickly and decisively. Your letter also mentions the Chamber of Commerce and their activity on social media following the press conference. We always seek to work closely with the Chamber, who are an important partner in helping to answer queries and correct any misinterpretations from non-Government sources.

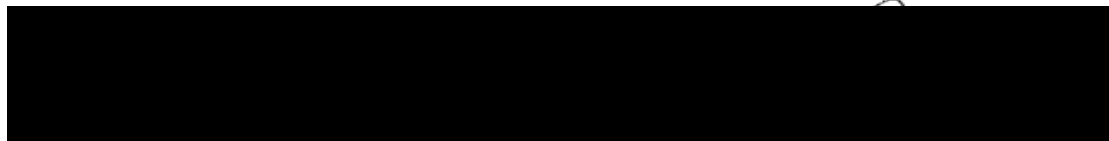
Vaccination programme

We are continuing to roll-out the Pfizer vaccination programme as speedily as possible and are making excellent progress. We are again fortunate to be served by such an excellent team of dedicated public servants who are imminently to be reinforced by hundreds of healthcare professionals and other volunteers who have now stepped forward to play their part in this exceptional community undertaking. We are delighted that stocks of the Oxford vaccine arrived in the Island yesterday, having been approved by the Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency, and this will enable us to further accelerate progress in protecting our community.

In conclusion, we remain firmly focussed on the actions needed to manage the pandemic. We will continue to act swiftly and decisively in order to protect the wellbeing of Islanders. Whilst the recent trend is downwards and gives some cause for optimism, we remain vigilant and cautious. During this challenging Winter phase, we must all work together constructively to help steer our community through to the successful completion of the vaccination roll-out.

To be clear, we cannot be complacent, and it is possible that there will be an increase from Christmas and New Year. That will only become clear over the next two weeks, and that is why we need Islanders to continue to act responsibly, in particular as we are now ramping up the roll out of the vaccine.

Yours sincerely



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