

KS

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL ADVISORY CELL

(38th Meeting)

22nd December 2020

(Meeting conducted via Microsoft Teams)

PART A (Non-Exempt)

Note: The Minutes of this meeting comprise Part A only.

Non-essential
retail premises.

A1. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell ('the Cell'), with reference to Minute No. A4 of its meeting of 21st December 2020, recalled that it had been asked to consider whether it felt that non-essential retail premises should be required to close in order to mitigate the spread of the virus and that the Emergencies Council would be meeting on 22nd December 2020, at which point the Chair would present the Cell's views.

The Cell accordingly received and noted a PowerPoint presentation, dated 22nd December 2020, entitled 'Closure of non-essential retail', which had been prepared for the Emergencies Council by the Interim Director, Public Health Policy, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Department and heard from him in connexion therewith. It was noted that Ministers would have the option to close all non-essential retail premises by means of an Amendment to the COVID-19 (Workplace Restrictions) (Jersey) Order 2020 and this could encompass close contact services (such as beauty salons and hairdressers), indoor recreation and other non-essential services. It was mooted that the Order to close the premises would take effect on the evening of Christmas Eve, once most people had finished their shopping and would expire 2 weeks thereafter, on 6th January 2021, albeit, if Ministers did decide to close the businesses, there was unlikely to be a relaxation of the Order before 11th January 2021. It would also be open to Ministers to decide to opt for a partial closure of some retail premises – potentially the close contact services – but if Ministers decided to choose only some to close, they would need to have a strong rationale therefor. The Interim Director, Public Health Policy, informed the Cell that when formulating the options for Ministers, he had considered whether 'zoning' could be introduced, or a restriction on opening hours, but was, personally, of the view that it would be too complex and could result in unintended consequences.

The Chair of the Cell indicated that the Island remained in a delicate position with regard to COVID-19. The number of cases had not declined as had been expected following the introduction of various mitigating measures and there was uncertainty around how the virus was being transmitted in a number of cases. Islanders would be celebrating with family and friends over the festive period and he questioned the wisdom of enabling people to congregate more than necessary. Accordingly, he was supportive of the proposal to close all non-essential retail premises for the 2 week period, whilst the schools were on holiday and many people had taken time off. However, if Ministers took this decision, they would need to be fully cognisant of the consequences thereof, mindful that it would have an impact on the more vulnerable in society, both financially and with regard to their mental wellbeing.

The Associate Medical Director for Primary Prevention and Intervention indicated that supplies of the COVID-19 vaccine were being delivered on a more regular basis to Jersey and it was important to suppress the spread of the virus in order for the vaccine

to have maximum effect. Accordingly, he was supportive of the closure of all non-essential retail premises. The Associate Medical Director for Unscheduled Secondary Care concurred and explained to the Cell the impact that the virus had recently had on the Emergency Department. The Consultant in Communicable Disease Control also agreed and indicated that in areas designated as Tier 4 in England, these settings had been closed and crowding was likely at this time of year if they remained open. However, he emphasised the need for Ministers to consider the impact that this decision would have on those people employed within such premises. On a related note, he informed the Cell that the new variant of the virus (N501Y) appeared to be affecting young people to a disproportionate extent and mitigating measures to reduce transmission were essential if the schools were to be kept open during term time.

The Independent Advisor - Epidemiology and Public Health agreed that it was a difficult decision. However, he was not wholly convinced that non-essential retail premises posed either a high, or moderate, risk with regard to transmission of COVID-19, whereas it was known that care homes, the Hospital and people's own houses were high risk areas. He was supportive of the closure of premises offering close contact services, as there was a more forceful argument that the virus might spread in those settings, but would prefer to see tighter controls to prevent crowding inside and outside retail premises, rather than requiring them to close. He also requested that consideration should be given to the in-Island transport situation, noting that the risk of spread of the virus posed by buses and in taxis was greater than by non-essential retail premises, acknowledging that if these closed, bus travel was likely to further decline. The Interim Director, Public Health Policy, informed the Cell that officers would review whether this issue aligned with the wider policy at this juncture.

The Environmental Health Consultant expressed a preference for all non-essential retail premises to be required to close and suggested that the greatest risk of transmission was not from staff, but from people crowding, particularly hoping for bargains in the sales. The Group Director, Financial Services and Digital Economy, did not believe that a decision to close those venues would be dictated by the data, but indicated that sales would happen at some point, because retailers would have sizeable stock levels that they wished to clear. Accordingly, he was supportive of the closures as a 'pre-emptive' move. The Director General, Justice and Home Affairs Department, concurred and emphasised the need to manage risk in the Town centre.

The Cell discussed the likely timing of any announcement and closure of the non-essential retail premises, in the event that Ministers made that decision and agreed that, in its view, it should be made public as soon as possible and that the premises should be permitted to close at their normal time on Christmas Eve, so that the circuit breaker would follow on naturally from the Christmas Day closure.

Christmas gatherings.

A2. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell ('the Cell'), with reference to Minute No. A1 of its meeting of 18th December 2020, recalled that its advice had been sought on a number of measures that had been presented to the Competent Authority Ministers, including that Islanders should be informed that entering other people's homes was strongly discouraged. The Competent Authorities had subsequently decided that Islanders should be instructed that they could attend gatherings on Christmas Day and Boxing Day only, with a maximum of 10 people in attendance.

The Cell was informed that its views were sought from Ministers on whether an exemption should also be made for Christmas Eve, mindful that some communities in the Island would traditionally gather on that evening as the principal focus of the celebrations. It was noted that a petition to that effect had also been launched. Some members of the Cell suggested that there might be merit in proposing that people could meet up on 2 of 3 days, viz Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or Boxing Day and that they currently had insufficient insight into the impact that only allowing exemptions on the

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latter 2 days would have on those communities. However, others emphasised the need to keep the messaging simple and suggested that, having recommended that non-essential retail premises should be closed, which would damage people's livelihoods, it would appear contradictory to then permit 'partying' on an additional day. The Consultant in Communicable Disease Control indicated that discussions with the communities that would be impacted was important and suggested that the message could be delivered by their leaders, emphasising the need for them to play their part in keeping everyone safe. The Director of Communications, Office of the Chief Executive, confirmed that appropriate communications were being prepared to that effect. The Cell recalled that many frontline and essential employees would be working on Christmas Day and Boxing Day and some enquiries had been received as to whether they could celebrate with family and friends on an alternative day.

Having considered the foregoing, the Cell decided to advise Ministers that gatherings should take place on Christmas Day and Boxing Day only.

COVID-19 –
communication of
positive test
results.

A3. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell ('the Cell') received and noted an undated paper entitled 'COVID-19 Communication of Positive Test Results' and heard from the Director General and the Director, Testing and Tracing, Justice and Home Affairs Department in relation thereto. The Cell recalled that when people undertook a PCR test for COVID-19, they would receive an automated text message to inform them that the results were negative. If, however, the results were positive, they would be contacted in person by a member of the Contact Tracing Team to convey the news and to notify them of the requirement to isolate and would subsequently receive a longer phone call to make enquiries about their direct contacts. The Cell further recalled that the on-Island laboratory, which processed most of the swabs, was operational for 22 hours per day and communicated results within an average of 12 hours, so test results were received throughout the night, whilst the Contact Tracing Team worked from 8.00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m.

The Cell noted that some concerns had been raised that the communication of a positive result could be delayed by up to 11 hours and there was a risk that someone could be unaware that they had the virus and transmit it to a vulnerable person. The Cell was reminded that this situation should only apply to asymptomatic individuals, because people with symptoms and direct contacts should be isolating. It was acknowledged that it was preferable to contact a positive individual in person where possible, but this had to be balanced against the welfare of the wider community. The paper set out 3 options, namely to notify someone immediately via automated text message, followed by a telephone call from 8.00 a.m. the following day; to delay sending the automated message until services and support were available, followed by a phone call from the Contact Tracing Team or to extend the opening hours of the Contact Tracing Team from 7.00 a.m. to 10.30 p.m.

It was acknowledged that people could experience a wide range of emotions when informed that they were infected with COVID-19, ranging from relief to extreme distress and that, in the latter cases, this could be exacerbated by receiving a text message in the middle of the night, although the Cell was informed that the message would explain that they would be contacted by a member of the Contact Tracing Team the following morning and would be directed towards 24/7 services offering support, such as the Samaritans, in the event that the news impacted their mental wellbeing. The Cell noted that people would also be able to contact the out of hours GP service. The Associate Medical Director for Unscheduled Secondary Care indicated that it would make things easier for those working in the Hospital Emergency Department if a patient who was admitted had received immediate notification that they were infected with COVID-19.

The Cell accordingly agreed that people should receive immediate notification of the

positive result via text message, followed by a call from a member of the Contact Tracing Team.

COVID-19:
Passengers
arriving from
the United
Kingdom.

A4. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell ('the Cell'), with reference to Minute No. A3 of its meeting of 21st December 2020, recalled that it had advised Ministers that the whole of the United Kingdom ('UK') should be categorised as a 'Red' area under its RAG (Red / Amber / Green) system, in light of the high level of current cases of COVID-19 and the emergence of the N501Y variant of the virus, most notably in the South East of England, with which the Island had close travel links. It further recalled that it had recommended that any person who undertook a day trip to the UK should now be classified as having arrived from a Red area, rather than Green as had previously been the case.

The Interim Director, Public Health Policy, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Department, informed the Cell that Ministers had requested advice on whether any person, who had transited through the UK, should be categorised as having arrived from a Red area. The Cell was mindful that when determining the testing and isolation requirements for people, consideration was normally given to where they had spent a night in the previous 14 days and it was possible that someone might not have stayed overnight when transiting through the UK.

The Cell was cognisant that it had recommended that day trips were to be categorised as Red and that someone, who had spent 12 hours in a crowded transit lounge, could potentially be categorised as having arrived from a Green area, albeit London Gatwick and London Heathrow airports were within areas where the N501Y variant was prevalent and which were designated as Tier 4 by the UK Government.

It was noted that those people who travelled off-Island in order to receive medical treatment in the UK were categorised as having arrived from a Green area because of the controlled nature of the hospital environment, although the Interim Director of Public Health, indicated that the Analytical Cell had been made aware of some patients who had tested positive for the virus on return to Jersey.

Ultimately, the Cell decided that it did not currently have sufficient data on which to base a decision at the current time and would give the matter further consideration.