

KS

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL ADVISORY CELL

(41st Meeting)

5th January 2021

(Meeting conducted via Microsoft Teams)

PART A (Non-Exempt)

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

Re-connection. A1. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell ('the Cell'), with reference to Minute No. A3 of its meeting of 4th January 2021, recalled that, over the period from late November to mid-December 2020, Ministers had implemented a range of non-pharmaceutical interventions, which had the effect of introducing an extended 'circuit break', with a view to restricting the transmission of COVID-19 within the Island. These had included the closure of non-essential retail premises, hospitality settings and close contact services, the advice to work from home if possible, the requirement to wear masks in indoor public settings, restrictions on the size of gatherings, the decision to categorise the whole of the United Kingdom as a 'Red' area – which included day trips to and from that jurisdiction and anyone transiting through it - and advice to avoid intermingling with other households. Some of these were enshrined within legislation and others took the form of guidance and were supported by the ongoing test, trace and isolate policy. Mindful that these measures restricted people's life and livelihoods, they would not be sustainable in the long term, so Ministers would wish to exit some, or all, of them at some juncture, based on evidence that it was appropriate to do so.

The Cell further recalled that, at its meeting on 4th January 2021, it had received a PowerPoint presentation entitled 'Circuit Re-connection version 2 (updated with RAG rating)', which proposed a staged approach to the re-connection, but that differing views had been expressed, so the decision had been taken to consider this issue again at the current meeting, mindful that the Competent Authority Ministers were due to meet on 6th January and would be presented with the proposals. The Chair of the Cell, thanked the members of the Cell for attending the previous and current meetings and indicated that he was keen for everyone to be able to express their views, even if that did not reflect the advice ultimately provided to Ministers.

The Cell accordingly received a PowerPoint presentation that was due to be delivered to the Competent Authority Ministers, entitled 'Circuit Re-connection', that had been prepared by the Interim Director, Public Health Policy, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Department and heard from him in relation thereto. He indicated that he had retained the staged approach to re-connection, but had included the opening of the schools and the introduction of the new testing programme for the schools at Stage One. At Stage 2 was the re-opening of the non-essential retail premises, indoor recreation and close contact services, which the Cell recalled had been required to close on Christmas Eve. It was mooted that there should be a minimum gap of 2 weeks between the various Stages, so these could potentially re-open during the week commencing 25th January, subject to the key metrics. It was noted that the Competent Authority Ministers would reconvene on 20th January.

The Cell was informed that the Competent Authorities would only be asked for a decision relating to the second Stage, because the Minister for Education, in

consultation with the Minister for Health and Social Services, had already taken the decision relating to the return of the schools. The decision relating to Stage 2 would be provisional, mindful that the Competent Authority Ministers would meet again on 20th January. The proposals contained within Stages 3 and 4 of the re-connection were for information only at this juncture. The move from Stage 2 to Stage 3 was quite significant and would potentially include the re-opening of all hospitality settings, with the exception of 'wet' venues, that only served drinks, which would notionally be within Stage 4. Beyond Stage 4 would be the post-vaccination policy. The Cell was advised that members of the policy team had worked hard to provide the detailed evidence base and rationale which underpinned the advisory position that would be provided to Ministers in exiting the circuit break arrangements. It was anticipated that there would be a divergence of views on the categorisation, but the Interim Director, Public Health Policy, assured the Cell that the work had been undertaken in a neutral way, based on international and local evidence from the Analytical Cell. The Cell was provided with a paper, dated 5th January 2021, entitled 'Impact of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions and circuit break restrictions on transmission of COVID-19', which supported the summary contained within the presentation. Work would continue within the Public Health Team to gather data and information to inform the measures contained within Stages 3 and 4 and these would be re-presented to the Cell at future meetings, before Competent Authority Ministers were asked to take a decision thereon.

It was noted that the presentation included considerations for Ministers that, whilst the extended circuit break appeared to be having some effect in reducing the spread of COVID-19, as multiple measures were combined, the removal of any single set of restrictions had risks associated therewith, due to the continuing community transmission and the potential for the more transmissible new variant of the virus (N501Y) to be present in the Island. An understanding of the effect of household mixing over the festive period had also been included as a key metric when Ministers were determining re-connection.

The progress through the various re-connection Stages was overlaid with high-level, indicative dates for various cohorts to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. However, the Cell was informed that these were for Ministers' information and it was not intended to conflate the vaccine roll-out with the move to Stages 3 and 4 and depending upon the key metrics, it could be possible to move through all Stages more rapidly than the slide would appear to suggest. Some concern had been expressed that 'greater household mixing' was currently within Stage 4 and the Cell was aware of the benefits to people's wellbeing of social interaction, but was also cognisant that inter- and intra-household mixing was an acknowledged vector of transmission.

The Independent Advisor - Epidemiology and Public Health, emphasised the importance of communicating to Ministers the need for a high degree of flexibility in the approach taken to the re-connection. He indicated that the positivity rate of the virus locally had declined over Christmas and continued so to do, but that this was not as a consequence of the closure of non-essential retail and other premises on Christmas Eve. There was little documented evidence of the risk posed by such *loci*, because research focused on essential premises, such as supermarkets and pharmacies, which were more likely to be busy and visited by people who were unwell. He suggested that the Jersey data was not being considered in a critical way and that there was speculation on the impact that the N501Y variant of COVID-19 would have. On the basis that this was unknown, he opined that the prioritisation for re-connection would be neither a scientific, nor technical decision, but a political one. The vulnerable in the Island and the health service would be protected through vaccination and he indicated that it would be helpful to undertake some modelling of the anticipated severe COVID-19 cases, which were likely to require hospitalisation, by the various rates of transmission. This would provide an indication of the risk posed to the Hospital at various stages and, as a consequence, the health trade-off of relaxing various measures. He agreed that it was

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important for the schools to return on 11th January, but opined that the risk of transmission posed in their communal areas and on the school buses was greater than in non-essential retail premises and that this should be communicated to Ministers. He disagreed that non-essential retail premises should have been required to close because there had been 300 active cases where the source of infection had been unknown.

The Director General, Justice and Home Affairs Department, stated that the Cell could take a view on the non-essential retail premises based on the evidence that it had received. He suggested that the presence in the Island of only one principal shopping area *viz* King Street and Queen Street led people to congregate in that location, which was fairly small, with the attendant risk of transmission.

The Consultant in Communicable Disease Control, indicated that the current strategy was to vaccinate as many people over the age of 50 years as possible in order to prevent severe disease, requiring admission to Hospital. As part of that strategy, he advocated retaining strict controls at the borders for the foreseeable future. He highlighted the threat posed by the South African variant of COVID-19 (E484K), because it was possible that it would impact the effectiveness of the current vaccines. Scientists were already developing variants to the vaccine, but this could take 2 months. Moreover, it was not yet known what impact the COVID-19 vaccine would have. It was anticipated that it would reduce severe disease, but it was not known if it would diminish transmission of the virus, as was the case with the influenza vaccine. Accordingly, the advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation was that the public health policy should not be changed until a better understanding was obtained of how the vaccine would interact with the epidemiology. He emphasised the need to keep the schools open and the impact to the economy of having 15,000 pupils at home, with parents and carers being required to stay off work to care for them.

The Group Director, Financial Services and Digital Economy, questioned whether it would be possible for some pupils to be educated from home, if that suited them and their family. He acknowledged the educational and social benefit of children being in school, but referenced the long-term harm that could potentially be caused by having parents out of work. He noted that the border was *de facto* closed, by virtue of the strict controls which were in place, but suggested that a complete closure could facilitate a more confident re-opening of the local economy. With regard to the schools, the Chair informed the Cell that it was problematic for the Children, Young People, Education and Skills Department to implement a 'blended' approach to learning, with some pupils physically in school and others not. He also opined that it was important for vulnerable children to be in school, where they were safe.

The Independent Advisor - Epidemiology and Public Health, agreed that it was important to keep strict controls at the border for as long as possible. He indicated that Ministers should be cognisant that the Island would have to accept a certain level of transmission of COVID-19 for the coming months until more people received the vaccine and the weather became warmer. He stated that whilst he respected the logic and views of other members of the Cell, he did not agree with them and wished for the Chair to make it clear to the Competent Authority Ministers that the Cell was not unanimous in supporting the re-connection prioritisation. The Chair undertook so to do and indicated that, in all communications, he had made it clear whether the Cell was of one view, or not.