



LEARNING TO LIVE IN A WORLD WITH COVID-19



Isle of Man
Government
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Context

The strategic aims of the Exit Framework endorsed by Tynwald in April 2021 included restoring unrestricted travel between the Island and the British Isles as well as “learning to live in a world with Covid-19”, and developing a long term sustainable position. The strategic shift from an objective of ‘local elimination’ to one of ‘living with Covid-19’ has been made possible by the advent of effective vaccines and the successful roll out of the vaccination programme on Island.

Having made a series of border changes towards returning unrestricted travel, this document describes at a high level the approach Government is currently taking over the next 1 - 3 months ahead of the next administration who may adjust it where appropriate when in position from mid-October 2021 onwards, ultimately moving towards a long term sustainable position.

Longer term, the expectation is that the virus will become endemic – it will continue to exist, but that it can be treated and managed alongside other illnesses, helped by continuation of the vaccination programme (including booster doses in line with emerging evidence), public health advice and guidance, a range of mitigations against transmission, and by ensuring that access to care for those who need it is readily available.

This may yet be some way off however and for now the approach continues to recognise that if left unchecked the virus could still represent a strategic threat to Island life, particularly if a new variant showing ability to evade vaccines emerges and spreads. Mitigations and vigilance must be maintained so as to avoid significant impact to individuals, to society as a whole and to the economy.

In September, schools reopened and children were encouraged back in to classrooms with additional mitigations such as increased ventilation and CO2 monitors in place. As the autumn and winter approach, there is an increased risk of further waves

of community transmission. Individual and community mitigations as well as Government mitigations will therefore be needed for the foreseeable future.

The response over the coming months will continue to recognise these threats, but will also look to balance them in the context of the harms caused by any strong national response such as mandated restrictions, against the immediate impacts from the virus as well as impacts that may only become apparent in years to come from responding to the virus, and from its impact where it penetrates.

This document does not create new policy, or a new approach, merely confirming the current approach, much of which has already been discussed through other channels.

“Learning to live in a world with Covid, means that Government will encourage as much protection as possible for individuals through vaccinations and non-pharmaceutical interventions, as well as directly delivering mitigations that help suppress and contain the level of person to person transmission such as through borders control, testing, tracing and isolation.

Government will not seek to implement Island wide or society level restrictions other than at the borders, unless the level of threat rises to the extent that there is a significant threat to the health and care system of being overwhelmed.

Minimising the harm and disruption caused by Covid, supporting people making informed choices and mitigating against uncontrolled transmission will continue to be the core approach.”

Approach

There were significant changes made to the borders during the first half of 2021 which facilitated increased travel between the Island and the UK. It also brought with it increased risk of importation of the virus, and from 27th June onwards the Island has seen its largest wave of cases to date.

Learning to live in a world with Covid-19

Isle of Man Government Approach September 2021

1. To minimise the harm and disruption caused by Covid

2. To support people in making informed choices

3. To mitigate against uncontrolled transmission

And to be prepared to intervene

Based on a range of factors, in particular health and care capacity and social and economic impact

At the time of writing, Government has so far avoided the need to introduce legal restrictions in response to these cases, instead seeking to encourage individuals to take personal decisions to help protect themselves, each other and the Island as a whole, complemented by a range of central mitigations including vaccinations, testing and isolation, and the provision of care for those who need it.

At a basic level, this current approach is expected to continue unless there is a substantial change in impact, or in external factors, such as new variants of concern.

There are currently a range of mitigations deployed to suppress the level of cases and to avoid uncontrolled community transmission, recognising that the threat from the virus is still significant - for those unable to be fully vaccinated (either through age, underlying conditions or choice) as well as those partially vaccinated, and to a lesser extent those fully vaccinated.

These mitigations are currently principally focused around:

- Ensuring eligible individuals become fully vaccinated, especially those most at risk;
- Continued border restrictions to prevent new importation, especially variants of concern;
- The formal identification of positive cases through PCR testing, and the isolation of positive cases for ten days to minimise further community spread;
- Increased awareness and vigilance for

close contacts including the ability for home testing;

- Ongoing public awareness campaigns supporting personal mitigations, complemented by free lateral flow devices for the general public and broader surveillance testing;
- Ongoing support to businesses to consider risk assessments and encourage mitigations being deployed where possible, complemented by financial support where restrictions continue to affect normal trading operations.

Vaccination remains an essential part of this overall approach, but even being fully vaccinated can never equate to being fully protected. Across the population as a whole however, it does significantly reduce the risks of serious illness and hospitalisation, and importantly when at scale, it helps weaken the chains of transmission that would otherwise result in the threat of overwhelming the health and care systems. There are a number of assumptions that sit behind the approach over the coming months, including:

1. There will be a level of ongoing risk from the virus circulating within the community for some time to come;
2. The majority of Island adult residents have high levels of protection from symptomatic and serious illness through vaccination. Vaccination also has been thought to provide a degree of protection against infection and transmission, although this is lower for Delta variant than previous variants;

3. Personal choices and mitigations will play an important part of the response, helping individuals protect themselves and in doing so each other;
4. The virus cannot be left simply to circulate within the community unchecked, some mitigation measures will have to be considered, complemented by ongoing testing to identify and confirm positive cases, as well as identifying variants of concern that may pose a higher level of threat to the Island through higher transmissibility or by having the capacity to cause more serious illness or vaccine escape;
5. The health and care service will ultimately be able to provide care to those who need it, supporting people with Covid as well as continued care for other illnesses and needs, ensuring regular services are maintained.

Whilst the original principles agreed in April 2020 served the Island well under an elimination strategy, the approach has been adjusted over many months and the three high level aims are now summarised below:

1. Minimise the harm and disruption caused by Covid

- a. Ensuring the health and care service has the capacity to operate normally, providing effective treatment and support for everyone;
- b. Provide targeted support to individuals and businesses impacted directly;
- c. Finding the balance between mitigations against Covid, and the benefit of the mitigations in preserving health and care capacity and avoiding serious illness and death, and the impact of the mitigations on the economy, social, mental and emotional wellbeing and outcomes from non-Covid related health conditions.

2. Support people in making informed choices

- d. Continue to promote advice and guidance on the potential risks of

confined spaces with poor ventilation, crowded spaces and close contact, together with the importance of hands, face, space and fresh air;

- e. Publish regular information and data related to Covid-19 to help inform personal choice;
- f. Support self-testing and personal choice through the use of Lateral Flow Tests.

3. Mitigate against uncontrolled transmission

- g. Continue to drive the vaccination programme, including extension to younger age groups and a phase 3 booster dose as recommended by JCVI;
- h. Continue border controls focused on the threat, particularly of new variants of concern;
- i. Continue with isolation and testing regimes for positive cases and mass surveillance testing where appropriate.

In taking this approach, Government aims to ensure that Island life is able to function as normally as possible, balancing the impact from Covid against the impact from other risks, and the impact of any national response.

Government will continue to be prepared to intervene with stronger measures should the situation deteriorate however, and regular monitoring across a wide range of factors will continue, with Government being ready to consider recommendations and advice from Gold command through the Chief Secretary, Public Health and where applicable the Emergency Advisory Group on the most appropriate course of action.

The Council of Ministers will make decisions in the context of a wide range of factors, in particular the scale of community transmission against capacity within the wider health and care system, and the social and economic impact, and Government will communicate from time to time how this context is developing, with early signposting

for any significant deterioration of position.

Strategic Aim 1 – Minimise the harm and disruption caused by Covid

- Across the three separate lockdowns the Island has endured there have been a significant direct costs and substantial indirect costs. The total financial cost so far is estimated at over £230m. Such ongoing costs are simply unsustainable in the medium / long term.
- There has also been, and continues to be ongoing harm caused through reduced health and care provision for non-Covid conditions as resources have necessarily been directed to the virus response. Some of the long term consequences of the response may only become apparent in years to come.
- This first strategic aim seeks to recognise that if left unchecked, the virus would likely cause significant direct harm to society through illness, serious illness, hospitalisation and ultimately death. There are also significant ongoing long term impacts resulting from the indirect harm from Covid such as through long Covid which have yet to be fully evaluated.
- Against this backdrop however, there are also significant and hidden impacts and ultimately costs that come from implementing restrictions, suppressing economic and social activity and importantly not being able to identify and treat a wide range of underlying health conditions in a timely manner due to the pandemic.
- It may also be that some of the society and economic adjustments together with those deployed in the delivery of care using new technology do remain in place for the foreseeable future, with remote and flexible working as well as improved telemedicine being prime examples of this legacy.
- The long term consequences of the pandemic on our Island will undoubtedly be felt by all areas of our commu-

nity, whether that be as a result of rise in domestic abuse, the impact on mental as well as physical health, and the strain placed on relationships and felt by individuals that for some may have led to self-harm and suicide.

- **Government will continue to seek to find the right balance in ensuring that the harm and disruption caused by Covid is minimised, but equally that the response does not itself cause a disproportionate and increased level of harm to our community.**

Strategic Aim 2 – Support people in making informed choices

- Government will continue to support individuals in considering personal responsibility for the risks they are comfortable in taking, and the steps that can help mitigate against a backdrop of circulating virus.
- To facilitate this, individuals will be given appropriate information on the risks posed, on the current trends and threats and on the choices available to help mitigate against these risks as far as they can.
- Government's advice and guidance surrounding the risks of crowded spaces, confined spaces with poor ventilation, and close contact will need to continue and business and public services will continue to develop responses that take these risks into account, such as improved hygiene, ventilation and CO2 monitors.
- Strong messaging on the personal mitigations that support reduced transmission – hands, face, space and fresh air will also be crucially important and these mitigations work best when everyone follows the same high standards.
- Individuals who may be at a higher level of risk from serious illness may need additional advice and guidance around the risks posed, and may need to consider additional mitigations such as further shielding from time to time.

Strategic Aim 3 – Mitigate against uncontrolled transmission

- In addition to the personal mitigations, Government's role will continue to be important to help suppress uncontrolled transmission and continue to mitigate this where possible so as to avoid significant outbreaks and waves. The most important protection is the vaccination programme, the major impact of which is to significantly reduce the levels of symptomatic and serious illness from Covid.
- A range of Government sponsored measures already in place will need to continue, focused on identifying and suppressing the risks of transmission across the population:

Borders

- Ensuring that the Island's borders do not risk importing new virus at volumes that are greater than what is already circulating in the local community will continue. In addition, additional measures currently in place, such as testing and isolation are likely to continue. The higher the level of community transmission, the greater the risk of infection leading to serious illness in those who have either not been fully vaccinated (for whatever reason) and those who have not had a full response to vaccine because, for example, of underlying health conditions.
- The aim remains to see unrestricted travel between the Island and the British Isles restored, and many adjustments have already been made to facilitate more movement. From 16th September, this will have been achieved for Isle of Man residents - for whom there will be no restrictions on travelling to and from the British Isles, with no testing or isolation requirements, regardless of vaccination status. They will, however, continue to be strongly advised to undertake home testing using lateral flow devices
- The restrictions that prevent a relatively

small percentage of British Isles adult residents who are not fully vaccinated from visiting will remain in place for now, and remain under review.

- *The current approach will require some level of border controls, such as health declarations and landing forms, together with testing from areas that pose higher risks, which are expected to continue for the foreseeable future as long as the global pandemic continues, and additional restrictions and controls may need to be re-implemented should a new variant of concern develop which poses further risks of vaccine escape.*

Testing

- Ensuring that there are sufficient resources in place to deliver a prompt and accessible service to the public, helping to rapidly and accurately identify the virus will continue. The Island's centralised laboratory testing will therefore continue.
- There will also continue to be a regular supply of lateral flow devices to the general public in the immediate term to help them better make informed decisions around the risks they carry to themselves and to others, and surveillance testing will also be expanded to include waste water testing to help identify population levels of infection.
- The rapid identification of variants as and when they develop will continue through the current PCR approach and genomic sequencing (through the UK Public Health Laboratory Service) will continue to play a part of the overall approach when new variants are of heightened concern.
- The current approach means that testing will be available to the population as a whole using home testing Lateral Flow Devices, supported by laboratory PCR confirmation testing for all concerned individuals, and ongoing surveillance testing across a range of scenarios.

Tracing & Isolation

- Ensuring those confirmed as positive cases isolate through the main period when they are at most risk of infecting others will remain in place, as well as ensuring those who have been identified as close contacts are aware and extra vigilant for symptoms and encouraged to continue self-testing using lateral flow devices.
- The contact tracing service will continue to work with confirmed positive cases to help them inform those most likely to have come into close contact so they can be aware and take necessary precautions. Where possible this process will be supplemented by systems and guidance provided to positive cases for consistency and transparency.
- Contact tracing and isolation will remain available and scalable should the situation develop with new variants of concern that require a more rigorous approach to suppressing transmission and potentially containing community spread where possible.
- At times of high level of community transmission however, it is recognised that formal contact tracing may not be possible.
- *The current approach is to isolate those suspected and confirmed as positive so as to prevent ongoing transmission, whilst providing advice, guidance and mitigations to those who may have been at risk from positive contacts rather than formally require them to isolate as a precaution.*

Economic Support

- Ensuring that financial support is readily available for those individuals who need to isolate as a result of contracting the virus will continue as will ensuring that businesses have access to temporary support when they are directly impacted as a result of either ongoing Government restrictions, or during periods of large

community transmission that threaten the business viability through staff or customer absences.

- The Economic Recovery Group, chaired by the Treasury Minister working together with the Department for Enterprise and the Cabinet Office, will continue to monitor the Island's economic position, underlying business and sector pressures and be ready to respond accordingly.
- *The current approach is to provide direct support to those who are directly affected, through isolation or restrictions in place, whilst continuing to monitor and plan for long term sustainable economic recovery.*

Vaccination

- Vaccination is the strongest defence available against the impact of Covid. Ensuring as many eligible people as possible complete the full course of vaccination will continue together with the delivery of a third priority phase to boost the protection over the winter period.
- Encouraging the uptake of vaccine by all those in eligible groups who do not have a contra-indication will continue.
- *The programme will continue to follow JCVI guidance, including the extension of the programme to younger age groups and the introduction of booster doses as and when these are recommended by JCVI.*

Health & Care

- Ensuring that the health and care system has adequate resources available to respond and treat those who need it will remain a priority, whilst at the same time continuing as far as possible with all other services in support of the broader health and care pressures.
- This may also mean that from time to time those in health and care settings may need additional protection, particularly during times of high community

transmission, although clearly, these additional measures cannot be sustained on an ongoing basis.

- Additional resources will continue to be made available to the health and care services to be able to respond to the virus, and to ensure mitigations are in place to prevent the additional risks posed in high risk environments.
- *The current approach will be to ensure as far as possible the health and care services are able to treat those with Covid alongside all other care pathways rather than having to restrict other services that could otherwise result in short, medium and long term impacts.*

Summary

Since the start of the pandemic through the Elimination strategy, modelling by Public Health England and the University of Cambridge, estimates that over 90 lives have been saved through vaccination and over 30,000 infections avoided on Island up to the end of July compared to what could have been the case had there been unmitigated spread of Covid during that time. Vaccination will not completely eliminate the virus. However, maintaining high levels of vaccine coverage along with continued observance of 'hands, face, and space and fresh air' is likely to lead to a position of 'endemic equilibrium' where further waves of Covid do occur but with manageable impact on health and care services, the economy and wider society.

There have sadly been those who have developed long term health conditions as a result of contracting the virus and, at the time of writing, tragically 48 people have so far lost their lives within 28 days of a positive diagnosis. Over the same period, since the start of the pandemic, there have been over 1,200 deaths on the Island through a wide range of other causes, some of whom may have unfortunately been impacted by the measures taken in response to the virus. As we learn to live in a world where the virus becomes endemic, a sustainable level of balance needs to be found between protecting against the virus, and maintaining a new normality as far as possible.

Going forward these risks still remain – of underlying complications, serious illness and death from this invisible threat and there are also the added risk that a new variant of concern with ability to evade vaccine may emerge. The vaccine programme however currently delivers good levels of protection to the majority of adults and in deploying at scale, reduces the impact of outbreaks and waves of sustained community transmission and therefore significantly increases the opportunity for the health and care system to be available to respond when called upon for all illnesses and care.

That is not to say that uncontrolled transmission can be allowed to occur. It cannot.

When the pandemic started, there were no clear solutions other than strong non-pharmaceutical measures and rigorous border controls to protect the Island's population. With the advent of vaccinations, and the completion of the first two phases of the vaccination programme a significant level of base protection has been developed, and is active ahead of the winter period when further pressures are inevitable.

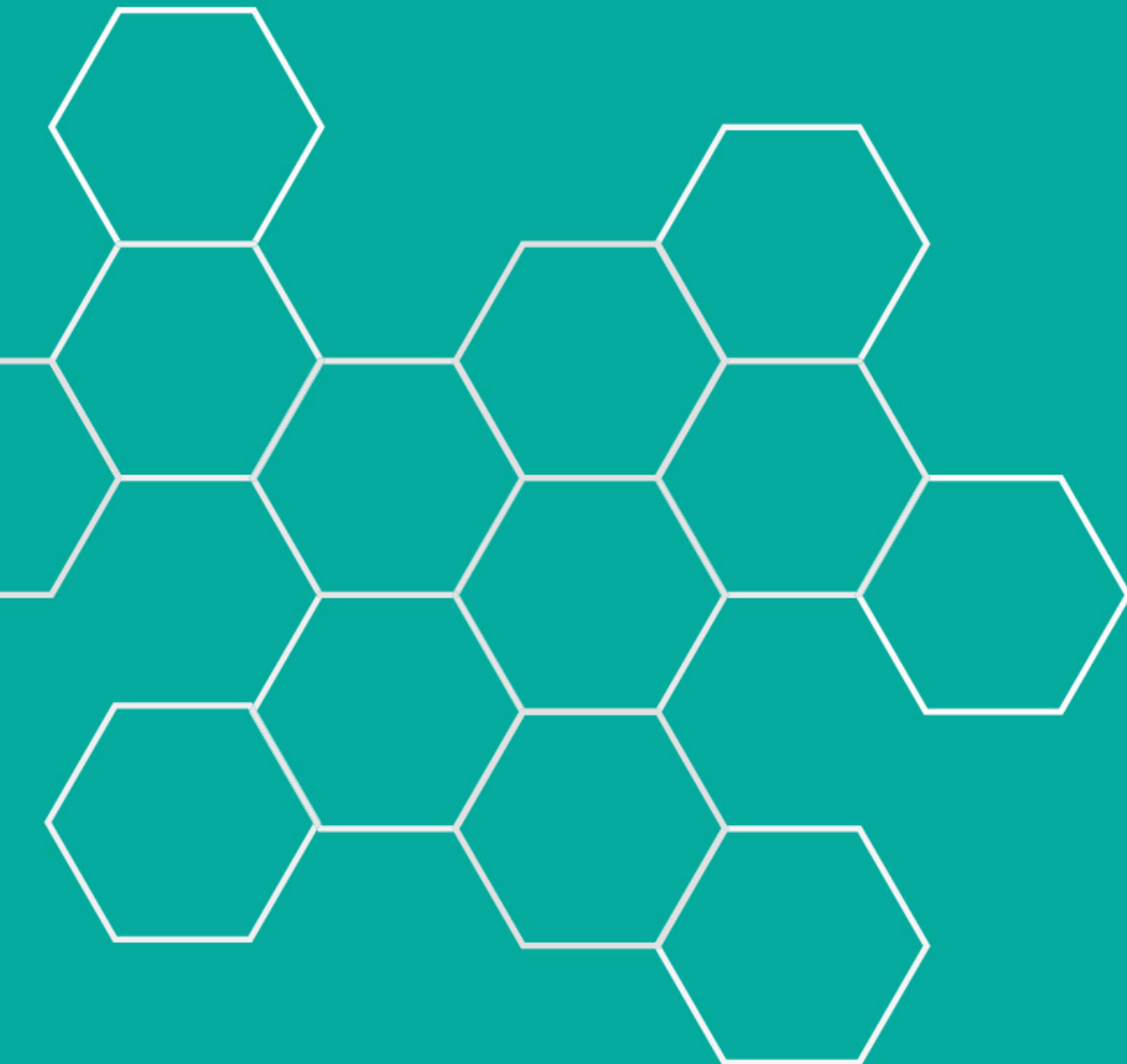
This has enabled Government to respond to recent cases differently, and this approach is expected to continue.

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