

Extract from the draft STAC minutes of 29 December 2020:

Return to school – January 2021. A3. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell ('the Cell'), with reference to Minute No. A3 of its meeting of 14th December 2020, recalled that it had previously provided advice that there was limited effectiveness on the spread of COVID-19 by closing the schools and, whilst there had been some transmission of the virus to children, this had largely been from outside the school settings. It had also advised that students should return to school in a physical environment in January 2021, mindful of the importance of young people receiving an education and the detrimental effect of missed school on children and their families.

The Cell welcomed Director General, Group Director of Education and Head of Office (Education), Children, Young People, Education and Skills Department. The Director General informed the Cell that when the schools had closed for the Christmas holidays, it had been intended that the teachers would return on 4th January 2021 and the pupils on 6th. However, the uncertainty around whether a new variant of COVID-19 (N501Y) was present in the Island and, if so, its likely impact across the various age groups had caused significant speculation and the Children, Young People, Education and Skills Department wished to avoid the situation, that had occurred at the end of the Christmas term, when many parents had kept their children home. Accordingly, the views of the Cell were sought on the extent to which students were likely to transmit the virus between themselves and into the adult population; whether there would be merit in introducing targeted screening, or testing, in the schools and whether a distinction should be drawn in the isolation regimes between pre-school, primary and secondary school children in relation to the contact tracing. If it was thought sensible to delay the physical return to school for pupils, a blended model could be adopted that enabled some to attend in person and others to learn on-line.

Consultant in Communicable Disease Control, explained that children had, to-date, been less severely affected by COVID-19, because the virus attached to the angiotensin-converting enzyme -2 ('ACE2') receptors, of which they had fewer than adults. However, whilst the N501Y variant did not give rise to more significant symptoms, it was more adept at attaching to the ACE2 receptors in both adults and children. As people became older, so they had more of these receptors, so young people in years 11 to 13 were more likely to be affected than younger children. Because the N501Y variant was better able to enter cells, more of the virus was produced and the transmissibility was increased by between 50 and 70 per cent. In children this increase was less marked, but they were more inclined to come into closer contact with one another than adults. Discussions were ongoing within NERVTAG (an expert committee of the United Kingdom Department of Health and Social Care, which provided scientific risk assessment and mitigation advice on the threat posed by new and emerging respiratory viruses and on options for their management) as to whether there was an increased susceptibility in children to be infected with N501Y and the impact that this could have on the wider community. However, NERVTAG's views had not yet been formalised. In the meantime, he suggested that there would be merit in increasing testing for teachers and pupils in years 11 to 13, using PCR and lateral flow tests. He favoured the schools re-opening for students on the 6th, but understood if, for practical reasons, it was preferable to delay to Monday, 11th January 2021 in order that this could be facilitated.

Interim Director, Public Health Policy, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Department, concurred and indicated that the N501Y variant posed additional risks. Accordingly, it was not a credible option to adhere to the current policy and a new strategy would be required, which might involve more frequent PCR testing of teachers and the introduction of regular PCR testing for students aged from 15 to 18 years, noting that there was no extant policy in relation to this age group. However, he informed the Cell that the

frequency of the PCR testing would be governed by operational capacity. Whilst there were no undue concerns about the health outcomes for young people who contracted the virus, every day of schooling that was lost would impact their subsequent life chances, so it was important that the schools were kept open for as long as possible. He suggested that by delaying the physical return to school for pupils to 11th January, this would afford NERVTAG longer in which to formalise their findings and for officers locally to review them.

Director, Testing and Tracing, Justice and Home Affairs Department, stated that Monday 11th January 2021 was just over 2 weeks after Boxing Day, which was the last date on which households had been 'permitted' to gather. As a consequence, anyone who had contracted the virus on that day would no longer be contagious. With regard to a screening programme for teachers and certain pupils, it would be possible to reshape capacity, to open the testing facility at the Harbour on a Sunday – at which 600 people could be tested each day - and to take a mobile testing unit to the schools. This could be undertaken in relatively short order but would be more deliverable and achievable with a few days' lead-in time.

It was queried whether any delay to the start of term should be for all settings, including pre-school, or just secondary schools. Independent Advisor - Epidemiology and Public Health, suggested that it should only be the secondary schools and that it should be allied to the proposed introduction of a comprehensive screening programme. He expressed the view that Islanders needed to be aware that COVID-19 would remain in the community, at a certain quantum, for the foreseeable future. Levels of transmission were being managed and the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine would improve the situation, but it was unlikely that the number of cases would reduce to zero, as had been the case briefly during the Summer. The Group Director of Education indicated that he believed that any delay to the start of the term should apply to all educational settings. Whilst secondary school pupils were better at adhering to physical distancing requirements, this was not the case for younger children, which was why classroom 'bubbles' had been introduced. It was also necessary, at times, to physically hold infants in pre-school, in order to meet their health needs.

Interim Director of Public Health, agreed that teachers and pupils should be tested and undertook to re-circulate information that she had received from a school in the Midlands, which had introduced a range of robust mitigations, inter alia seating plans, face masks in classrooms, good ventilation and distancing. Director of Strategy and Innovation, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Department, suggested that any significant shift in advice would need to be allied to an intervention and linked to the N501Y variant, because of the disconnect with the views that had been expressed earlier in the year, when it had been recommended that the schools should remain open.

The Cell was mindful that its remit was to provide advice and that it would be for the Minister for Education, in consultation with the Minister for Health and Social Services, to determine, by way of Ministerial Decision, when the schools should be open, having received input from senior officers within the Children, Young People, Education and Skills Department. It indicated that its view was that there was a lack of clarity around the N501Y variant and that it was felt sensible to slightly delay a return to physical schooling to enable various mitigations to be introduced, together with a testing programme.

The representatives from the Children, Young People, Education and Skills Department thanked the Cell for the advice and asked the Chair to provide it in written format for the Minister for Education.