

Date: 28 March 2020

Open Letter from Deputy Gavin St Pier

I am writing to update you on the developments since the extraordinary decision to lock down the islands from 0001 on Thursday. I've said many times before that we won't get everything right. This week we stumbled on some of the detail, specifically around what that means for essential business and of what 'locking down' means. For that, I am sorry.

The objective has not changed: to minimise contacts between households as far as possible so that we can reduce the rate of transmission of the virus and number of COVID-19 cases, ensuring our health care system is not overwhelmed.

The core instruction has not changed: you must not leave your home except to exercise, to buy necessary food and supplies, for medical appointments or to work – where that work is essential.

When we announced the decision, we said that the details would not be perfect. It must be remembered that this has never been done before. We have no rulebook or precedents. There will be difficult judgements and nobody said it would be easy. We have, rightly, had to move incredibly fast to protect public health, and there simply has not been time in many cases to deliver fully fleshed out measures that covers every circumstance. The big policy decision to lock down was the right one, but clearly we recognise that the additional detail may have caused confusion and challenges in its implementation.

Since Wednesday we have taken time to thrash out that detail, give more clarity, make decisions on how the lock down should apply to certain businesses, which we did not have time to consider in those short hours before the lock down began. Yesterday we provided additional guidance which included those details. We have heard your concerns, we are looking at the problems you have highlighted to us, and we are revisiting the guidance that is based on Public Health advice to make it better, make sure it lines up with our core message to stay at home, and most of all make sure it is an effective part of our public health strategy.

Tomorrow we will be issuing detailed revisions to the guidance that went out yesterday evening. We will be ensuring many of the jobs that are clearly non-essential, are not permitted to continue as normal during this initial 2 week period. We have reviewed carefully the list of retailers who should be allowed to open, some of which will have to remain closed and others may need to operate with very strict limitations in place.

As we look at these issues, the starting point is to keep in mind what it is we are trying to achieve with these measures. The objective is to minimise unnecessary contact between individuals from different households. It was recognised that there will always be a need for people and vehicles to move around the island 24/7 to keep the Island running – whether that is medical staff, those stocking and working in the shops which sell essential supplies or those collecting our rubbish. All of that does require a significant number of people to leave their homes for work each day, but self-evidently it is far, far fewer than were doing so before we locked down. In addition, permitting people to get out and exercise in fresh air also means that some will drive to their start point. The next test is one of ‘essentiality’ – is my reason for leaving the house essential, not just for me, or my business, but for the island?

We know this is going to impact on businesses. That is why we announced further support measures on Tuesday, and will continue to assess where further measures are needed right across the economy.

I should add, in respect of the payroll co-sharing and grants schemes for businesses and the self-employed, we expect to be in a position to begin making payments in the second half of this coming week. We recognise this is urgent.

In short, all our decisions must continue to be founded on the risk to the public and the advice from our public health experts, and to meeting our objective of minimising contacts between households as far as possible, so that we can reduce the rate of transmission of the virus and number of COVID-19 cases, ensuring our health care system is not overwhelmed.

You have given me and the States incredible support in these past weeks, for which we are grateful at this challenging time for the whole community. These decisions are far from easy, and in some cases they are anything but straightforward. For tonight I’m going to ask you to stick with us while we revise, clarify and improve our latest guidance.

Please let me be clear we haven’t and won’t make decisions based on public opinion, but public confidence is a subtly different issue. Right now, understandably, we all want reassurance that everything has been done to protect us and our families. Our strategy is more effective when you can be sure that’s exactly what we are doing.

We will have no hesitation in changing the rules and doing so very quickly if they are abused, circumstances change or the public health advice changes. The priority was, is and will remain the protection of you and your families, particularly for the benefit of the most vulnerable in our community.

As well as guarding against the health risks posed by the coronavirus, we must also guard against fear and stigma. We must not overcome with fear to the point we turn our homes into prisons. We are not at that stage and I hope that we never get there.

Stigma is also a danger. We all need to take personal responsibility for mitigating the spread, and there are a reckless handful who still seem determined not to take this seriously. But they are a very small minority. The vast majority of us are trying to find a way of avoiding contact with others, while caring for our families. It is difficult, and judgment

from others – particularly in the form of social media mobs – is more than just unhelpful, it is toxic.

In good news, all the test equipment needed is now in the pathology laboratory. It is being trialled and the team are being trained in its use and preparing to begin local testing in earnest. We will, of course, advise as soon as this is the case.

I was lucky enough yesterday to have the opportunity with Deputy Soulsby to see for ourselves the preparations which have been undertaken at the hospital to prepare for an increase of in-patient Covid-19 cases. We were hugely impressed. In 2 weeks, a whole additional intensive care unit has been created from scratch in what was the day patient unit. This week, 100 staff across the health professions have been trained to assist, if required. My heart was bursting with pride as a huge number of people have pulled together so quietly but quickly to deliver what was needed. This means that, once again, we are ahead of much larger jurisdictions in our preparations at the same stage of the disease. All my fingers are crossed that we will look back in a few months and say it was all for nothing – that would be the best ‘waste of money’ ever undertaken by the States of Guernsey. But, if not, we are as ready as we can be.

The response to the economic crisis has also continued apace this week and I hope that we will within days be able to publicise details of the loan guarantee scheme developed with the clearing banks.

I will continue to keep you updated periodically by these open letters, regular press conferences and through social media. (Follow me on Twitter @gavinstpier)

Be patient, tolerant, flexible and kind - and stay well,

Gavin St Pier

Chair, Civil Contingencies Authority

28th March 2020