

## Media Release

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### **We don't want COVID to control our lives, so let's take control of COVID - Open Letter to the Bailiwick from the Civil Contingencies Authority**

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Dear Islanders,

It's a long time since we've written to you in this form to talk in detail about the ever-changing challenge that is COVID-19. An open letter like this can seem formal when we're so used to posts on social media or video briefings livestreamed to our phones. But sometimes there are difficult issues where there is merit in sitting down and setting out our challenges in detail, the old-fashioned way.

And today we have a very real challenge and dilemma with the ongoing management of the COVID-19 emergency response across the Bailiwick. Our cases are rising faster than they have since the second wave. In fact, we have reached a stage where we have more known active cases than we've had at any single point in the whole pandemic. Our most recent Civil Contingencies Authority (CCA) meeting was held on Tuesday. It saw us discuss with real seriousness the option of whether to make the use of face coverings mandatory, to try and bring case numbers down.

We know and accept that rising cases is not the same cause for concern it once was, as we have a highly vaccinated community and the roll out of our booster programme is on track. The numbers in hospital with COVID-19 remain low. So why on earth would we impose something like mandatory mask-wearing on our community now? Well, the simple answer is we are concerned. We're concerned that we're standing at a threshold now where if we don't act, we will see the number of cases rise higher and higher until there's no way to rein them back in. Our capacity to track and trace active cases per day is at its maximum threshold. There is concern that cases could climb to such high numbers, that the small percentage who would still become very ill and need hospital care is still a high number. Because a small percentage of a lot, can still be a lot. A lot of real people, with real lives and real friends and family.

While we have plans in place to increase hospital capacity for COVID patients at very short notice, there is of course still a limit to the overall capacity and we know that general winter

pressures will mean our hospital is extremely busy even before COVID cases are factored – a trend being seen in many parts of the UK. We're worried it will impact on other patients needing care for other, equally life-threatening reasons. We're also worried that we could have so many active cases, isolating at the same time, that the delivery of key services will be compromised. And we're worried we'll look back at this point right now as the point when we should have acted but didn't.

But, then come the counter arguments: imposing a mandatory rule for face coverings, or anything else for that matter, was not part of our plan for this stage of the pandemic. With our main vaccine programme rolled out, we believed that we could manage COVID and keep it at low enough levels without needing to impose new rules. We believed we could ask our community to take proportionate measures and act responsibly to avoid spreading the virus, given how much we have all learned about how to reduce transmissions in these past two years. And so far we've been right about that, the Bailiwick has been successful and one of the only jurisdictions that has not had a third lockdown to date which has enabled our economy to bounce back quicker than anticipated. We've all done our bit and we've done it well, keeping cases low.

Last month, with cases on the rise, we made some very strong recommendations. Some of these, such as Lateral Flow Device (LFD) testing have been embraced by Islanders and that is helping us to detect cases early, but with others, the uptake has not been so good. Let's face it, the use of face coverings is poor. Even in the sorts of places where they are recommended - crowded places, places with poor ventilation, places where it's hard to socially distance – very few people are using them. We know face coverings are effective in reducing transmissions, even if you wear a covering for only some of the time, that's fewer instances where you risk spreading COVID-19. Even if you take it off to eat and drink, it is worth wearing the rest of the time as it's less time where you might transmit the virus to others. And the funny thing is, most Islanders seem to say they support it as a good, sensible measure for us each to adopt. So why don't we do it in practice? We have to ask ourselves what the barrier is that prevents us from putting the mask that we have in our pocket, over our nose and mouth, when we can walk into that small shop packed with people. Perhaps it is partly down to our own unique experience throughout this pandemic. For other jurisdictions face coverings have been such a constant feature that using them regularly now is a normal, unremarkable part of life. In the Bailiwick we've not had that experience, which makes introducing the regular use of face coverings into our lives now that much harder.

One step we are taking from today is to emphasise to all public sector employees in all States buildings, and customers visiting or attending meetings in a public building, that they should observe the guidance and use face coverings at all times and in all settings where they are strongly recommended. If we want to encourage the community to adopt these measures, the States needs to lead by example.

Some Islanders have actually asked us to go that step further and make the use of face coverings mandatory, that way everyone knows what they're meant to do. But we don't believe it's the job of government to legislate how everyone lives their day to day lives – at

least, not unless we absolutely have to in order to protect the health and wellbeing and freedoms of others. The question is are we now at that point? On Tuesday 16 November when the CCA holds its next meeting, we will discuss that again. And as much as we don't like it, we have to keep the possibility of making face coverings mandatory on the table.

To paraphrase one of the Channel Islands' most highly-respected journalists Gary Burgess who wrote on this topic this week, living with COVID doesn't mean acting like it isn't here. None of us wants COVID to control our lives, so let's not let it. Let's take control of COVID. Let's wear our masks. Let's reduce the spread. Let's remember how we've supported each other and what that sense of togetherness used to mean to us all. Because it is for each other that we wear face coverings and get tested and stay at home when we have symptoms.

Yours truly,

Deputy Peter Ferbrache, on behalf of the Civil Contingencies Authority

**Ends**