

Public Health Wales advice to the Chief Medical Officer for Wales: Possible next steps in COVID-19 response

24 October 2020

1 Introduction

Following receipt of an email request on the 22 October and a subsequent meeting between Welsh Government (WG) and Public Health Wales (PHW) officials on the 23 October, PHW is submitting this advisory note to inform the next steps to be taken to respond to the pandemic in Wales, following the 'Firebreak' intervention (23 October – 9 November 2020).

Our advice builds on the advice note submitted to the Chief Medical Officer on the 12 October - 'Possible Next Steps to inform Covid-19 Response'. It recognises that any decisions will need to balance different considerations: reducing transmission, protecting essential health and social care services and minimising the wider harm effects including those arising from impacts on the economy and, notably, the wider impact on population health outcomes in the medium/long term.

PHW were requested to comment in support of a number of work stream activities being undertaken by WG officials including:

- Policy and Regulatory environment (e.g. Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions)
- Cross cutting considerations (e.g. Communications, Behavioural response)
- Enablers (e.g. Test Trace Protect).

However, our response also outlines the need to move to a wider public health approach in the next stage response.

In responding to the specific work stream requests, PHW has referred to key existing WG policy publications these are the:

- *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*
- *Leading Wales Out of the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Framework for Recovery (April 2020)*
- *Coronavirus Control Plan for Wales (August 2020).*

The broader recovery from the many different ways that the current emergency has impacted on Wales represents the biggest challenge we face. PHW, as the national Public Health Institute in Wales, is therefore highlighting the importance at this next stage in the response, of the need to have a clear focus on both the immediate control of the harms associated

with the transmission of Covid-19 and also the wider population health harms which are associated with the immediate interventions.

2 Taking a Public Health Approach - Living with the Virus

We are now moving into a phase in our response to Covid-19, of needing to enable and support our population in Wales to live safely with the virus - protecting themselves, their family members, friends and co-workers, until a new safe, effective vaccine becomes available. PHW is therefore recommending a broader public health approach to responding to the challenges of Covid-19.

Our advice, based on the knowledge and experience that we have all gained from our collective response to date, is that now is the time to enter into a new 'contract' and relationship with the public, which is consistent with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act .

This world renowned legislation makes it our duty to consider the longer-term, to work with people and communities to find appropriate solutions and consider all aspects of society in order to create a more equal and resilient Wales. Consequently, we are seeking sustainable solutions to the pandemic, which facilitate population level behavioural change and help safeguard society but are consistent with the five Ways of Working outlined in the act.

Our conclusion is that the next framework for response needs to balance a regulatory approach with an approach that seeks to enable our population to adopt and maintain the right behaviours with access to simple messaging and knowledge to help them make informed, 'risk-based' decisions.

This will need to be informed by key measurements, shared openly with the public, and the acceptance and explicit messaging that, in certain circumstances, there may need to be further short, sharp (more restrictive) circuit/fire-break interventions to suppress and control the virus at a local or national level.

As such, our advice is to reduce any regulations to a minimum and replace such regulation with advice to the public on behaviours that will reduce transmission. This will allow the public to decide the importance of the behaviours they adopt versus the risk they represent.

However, we recognise that some regulation may still be required but suggest these are only used where:

- There are strong reasons to believe an advisory approach will not be successful and that a regulatory or criminalising approach stands significantly more chance of success.

- The balance of empirical, rather than just theoretical, evidence shows that such regulatory approaches are successful at controlling the virus.
- The harms arising from regulatory impacts on access to health care, mental health, unemployment and consequent ill health and mortality have been calculated and the population health benefits of the regulations have been shown to exceed the harms caused on a Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) basis.

Public Health Wales will be happy to provide further support to such an approach.

3 Specific Response to Restrictions

With reference to the above, Public Health Wales' advice focusses on the following key Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions. Each will need to be accompanied with more detailed, clear and easy to understand descriptions to support communication and understanding. Recent advice from SAGE and TAG has been considered in informing this advice.

Key Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions:

1. *Reinforce compliance with key messages: social distancing (2 metres), hand washing, self-isolation if symptomatic*
2. *Focus on advice to minimise household and social contacts (particularly indoors).*
3. *Work from home, wherever possible (enabled by employers)*
4. *End-to-end focus on attending settings (e.g. school, work, sport, leisure) – get there safely, be safe whilst there, be safe when returning home). Do not attend if symptomatic (self-isolate)*
5. *All overseas returning travellers to be subject to consistent self-isolation (10 days) requirement.*

We further recommend that when used, such restrictions should be clear to understand to support increased compliance. When required we recommend a Wales-wide approach, with targeted local action as necessary.

4 Enabling Response

With reference to the above, Public Health Wales advice focusses on the following key supporting activities.

1. Ensuring that appropriate levels of financial support are made available to individuals and businesses to support required response and behaviour to protect communities (including self-isolation).
2. Ensure an optimised end-to-end Test Trace Protect system, which can facilitate the protection of communities from individuals who are infectious with Covid -19.

3. Embed behavioural insights into all communications with the public, through the development of a comprehensive behavioural insight-driven communication programme, which is integrated into all communications ('leaders/ talking heads', social media, media etc). This to encompass a 'refreshed brand' – e.g. 'Living with Covid-19'. This should seek to build from existing programmes (e.g. animated programmes used in the Well-being of Future Generation Act), to assist individuals and communities to understand the virus and make personal risk based decisions, using the information provided.

5 Measuring compliance and informing future restrictions

We have learnt much from the experience of responding to the first phases of the pandemic. PHW recommends that there is now further consideration of the key measurement information and its use (e.g. incidence rates) to inform a balanced approach to informing decisions. In particular, we recommend the use of key measures, e.g. hospital admissions, ICU, mortality to inform future decisions on local and national restrictions in addition to incidence rates and these are published and 'packaged' as regular information for the public to understand at a local level.

We also recommend the review of the current 'thresholds' to include further segmentation/risk stratification and the composite measures above in consideration of informed public health action locally and nationally.

Public Health Wales 24/10/2020