

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

7 December 2020

1 Introduction

Following a receipt of a verbal request on 7 December, 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 notes submitted to the Chief Medical Officer on the 12 October, 24 October and 5 November 2020. 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 (for example, undiagnosed and untreated conditions, and other health harms including mental health) as well as any unintended impacts arising from further interventions.

2 Current Epidemiological Summary

The current weekly incidence in the community is around 300 per 100,000 (305.8, sample dates 28/11 to 4/12 inclusive). This compares to 149.5 per 100,000 in England (85.8- 178.1 by region, report dated 6/12/2020, using sample dates 25/11 to 1/12 inclusive) and 99.5 per 100,000 in Scotland.

The all-Wales doubling time estimate from Wednesday 2/12 was 20.8 days, which suggests that today's incidence of 300 will be 600 by 27/12.

Weekly hospital admission are at 447 per week (all Wales, w/e 29/11) and are rising.

It is likely that the Christmas Bubble arrangements that have been agreed at UK-level will lead to some increase in mixing and transmission. The impact of this will be more severe if the levels in the population are high when the Christmas period begins (23rd December).

3 Public Health Wales Advice

With regard to the current rate of infection of COVID-19 in Wales, we recommend that urgent additional action before Christmas is required.

The key advice is to restrict household mixing. Any contact between individuals of different households can drive spread and should be avoided.

Evidence from national 'additional restriction' interventions, combined with previous regional and local interventions, is that the largest falls are seen in those

areas that have had the highest incidence rates. Peaks in incidence occur at different times between regions and more local geographies.

There are two interventions, which have been shown to have an effect on the incidence of infection. These are:

- National “additional restrictions” similar to that used between October 23 and November 9 in Wales
- Mass testing, over a short period, if done at scale (e.g. 65% of population in Slovakia).

Public Wales also references that:

The effect of the national interventions (‘firebreak’) in Wales has been short lived.

Major celebrations, such as Christmas, presents an opportunity for increased social mixing. This is highly likely to precipitate nationwide increases in transmission.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/939166/S0866_Key_Evidence_and_Advice_on_Celebrations_and_Observances_during_COVID-19.pdf

Vaccination of those most at risk can reduce the impact of hospital admissions and deaths.

3.1 Non - Pharmaceutical Interventions:

The ‘additional restrictions’ used previously have a number of component elements and we have not yet been able to model how each of these impact in isolation.

As per our previous advice, we would therefore recommend the following Non - Pharmaceutical Interventions, aimed at reducing household contact:

1. *Reinforce compliance with key messages: social distancing (2 metres), hand washing, early testing, self-isolation if symptomatic and/or in receipt of a positive COVID-19 test result.*
2. *A suite of national ‘additional restrictions’ similar to those used between October 23 and November 9 in Wales should be introduced.*

In relation to the additional restrictions, we propose that the following should be included.

- *Focus on advice to minimise household and social contacts (indoors and out of doors). Pre-Christmas doubling down on minimising contacts - stick to your own household from now until the 23rd December. Remove the allowance for 4 different households (rule of 4) to meet up in coffee shops etc.*
- Working from home except for essential workers.
- Schools to move to online learning at the earliest opportunity to reduce the wider risks associated with travel and mixing.

- Individuals in the clinically extremely vulnerable group (previously described as the group needing to shield) should, in addition to following the rules applicable to all others, take extra precautions as outlined in the CMO Wales guidance: <https://gov.wales/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-people-defined-on-medical-grounds-as-extremely-vulnerable-from-coronavirus-covid-19-html>
- The promotion of mass gatherings through e.g. Christmas attractions/markets to be stopped or, if the decision is to continue these, they should be subject to rigorous enforcement actions.

3.2 Enabling Response

With reference to the above, Public Health Wales advice also 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. Ensuring that an optimised end-to-end Test Trace Protect system is in place, which can facilitate the protection of communities from individuals who are infectious with COVID-19.
3. Strengthening the current communication programmes and behaviour change messages to ensure that simple clear messaging in relation to avoiding household contact are regularly and consistently communicated to the population.

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