

Fire-break considerations: Cabinet, 18 October

Why a fire-break / circuit break?

A “fire-break” is a swift and short-term period of simple, strict restrictions across the whole of Wales that would significantly reduce the prevalence of the virus in Wales.

The TAC paper at Annex A provides evidence to support the proposal to put in place a firebreak. This updates the TAC paper prepared prior to the weekend setting out the current situation in Wales and the strong recommendation for a fire-break that is as strict as possible. Wales is now in material breach of several of the circuit breakers (indicators once breached that would require national restrictions / action) agreed in the summer. There is high confidence that the others will be breached within the next 2-3 weeks, resulting in significant harm unless action is taken. The Welsh Government aim of protecting both lives and livelihoods requires a balancing of harms, and action is now required to maintain the balance.

TAC conclusions make clear that: *“Without intervention, continued increase of cases of Covid-19 in Wales, in hospitals and in ICU will be too high for the NHS to sustain. In order to balance the four harms effectively, TAC recommends urgent consideration and execution of a national fire break to reduce the number of cases to a sustainable level and then a set of sustainable, national interventions to keep Rt around 1 while maximising social, economic and health benefits.”*

TAC recommends a 2-3 week hard firebreak to bring R below 1 in order to lessen the force and slow the growth of the epidemic in Wales. Alternative approaches would be to continue to tighten either national or local restrictions, but the desired outcome is far less likely and it potentially creates greater uncertainty and fatigue.

What is the cost?

Separate advice has been prepared on the financial support for businesses affected by the shutdown of large parts of the economy, both through closure and where a business may be materially impacted (even if not required to close).

We are already in the deepest recession in history and the socio-economic impact of that will be exacerbated by a significant economic shutdown. While this may be mitigated by the fact it is short-term, providing certainty, and is intended to avoid an emergency lockdown that may not have an end date, the costs are still high. Estimates of the loss of output from the businesses we close are of around £100m a week, but the impact on the wider economy will be much greater than this. The total value of GVA in Wales was £65bn in 2018. For illustrative purposes, if the economy shut down completely for two weeks (including three weekends) this may equate to around £3bn in lost GVA.¹ A complete shutdown of all sectors of the economy wouldn't be possible if the essential services are to operate and key workers remain in work. Some analysts have suggested a firebreak could reduce GDP by as much

¹ Calculated as $(16/365) \times £65\text{bn}$.

as another 5%. Hopefully, we would recover some of that but some of the loss will likely be permanent.

The enhanced JSS is less generous than the JRS that was in place in April/May so individuals in sectors that are closing will suffer a bigger negative impact on their incomes (albeit for a shorter period) than previously.

There are longer-term consequences of recessions that are well known, in particular significant negative impacts for the employment prospects for young people and the lower paid. A smaller economy and less opportunities for employment will disproportionately affect the already disadvantaged. There are clear negative equality impacts for a range of protected characteristics of these measures. However, there would also be clear, negative equality impacts from allowing the virus to continue to grow on its current trajectory. There would also be problems for businesses associated with uncertainty about trading conditions. A short sharp firebreak will have significant short-term economic consequences, but in the longer-term it could be more beneficial than prolonged periods of uncertainty or the additional costs associated with an emergency and open-ended 'lockdown' as experienced in March.

There is also already evidence of pandemic fatigue, with people across the world becoming fed up with ongoing restrictions and intrusions into private lives. There are mental health and wellbeing impacts from forcing people to stay apart and not to see people. These impacts are more severe who live alone or whose primary social contact arises through their work place or day to day interaction in shops or with public services. These would be exacerbated by a firebreak situation, particularly if it creates uncertainty about how long new restrictions will last. Restricting social contact and limiting access to social networks also restrict support mechanisms or opportunities for safeguarding. Initial Equality Impact Assessment and children's rights impact assessment work is included in Annexes F and G, which will continue to be updated.

Legal advice and an UNCHR analysis are attached at Annexes H and I.

What will it achieve?

The intention is to bring R_t to below 1. In order for the firebreak to reduce the national R (latest between 1.1 – 1.5) to below 0.9 a national approach is required to reduce R in all areas of Wales concurrently. The aim is to significantly reduce the prevalence of the virus in Wales, ease the pressure on the NHS and buy time to help adjust public behaviour. Capacity constraints should also be addressed and tracing approaches or other interventions that require lead-in times implemented.

A key aim of a planned fire-break will be to try and maintain as much NHS capacity as possible. Non-COVID activity has been building up over the summer and there remain significant backlogs. There are already some hospitals that have suspended some elective procedures or limited other activity. A firebreak could help avoid the widespread suspension of non-COVID activity to deal with rising cases.

There are a series of actions that will need to take place during the firebreak itself to prepare for the period immediately afterwards. A concerted communications campaign focussed primarily on behaviours (rather than attempting to explain ever changing and ever complex rules) will be put in place. A new national set of rules should simplify things where possible to aid adherence with good practice. There are also opportunities to improve capacity for TTP and local responses to outbreaks. Options for actions during the firebreak period are set out in Annex E.

What won't it do?

It won't solve the problem that current behaviours if maintained will simply lead once again to exponential growth. It may delay or push back the peak, but wider changes are required to prevent further fire-breaks or even emergency lockdowns being required to prevent the NHS being overwhelmed. Current behaviours have led to unsustainable growth, so reverting to them is not an option. There is some evidence that the confusing nature of the rules may lead to people interpreting them in their own way, particularly when they are not seen as applicable or rational.

It won't be instant. Two weeks (three weekends) is enough time to break chains of transmission, but not enough time for indicators to illustrate a substantial change in the position. Cases, hospitalisations and other indicators may increase during the course of the firebreak. Peaks were reached and began to decline following the March lockdown after 2-6 weeks depending on the indicators.

What might it look like?

Proposals for the firebreak are set out in Annex B, based on the following principles:

- Following TAC advice to adopt as strict a set of rules that align with the position in May in Wales as far as possible.
- To avoid creating exemptions that could undermine the approach.
- To keep rules as simple as possible to aid adherence and understanding and avoid apparent anomalies as far as possible.
- To prioritise the welfare and wellbeing of children in those areas where there are limited differences to the previous lockdown.
- To consider equality and children's rights impacts and mitigate negative effects wherever possible.

The TAC paper at Annex A highlights that if schools were to remain open to all or most learners, while short- and long-term harm would be reduced, most other workplaces would need to be closed and social visiting restricted in order to reduce overall contacts and break the chains of transmission. Doing it over half term would reduce financial and social harms. At least two weeks would be needed.

Annex C describes the areas in which there remain additional choices to make. The clear steer from TAC, the CMO and the Chief Scientific Advisor for Health is that the

more stringent the conditions the more effective the firebreak. This is particularly important when opting for a shorter length of firebreak. There are concerns in particular that the choices to keep all education settings open for face-to-face teaching (as one of the areas overall that contributes most to R) risks undermining the efforts of the firebreak; albeit modelling is inherently uncertain. Given the strictness of the options selected under Annex B, there are only really two levers to pull if the intent is to be as certain as possible that the firebreak will have the desired effect:

1. Extend the length of the firebreak to three weeks (three or four weekends).
2. Close some education settings or move to online only provision for those settings.

On the second option there are alternatives for secondary school set out in Annex C. The other area modelled by SAGE as having a high impact is Universities. There is a particular dilemma here in that while closing Universities or moving to online provision will have a significant impact, this would require all students to stay where they are. The actions to close or restrict face-to-face learning, however, would likely lead to mass migration and significant secondary infections. That is why Universities have been recommended to continue blended learning to keep students in situ.

What comes next?

The TAC paper at Annex A highlights that coming out of the firebreak requires a new, simpler, national approach. The most important element is the behaviour of every citizen in Wales, despite the focus we often place on the regulatory regime. TAC highlight evidence that simpler messaging and regulations are expected to be easier to understand and comply with. Some existing restrictions may be removed if they are shown to be less effective or more harmful than originally expected, such as the Local Authority travel boundary restrictions. However, there would need to be sustainable changes in behaviour in many areas of life in order for Rt to remain as near to 1 as possible.

Annex D sets out some of the key issues for the post-firebreak regime in Wales. Significant additional work is required to work through these issues, so it is suggested that specific details do not form part of any initial announcement.

Annexes

ANNEX A: TAC paper
ANNEX B: Proposals for shape of firebreak
ANNEX C: Issues to resolve on firebreak
ANNEX D: Options for post firebreak national regime – key issues
ANNEX E: Options for utilisation of firebreak period
ANNEX F: Children's rights and Firebreak options
ANNEX G: Equality impact work (to be updated)
ANNEX H: Legal Advice
ANNEX I: ECHR Analysis