

# STATES OF JERSEY



## **ADJUSTMENT OF GREEN TRAVEL AND REGIONAL CATEGORISATION AHEAD OF REINTRODUCTION OF SAFER TRAVEL POLICY (P.34/2021): COMMENTS**

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**Presented to the States on 29th April 2021  
by the Minister for Health and Social Services**

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**STATES GREFFE**

## COMMENTS

### **Introduction**

Ministers share the overall objectives of the Panel in seeking to achieve an appropriate level of caution, but must strongly advise against the adoption of this proposition, which would lead to confusion and distress for Islanders, damage to the reputation of the government, and unnecessary constraints on my ability to respond to urgent pandemic developments. Moreover, at this stage of the pandemic, any public health benefit would be marginal.

### **The impact of short notice changes to travel policy**

In a briefing to Scrutiny and later to States Members on the 19th March 2021, and in a press notice of the same day, Ministers outlined the travel elements of the Reconnection Roadmap, namely the proposed reintroduction on 26th April of regional classification for the Common Travel Area (excepting the Republic of Ireland) and no earlier than the 17th May for other countries. These announcements followed policy analysis from officers and advice from STAC to ensure scientific, public health evidence was the primary factor in making travel reconnection decisions.

The timing of the announcement was such that Islanders and other prospective passengers have had adequate notice of our intentions, and have been able to plan accordingly. Adoption of the proposition would give travellers a notice period of no more than 3 to 4 days and contradict the more settled and clear position set out on 19 March, upon which personal travel plans will have been made, in many instances by Islanders to visit family members in the UK.

The impact of this sudden change would be significant. In the three weeks subsequent to 26th April, an average of 125 passengers each day have already booked their travel from Jersey to the UK. The majority of these travellers will be visiting Green regions of the UK and expecting to return with minimal isolation requirements. Based on regional classifications as of 20th April, a total of 152 UK regions would change from Green to Amber (62% of the total of Green Regions) by changing to the threshold to <25 per 100,000 over 14 days.

We conservatively estimate that at least half of Islanders with travel bookings over this three-week period would be adversely affected. Many hundreds of Islanders will be faced with a difficult choice of whether to cancel their bookings or undergo an isolation requirement for which they have made no preparations. The confusion, distress and anger in our community this action would create cannot be overstated.

### **The impact of minor changes to low thresholds**

The purpose of the thresholds between Green and Amber, and Amber and Red, are to reflect the relative risk of seeding of COVID-19. For seeding to occur, a passenger from a Green region would need to be infected, and further the virus would need to evade surveillance by the Day 0 test and transmit from the index case to other Islanders in such a way that infection spreads into an outbreak. The impact of the changes to regional classifications on the seeding risk posed to Jersey, where the threshold is already very low, is slight. For every 1,000 passengers arriving from a Green region, we estimate the marginal decrease in the number of COVID positive passengers, where <25 is adopted in place of <50, to be in the range of 0 to 0.6, or less than a single passenger. In addition, the majority of such passengers will nevertheless be identified by arrivals testing. Therefore the benefit of the proposed change is marginal.

In the context of expected lower passenger capacity over summer, the additional benefit of a lower green threshold is further limited. Carriers, which tend to plan at least two months in advance, are currently not signalling they will be increasing capacity to Jersey over the May and June period. Current arrivals to Jersey of c1,000 persons per week are therefore unlikely to increase significantly in the short term.

#### **The advice of STAC on thresholds in the current context**

Whilst the accompanying report to the proposition selectively references individual STAC member contributions from the minutes of STAC in September and October 2020, I can be clear, as set out in the States Members Briefing of 19th March 2021, that STAC has considered the Safer Travel policy in the current context and its consensus is that the current thresholds should remain at those immediately prior to the suspension of the Amber and Green RAG classifications in December 2020.

Of crucial importance in this judgement is that the context now is markedly different in comparison to Autumn 2020 by virtue of the COVID-19 vaccination programme. Over 47,000 first doses (55% of the adult population) and over 25,000 second doses have been administered to Islanders, ensuring good levels of protection for the older and more vulnerable Island populations. A similar pace of vaccination is being achieved in the UK, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, which accords Jersey a further benefit in terms of the reduced transmissibility of arrivals, whether returning Islanders or UK/Crown dependency residents. STAC has closely studied the academic modelling assumptions for reduced transmissibility of vaccinated populations and considers a range between 50% and 90% effectiveness in preventing infection (and therefore transmission) to be reasonable, depending on vaccine product, numbers of doses administered and other factors.

Whilst some caution is still required, increasing levels of protection are allowing carefully managed reconnection measures to be taken both on-Island and for our borders.

#### **No evidence of benefit in changing the scale of regional classification**

No scientific evidence has been provided within the accompanying report to the proposition for part (b) of the proposition which seeks to change the scale of classification to upper tier local authorities. As made clear to States Members on 19 March 2020, STAC considered the relative merits of different spatial scales and could find no strong evidence that different regional sizes offered superior levels of protection. As such, Ministers concluded that maintaining the Lower Tier Local Authority Area (LTLOA) classification offered Islanders consistency with the scheme that had been in operation for Jersey prior to December 2020.

#### **The importance of rapid response within the Safer Travel policy**

I have been grateful to the Assembly for recognition that in the context of an emergency, I should be able to respond quickly and decisively to threats. This authority to protect the health of Islanders was confirmed by an Assembly proposition (as amended) brought forward by Deputy Young (P89/2020) which contains, with respect to borders, the wording *'the Minister may introduce additional or alternative measures at any point if he considers that the risk of infection require it.'*

As States Members will appreciate, I have used this authority very sparingly, but part (c) of the proposition may prevent the necessary rapid action, for example in relation to Variants of Concern, and represents a potential hampering of any emergency response

that may be needed to keep the Island safe. We will always seek to brief Scrutiny and States Members ahead of any changes to the Safer Travel Policy, as we did on 19<sup>th</sup> March, and I hope that Members can be assured that this part of the proposition is unnecessary.

**No public health advice sought, or scientific evidence provided**

To the best of my knowledge, the Panel has not sought advice from the public health team, from STAC, or from relevant Ministers. It is plain from the content of my preceding commentary that such advice would have been of great value in developing an evidence-based and proportionate proposition. However, the lack of good evidence and science to support the policy, combined with the extremely short notice of the timing proposed, renders the proposition wholly unsupportable.