



PRESS RELEASE

No: 733/2020

Date: 20th October 2020

COVID-19 Press Conference: Chief Minister's Script

Good afternoon

Welcome all to No 6 Convent Place for another COVID-19 live press conference.

Before I start on my concerns this afternoon, I am going to give you the updated statistics on the progress of the COVID-19 infection through our Community.

Gibraltar has now carried out 58,608 tests for COVID-19.

That is almost twice our population.

Today, the number of active cases detected is 128.

126 of those are residents of Gibraltar.

The day-on-day increase in the numbers of cases is 31 new positives today.

9 persons have recovered from the infection overnight.

That makes the total number of cases detected in Gibraltar since the start of the pandemic, 608.

The numbers of tests in our Community yesterday was a remarkable 1,066.

The professionals in our labs are doing an incredible job for which I thank each and every one of them on behalf of all of us.

To set that in context you have to recall that in spring we were carrying out a few hundred tests a day.

We are now doing ten times that.

That is more than 350% more testing per 100,000 head of population than the United Kingdom last week.

It is more than 550% more testing per 100,000 head of population than Spain each day last week.

Again, I make these comparisons not to show competitive success.



That is not the nature of the battle against this virus.

We are not competing with anyone in respect of beating this virus.

But it is important that you should know that the infection numbers being reported to you in Gibraltar are more accurately reflective of the prevalence of the virus in this Community than is the level of accuracy in respect of any other place on the planet.

As a result, it is natural that we will find more prevalence of the virus in Gibraltar. We are doing more tests per head of population.

But having found that prevalence, we must deal with it.

And the most important things to note about the numbers I am reporting to you today are the following two key factors:

Firstly, the very high number of positives we are reporting today.

Let's not pretend otherwise.

Thirty new cases in one day is a very large number of new positives and it must give us all reason to pause for thought.

The virus is now, once again, all around us.

Community transmission is an undeniable reality.

Secondly, the other important factor to note in today's numbers is the inexorable growth of the numbers of people who are now in our hospital wards.

Those numbers are growing.

There are 6 persons in Victoria Ward.

The numbers will ebb and flow, but the number is going up.

Today, there is no one in the Intensive Care Unit, because the condition of the patient there has improved overnight and they have been passed over to the Victoria Ward.

We wish all patients all the very best.

The GHA is presently able to deal with the surge we are experiencing.

The numbers we are seeing today have not yet overwhelmed our ability to provide care in our health authority for those who need it, when they need it.

But these numbers can very quickly grow exponentially if the virus remains unchecked.

The best evidence of that is the growth just on one day – today – by over 30 newly infected persons.



Remember - that is the highest number of day-on-day growth we have ever recorded.

Yesterday, I therefore instructed the Minister for Health to gear up the re-opening of the Nightingale Ward at Europa at short notice.

In light of the growing numbers, at the Platinum Command level, I also instructed that the re-opening of the first part of the Nightingale Unit should be put now at 72 hours notice.

We will ensure that Nightingale will be available within 72 hours if the GHA needs it.

But our current availability of ICU beds is only 8 today.

ICU could be overwhelmed if numbers start to increase as we are predicting could be the case.

For that reason, I have further instructed that the GHA should be ready to deploy the additional ICU facility within 24 hours of the Minister for Health's decision to re-open it.

This facility will be housed once again, in the day surgery unit.

We will nonetheless seek to maintain day surgery as long as is possible.

Day surgery will therefore continue to be carried out but, if it becomes necessary to convert the day surgery suite into a second ICU if numbers increase, then day surgery will be cancelled almost overnight.

The very bad news today is that three of the new positive reported are ERS residents at the John Mackintosh Wing.

Five members of the staff in ERS facilities are also positive.

As a result, and with a very, very heavy heart therefore, as from today, all visits to ERS facilities are once again prohibited.

Elderly Residential Services will be in LOCKDOWN as from today.

I know how painful it will be to be prevented from seeing loved ones in ERS.

I can only apologise to you for having no choice but to impose this restriction.

It is administratively burdensome for the nurses and carers as many family members are the best carers of their relatives.

But we really have no choice.

In ERS, the reality is we are dealing with a matter of life and death for the residents in our care if we do not act, and we will not let them down by not acting.

I guarantee you that this restriction, and all restrictions I will refer to today, will not be in place for a moment longer than is strictly necessary.



I ask you to please ensure that if you do have a relative at ERS, you provide the support necessary to our great staff at ERS over this issue. They are so ably led by Antonio Marin and Susan Vallejo who have demonstrated their commitment and care for the residents of ERS.

For all of these reasons, I am putting the GHA now on 24 hours notice for the declaration of a MAJOR INCIDENT in the event that the Minister for Civil Contingencies and I consider that such a declaration should become necessary.

We will not declare a major incident until it is absolutely necessary, but we have to be ready for it as numbers grow if we do not manage to suppress the current curve.

It is in trying to achieve this suppression that the work of the Contact Tracing Bureau is hugely important in tracking down infected persons.

I want to thank those in our CTB on behalf of all of this Community for the absolutely brilliant job that they are doing.

The CTB data shows that the main spread is in the home and in the workplace.

And the measures we will announce today will be designed to address those vectors.

That is why we are acting.

We are acting today because we are fighting to keep schools open.

We are acting today to ensure that we do everything possible to avoid having to lock down Gibraltar again or to shut our economy again.

We are acting today because we do not want to have to move to further restrict freedoms and civil liberties.

And we will only act where we are advised that we have to.

Yesterday the COVID-19 Platinum Command met and received advice from the Director of Public Health and the Commissioner of Police.

Yesterday morning, I had consulted with Cabinet colleagues to consider the approach to the further restrictions we are going to put in place today.

None of these decisions have been taken lightly.

I have today also consulted with the Leader of the Opposition and with Ms Hassan Nahon to take on board their views also in relation to these measures.

These measures are necessary and proportionate in order to address the current resurgence of the virus in Gibraltar.

So please understand that everything I am about to announce, I announce as a matter of necessity because of the advice of our public health professionals.



None of this is done on a whim.

None of this is done without doing our best to think it through on the basis of a cost benefit analysis of each measure.

And none of this is of our choosing.

The advice we receive is updated constantly as science learns more and more about the virus.

For that reason, and in order to avoid a further LOCKDOWN, you must now help us by following all of the relevant advice.

Please stick strictly to the public health advice.

Please observe social distancing.

I know you are sick of hearing this message.

But you may get very sick if you don't heed this message.

Please refrain from interpersonal contact.

I refuse to bring a law that says you cannot kiss, hug or shake hands.

But PLEASE from now on, do not kiss, hug or shake hands with persons outside of your home family unit.

I know we consider it natural to act in that way, but let us understand that we must change our social behaviour, for now at least.

And do not let your guard down when you are at work.

That is where the spread is occurring.

COVID-19 Officers in the work place need to help us to emphasise the message of caution in the work place.

And if you are at work and you need to self-isolate and your sick pay is affected, I will soon be announcing a new BEAT measure agreed in CELAC to assist employees and employers.

Remember also that if you are in close contact with your workmates without social distancing, the consequences could be that everyone in your area at work may have to go into self-isolation.

Office workers in the private sector who are able to do so, are from now strongly advised to consider returning to work from home where possible.

In the public sector, the Chief Secretary will be starting a process of establishing remote working with team splits where necessary.



If you travel this school Mid-term please contact 200 41818 upon your return to organise a screening test.

Please pay particular heed to the following additional measures.

First, I am going to go through a number of things that we will now STRONGLY ADVISE.

Then, I will go through legal changes which will be enforceable through compulsion of law.

ADVICE

WE STRONGLY ADVISE that those who are over 70 or who are immunosuppressed should not leave their homes unless it is necessary to work, to shop for essentials, to exercise under gold or silver hour, or for other essential purposes.

If you need help with supplies, call us on 200 41818 and we will assist.

WE STRONGLY ADVISE that those who are over 70 or who are immunosuppressed who do leave their homes, should wear masks at all times when in public places.

The evidence now suggests that the wearing of masks reduces the viral load you give off and it reduces the viral load you become infected with.

WE STRONGLY ADVISE that whatever your age, when you are in Main Street, Irish Town or other areas where people accumulate and cannot keep social distance, that persons of all ages above the age of 10 should wear masks.

WE STRONGLY ADVISE against attendance at funerals other than by the first degree direct relatives of the deceased.

WE STRONGLY ADVISE against attendance at communal worship where social distancing cannot be observed.

We are liaising with faith leaders to address these issues again as we did in the spring and to ask the public service broadcaster to also liaise with faith leaders to bring the broadcasting of services back to our television screens for those for whom it is relevant. Restrictions will be put in place in respect of the numbers of persons who can attend places of worship.

If you do attend a funeral, a place of worship or any other communal event, **YOU ARE STRONGLY ADVISED TO WEAR A MASK.**

LAW

Additionally, beyond that strong advice, the public health emergency caused by COVID-19 continues to present a requirement for legislation under the Civil Contingencies Act.



The first legislation we passed, in February, recited 40,000 people being infected globally and 900 deaths.

The regulations that we will pass on Thursday will refer to over 40 million cases worldwide now, some 8 months later and over 1.1 million people dead.

That is a 100,000% increase in cases in 8 months.

122,000% increase in deaths in 8 months.

That is absolutely staggering.

And it helps put into context any notion that COVID-19 is just an ordinary flu.

As a result, the following legal measures will therefore be the subject of legislation in Thursday's Gazette and will come into effect as from midnight on Friday:

The maximum number of people who will be able to gather in an organised way will be decreased.

This number will initially be reduced from 20 to 16.

This obviously negatively affects the right of freedom of assembly protected under the Constitution, but we are advised specifically by the Director of Public Health that reducing the numbers of people gathering is the most sensible way to proceed.

In respect of Catering Establishments, principally Bars, Cafeterias and Restaurants the following new rules will apply:

The maximum number of persons who can sit at one table in a restaurant will be reduced from 10 to 8.

There will be no live, public, musical performances at bars, restaurants or cafeterias.

Indeed, such performances will be restricted in their entirety other than by express permission of the Director of Public Health.

I want to thank the Musicians Association of Gibraltar for their hugely uplifting work in the past period of the pandemic.

They will no doubt continue to work well with us and our Public Health authorities as we try to continue to have music in our lives, even in a slightly more restricted way for now.

And if you will permit me a short aside, I want to express my condolences to the family of the great talent that was Neville Guilliano, who passed away so very young at the weekend.

He is a great loss to the local music scene.

The total number of tables permitted by the Environmental Agency at any restaurant under a permit issued via the Office of Civil Contingencies Coordinator will be reduced to a ratio of 1.5 metres per person in their useable common area.



Everywhere, tables will have to continue to be booked in advance.

Detailed information of all persons at tables will have to be kept to facilitate the work of the Contact Tracing Bureau.

Last orders for alcoholic drinks will be brought forward to 11pm.

Only one alcoholic drink per person at a table will be permitted at last orders.

Restaurants will be able to continue to close at 1am.

And the same rule will apply to bars with their own kitchen.

But any bars, pubs or clubs that do not have their own kitchen will be required to stop service by 9pm.

Such establishments must close by 10pm.

The operation of Casinos will now be subject to the same rules as bars and restaurants and they will have to close also by 1am.

Additionally bars, clubs and other establishments will not be able to offer the use of pool tables or darts facilities for now.

These will have to be blocked off so that they cannot be used by patrons.

CHATHAM COUNTERGUARD

In the leisure area at Chatham Counterguard, new and specific restrictions will be required.

I want to thank the restaurateurs in this area for their support and observance of rules.

Some patrons have, however, not observed rules of social distancing and consumption of alcohol.

For that reason, tighter restrictions will be applied to catering establishments in that area, as follows:

At Chatham Counterguard, all restaurants will have to close one hour earlier than elsewhere, at midnight.

Wearing of masks will also be mandatory in the leisure area of Chatham Counterguard except when sat down at a restaurant table.

Signs will illustrate where the area starts and ends.

Additionally at Chatham Counterguard, capacity will be determined to a ratio of 3 metres per person in their useable external common area.



Also at Chatham, only persons sat at tables will be permitted to be served.

I do not want to add to how bleak my message is today, but it is my obligation to warn you also that it is unlikely that organised Christmas parties will be permitted this year in restaurants, bars or elsewhere.

Believe me, if you hate hearing that – I hate saying it.

But we have to be realistic.

If things change, that would be a very happy surprise indeed.

But let us not pretend that things are likely to be fine, when they are likely not to be.

Yet let us do everything we can to protect all our loved ones so that we are all well at Christmas and able to celebrate, even if not as closely together as we might have wished.

Finally, two more matters that the law will also provide for.

The first will be that any organisation that requires an AGM for year 2020/2021 shall not be required to have it. This will assist any office holders of any organisation who consider that they may be in breach of their statutes.

Testing for students who return to Gibraltar will now also become mandatory, as universities have become clear vectors of infection.

This will apply to any person who is on a scholarship from the Department of Education who is returning to Gibraltar.

Students should therefore be in touch with 200 41818 to be tested on arrival in Gibraltar and they will have to quarantine for 5 days.

This will also mean that their contact with elderly loved ones will also be safer.

I hope everyone will understand that these measures are designed to try to avoid a new lockdown.

To avoid a circuit breaker or sharp shock being required.

But further measures – short of a lockdown – may be required if the numbers of infections in our community are not substantially reduced in coming weeks.

We therefore anticipate further action if the measures we are taking today are not having the required effect.

I also want to emphasise that there is no blame in having the virus.

So when you are contacted by the Contact Tracing Bureau your honesty is the key antidote to stop the strand of infection that passes through you.

Please be honest, open and frank with the Contact Tracing Bureau.



If you are not, you are failing Gibraltar and your fellow Gibraltarians.

Because, my dear fellow Gibraltarians,

My dear fellow residents of Gibraltar and those who work amongst us and live close to us.

I really do not want to do this.

But we have no choice.

We have no desire to interfere with your basic freedoms and your civil liberties.

But a failure to act now would be a gross dereliction of my duty to you and to your loved ones.

A failure to act now would lead to an inexorable rise in numbers in coming days

So I ask you again for your cooperation.

I ask you to help us tame this new wave.

I ask you to help us to stop this surge.

To help us suppress the prevalence of the COVID-19 infection in our Community.

Because, this will be an autumn where no matter how many leaves fall, we will not allow any of our compatriots to fall without a fight.

An autumn of inconvenience, as we work towards as normal a Christmas as possible.

But the confluence of Brexit and this increase in COVID-19 infections is presenting a bleak outlook.

Last year, when we won the election, Brexit seemed like the biggest challenge we were facing.

Yet, we now know that what lurked around the corner was worse than what was advertised.

But, let me assure you of one thing.

We will get through this.

Just like we did in the winter and spring of the first part of this virus.

Just like we got through the EU withdrawal process that was the first part of Brexit.

We will get through these challenges together.

Stoically.

With our steely determination.

And with the discipline we will need to stick to the rules.



I assure you that my government's energy and ability will not be found wanting when it comes to either.

I assure you of my total commitment to the work required in the Brexit negotiations to ensure a good outcome for Gibraltar without any crossing of our red lines on sovereignty, jurisdiction or control.

And I assure you that we will do that whilst we continue to work on all matters related to the control of the pandemic in Gibraltar.

Of that I know you need have no doubt.

We will be resilient in supporting each other.

And we will be resilient in our representation of you.

And as we move once more to fight this virus, remember:

We will prevail.

We will smile again.

And one day, not long from now, COVID-19 will be the nightmare we woke from and Brexit will be the nightmare we tamed.

With that hope, let me ask you once again for your support at this crucial time.

I need each and every one of you as part of Team Gibraltar to help us pull through this together.

Because this nation, united, will never be defeated.

Now, I look forward to taking questions from media colleagues here at No 6 Convent Place this afternoon.

ENDS