

Meeting (37) of Tourism Group, 13:00 – 14:00 Thursday 18th February 2021

Participants:

First Minister	WG	Carys Evans	WG
Deputy Minister, CST	WG	Adrian Greason-Walker	WTA
Jason Thomas	WG	Sean Taylor	UK TIC Rep
Rob Holt	WG	Dave Chapman	UK Hospitality C
Claire Chappell	WG	Paula Ellis	SW Forum Chair
Rhidian Morgan	WG	Ian Edwards	VB Board rep
Mitchel Theaker	WG	Steve Hughson	MW Forum Chair
Nisreen Anna Mansour	TUC	Philippa George	SE Forum Chair
Edmund Inkin	WIRC	Michael Bewick	North Forum Chair
Mark Turner	UNITE	Anthony Rosser	UK Hospitality C
Josh Green	BB&PA	Andrew Campbell	WTA
		Stephen Jones	WLGA

Apologies: Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh Language

Version: Final

Main points of the Meeting

Jason Thomas opened the meeting by welcoming the First Minister.

1. Opening remarks from the First Minister

The First Minister (FM) thanked all for the work and commitment over the last year, reflecting that this was the 37th meeting of the Taskforce. The FM then provided an indication of what he would likely say at Friday's press conference:

- Cause for some optimism with the positivity rate at 8% compared to before Christmas of 27%. The position has decreased from 650 per 100,000 people to around 80 per 100,000 people.

-The introduction of the vaccination programme has seen 1/3 of the adult population vaccinated and we are on track to complete the first dose of the next 5 priority groups, which totals to around 1.7m adults in Wales.

- Anxiety around new variants of concern, SA, Brazilian, Nigerian, on our border in Bristol and Liverpool.

- Priority remains getting children back to school and if the rates continue to fall will consider secondary school pupils on the 15th March. Consideration also on re-opening of non-essential retail and face-to-face services.

Turning to Tourism the FM indicated he wants to work with the sector on a phased re-opening on the basis of the successful re-opening in 2020, starting with the possibility of re-opening self-contained accommodation in time for Easter subject to the Public Health (PH) position.

The FM confirmed that relations with UK Government (UKG) had improved and there are now regular meetings with the UK Government (Michael Gove) and devolved Government FM. This has the opportunity to share and learn but decisions would still need to be taken by respective governments based on the PH position.

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The FM was optimistic regarding the future opening up of the sector but remained cautious noting that the Republic of Ireland had gone from one of the lowest infection rates in the world to the highest in just 3 weeks – that is what the disease could do.

2. Key Questions from the industry

2.1 In terms of Easter – can we expect Tourism and Hospitality sector to reopen fully?

The FM noted that there is no realistic pathway on any available scientific advice that the industry will fully reopen by Easter. He emphasised that the best we can hope is a phased approach with self-contained accommodation, which includes hotels with room service etc, first. That would be an important step, by maintaining household arrangements with mitigations in place. This would allow local communities, who haven't had visitors, who are anxious/nervous and allow this to be built up. This demonstrates the industry is restoring the economic activity by keeping the local communities safe as an investment for long-term success. The FM noted the concerns raised by stakeholders that without attractions or hospitality, open hotspots could be swamped, communities frustrated and emphasised the need to work together to manage this.

JT said the group have mentioned consistently they would like dates to when things can open, or equally when they will definitely not open. This steer is helpful with clarity.

2.2 When will Wales move to Alert Level 3?

The FM explains the move slowly down the tiers. The Cabinet's aim is to move as quickly and safely within the Public Health Wales context in a more gradual move down the tiers. He doesn't want to lose opportunities to re-open the economy through sticking rigidly to the tiers but PH comes first.

2.3 Will Wales align with England so that we reopen at the same time?

FM said he is in favour of as much alignment across the UK but each nation has to make decisions in line with their PH advice. As of today, Wales are in a more favourable position than England and have been for a couple of weeks. In favour of doing things in the same direction but reserving the freedom to do things that's right for our own circumstances not subcontracting the decisions to somebody else. The FM was fully aware of the concerns that England opening sooner could lead to competitive disadvantage but ensuring exact alignment was very difficult, for example Wales may now be ahead in some area such as self-contained accommodation. The key was continuing discussions at UK level, to which he was committed and communicating any differences.

2.4 What financial support will be available to support the sector further in the coming months whilst restrictions continue to be in force?

FM made clear that ongoing financial support was a priority and in that context he has agreed with the Finance Minister to take forward the maximum budget amount into next year but unfortunately WG had not succeeded in persuading the Treasury to provide flexibility around reserves. He welcomed the announcement from Treasury of £650m in their supplementary estimates on decisions made in England and Barnett Consequentials. Whilst tempting to allocate money immediately he wanted to make decisions in the full knowledge

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of the implications of the Chancellors budget on 3rd March, which will hopefully cover extension of furlough, VT, business rates etc. WG will announce its budget asap after that.

JT said WG are not going to be pre-announcing anything in Wales, in comparison to Scotland's announcement on Business Rates. JT confirms the position around the pre-election period and reassure everyone that WG and Ministers will be here until the new administration and making decisions in relation to the pandemic.

2. Questions and Comments from the group

- Appreciation from the group to the WG for all the hard work and success of the vaccination and the continued direct engagement with Ministers.
- Members emphasised that it's been a very tough time and the need to trade as soon as possible with spring around the corner but that any opening must be sustainable and not be followed by another lockdown. FM recognised the finance and mental health impacts of opening and closing.
- At the WTA meeting, there were mixed views but if full opening of the sector was not possible members were in favour of a phased reopening starting with self-contained accommodation.
- Members re-emphasised concerns in respect of community pressures if visitor attractions etc are not open.
- Members noted the commitment to support the sector post 1st April in particular in terms of Events. It was noted that the relaxation of restrictions would have limited impact on many events which had already been postponed until to 2022 and therefore early clarification on further support would be greatly received. The cancellation of events calculated £100m loss in Mid Wales, bigger than just events it's a cultural and mental health issue.
- Whilst some would prefer the industry to open in full asap many had concerns on this in terms of sustainable opening if infection rates go up as result and therefore a phased return, with clarity regarding timelines was the acceptable option.
- Stakeholders emphasised the need for a road map to enable the sector to plan, for example consideration should be given to test events and putting them into tier 3 instead of tier 2 as it's critical to get events back up and running and outdoor visitor attractions brought into level 3.

FM noted the importance of events and the impact of the cancellation of the likes of Royal Welsh and Eisteddfod, Wales's signature events. Roll out of vaccine, developing lateral flow testing (LFT) will play roles in reopening of events but LFT aren't a silver bullet due to logistical issues but they do give cause for optimism.

The FM emphasised his view that a phased re-opening, in line with WHO advice, was the best way to ensure sustainable approach and noted the great efforts the sector had made to deliver a successful and safe re-opening on this basis in 2020.

FM welcomed the role out of the vaccine but noted there were challenging ethical issues around issues such as vaccine certificates which are seen by many as key in the visitor economy. Discussions are ongoing and papers will be coming up to the Social Partnership Forum and National Health and Safety forum.

JT discusses that the support through Cultural Recovery Fund is unprecedented across the UK and will continue to look at what we could do to support.

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- The stakeholders hope Tourism and Hospitality has been established as a priority economic sector and highlighted the importance to keep young people in employment, as they are the most vulnerable in the current economy. Need to push between now and May to get investment from WG for sector specific funds to include events, night-time economy and wedding sector.
- Members wanted to stress the importance of continuity in licencing and enforcement within the best interest of customers in health and delivery. Don't want to be in a position where young people congregated in the street. Important to work with each other on the flexibility and making the mitigations work for the industry and the WG.

The FM understand the importance of young people to the sector and building back a fairer industry. Prior to the pandemic, the FM was already aware of the challenges attracting people to the industry and the need to ensure jobs in the industry are attractive, with prospects for people working long-term. The skills agenda for the sector is vital going forward.

- Members reiterated their concerns around the level of demand within domestic tourism and could fracture the communities. Important that there is funding in place for Local Authorities for community support around signage and people management etc. to ensure they are supported during this difficult period.

–Request for a clearer 'road map' taking into account the mistakes from last year in terms of restrictions in place within Hospitality and seeing what worked and what didn't moving forward. Want to discard the ones that didn't work and open with a sensible set of restrictions.

-The Stakeholders discussed the important aspect of funding. Furlough has been paramount for team members and is ending in April, which could have huge implications. Industry is struggling, members agreed that it was right to keep the industry closed and come out when safe, however, the industry needs financial aid. NDR is a massive element for big businesses who are struggling and employ 650 people. As a business, they need to know where they stand with fixed costs. Celtic Manor Resort have already made many people redundant, need decisions quickly to survive the pandemic.

-Immediate concern around the wage support after April and the need to plan. Something similar to an impact assessment for workers with far more detail on wage and income with support measures for the work force. Profitability for business is critical for survival with immediate measures set out for the workforce. There are 85,000 people on 80% usual pay, no move for household budget and need to focus on this.

-Discussions around how good the industry is at putting protocols in place to ensure safe spaces. The Stakeholders stressed that not all the mitigations required allowed for viable re-opening e.g. if hotels open as part of self-contained accommodation then they need to be able to serve alcohol in rooms without the restrain on curfews.

-Concerns outdoor industry/attractions is within the wrong tier with museums and cinemas and should be in tier 3 (**Action – further discussion**).

-Mental health issues within organisations in North Wales. With 80 per 100,000 and 6 weeks away from Easter holiday's optimism and anxiety is growing. As the industry lost October half term when it was 150 per 100,000 the perception is that things are moving. The suggestions is to use being a Devolved Government to it's benefits by coming out of this earlier.

The FM understand the need for speed on decision-making and once we have the budget announcement, will be announcing as soon as possible. Infinite number of demands for funding, NHS, vaccine roll out etc but the needs of this sector is high in the list. The FM

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wants to work on phased re-opening with the industry reflecting on the work last year, which had to be invented without any experience. Need to remember the actions assessing what worked and what didn't work within PH context, facing the responses effectively and better with a gradual opening of the sector. Communities need reassurance and will need LA and WG to play their part for the future. FM closes the meeting discussing creating Tourism, Hospitality and Events as an industry people want to work in with careers for long-term prosperity as many parts of Wales rely on this sector. The FM thanks again for the last 12 months and for the weeks to come.

3. Next meeting – 26th February 2021

Ffion Evans-Humphreys
22nd February 2021