

Meeting (38) of Tourism Group, 10:30 – 12:30 Friday 26 February 2021

Participants:

Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh Language	WG	Stephen Jones	WLGA
Deputy Minister, CST	WG	Adrian Greason-Walker	WTA
Jason Thomas	WG	Andrew Campbell	WTA
Rob Holt	WG	Dave Chapman	UK Hospitality C
Claire Chappell	WG	Paula Ellis	SW Forum Chair
Rhidian Morgan	WG	Ian Edwards	VB Board rep
Mitch Theaker	SpAd	Steve Hughson	MW Forum Chair
Lucy von Weber	WG	Philippa George	SE Forum Chair
Alyson Burke	WG	Michael Bewick	North Forum Chair
		Anthony Rosser	UK Hospitality C
		Andrew Campbell	WTA

Apologies: Sean Taylor

Main points

- ~ Overwhelming frustration that Welsh Government won't publish reopening dates for the tourism and hospitality sector;
- ~ The need for financial support still critical. The prospect of an additional £30million for SSF2 was welcome, plus potential for a second round of CRF2;
- ~ Restart of self-contained accommodation welcomed, but not a panacea. Dates needed for restarting the remaining parts of the visitor economy.
- ~ What resources could we provide to LAs to assist with handling the reopening of the visitor economy from a "brilliant basics" point of view.
- ~ Next meeting – the discussion would focus on vaccination passports, the next 21-Day Review, and initial triage of the SSF2 funding.

Note of discussion

1. Jason Thomas (JT) welcomed all to the meeting. The Minister for Mental Health Wellbeing and Welsh Language (Min MHWWL) commented that there was hope on the horizon in terms of emerging from the pandemic and that it was important to get the next steps right.

2. JT agreed that the situation was continuing to improve, numbers of new infections were down, vaccination figures were up and efficacy of vaccines was high so things were encouraging, but clearly we are not out of this yet. The CMOs of the UK Nations agreed that the risk of the NHS becoming overwhelmed had subsided and we would move from Level 5 to 4. The rate of transmission was still fairly high but much better. Nothing had changed in terms of reopening since the FM's announcement the previous Friday. JT said that the following would need to be considered:

- Reopening date for self-contained (s/c) accommodation – what was reasonable? We needed to be cautious. If open up on Easter weekend then we would risk a flood of people – so perhaps better for an earlier start, perhaps to reopen mid-week in time for a Friday/Saturday let?
- Do we need to change anything in the current guidance to cover off the new variants? VW had presented it to Health colleagues as a starting point.
- Are there any lessons learnt from last year that we are not learning?

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3. Rob Holt added that he did not think much would change in the guidance, perhaps some key issues around ventilation but TAC was looking at this. RH said so far there were mixed views on a mid-week opening but a compromise was needed to avoid a deluge of visitors.

4. The English position had not helped and clarity was needed around “minimised travel before April 12th” and we would need to take into account any rules around the number of households who can mix etc. JT asked for views – he realised many would want reopening ASAP but he cautioned that it would be gradual. The following comments were made:

- ~ The 4 CMOs were singing from same hymn-sheet so why couldn't Governments? A united front was wanted and needed. The divergence was causing significant problems and a real challenge in terms of business events. England was having a head-start as they had a date to work with and more certainty for customers and as such business had the confidence to book events. These bookings also assisted with businesses' cash-flow –helped keep things moving even if ultimately paid back. March was a bad time to be running out of money.
- ~ Members understood the “no dates” policy but dates could be given with caveats. Some said it was the single most frequently asked question.
- ~ JT added that in effect the FM had already given 6 weeks' notice for s/c – i.e. the current 3 week period plus if he signals reopening of self-contained on 11 March for a later date.

5. JT encouraged all to look at the FM's addendum to the control plan leading us out of Alert Level 4 into 3 and then onwards. It did not provide dates, instead it set out the data needed to signal any relaxation of restrictions at the various levels. Other comments included:

- ~ Min MHWWL thought that England would not follow through on its published dates i.e. highly unlikely that night clubs would be open by 21 June, especially as we did not really know as yet how the new variants would react.
- ~ RH added that UKG Quarantine would still be in place May/June.
- ~ It was felt that the leisure market would come back strong but members wanted to see some positive movement on business events, even if test events – some had already proved they could operate safely.
- ~ Members made the further point that if certain sub-sectors were going to be opening later then further financial support would need to be in place. Businesses were running out of money now – CBILS was spent and furlough was insufficient and a funding crisis was emerging.
- ~ There was a discussion around the “minimise travel before 12 April” rule for England which would mean no travel for those living in England into Wales. If s/c opened for Easter (after non-essential retail and close contact services) then outdoor hospitality could open in the next tranche and Wales would therefore be on a similar footing to England dates-wise.
- ~ RH and the Deputy Minister were about to leave the meeting for a different meeting with the WLGA about reopening s/c only and the implications and pressures of that on communities and resources. Some thought that last year's model timetable was a good one to follow – though not all agreed. Some felt there was more headroom this time so we could move more quickly. Lucy von Weber was dealing with various queries around impacts on communities and was considering the implications of the England position and what our lines should be as we needed to be consistent.

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- ~ RH added that we had received a slew of correspondence on both sides of the argument – “please open/please don’t open!” This is what VW was constantly faced with.

6. Some members felt that the message from England had overpowered the Wales message and it was lost. There had been some questioning by the public about the cancellation of major events in Wales this year in view of the England announcement. Better communication was needed – some thought that nobody understood the “control plan”...the term “roadmap” had more traction – perhaps there was a need to relaunch? Events now needed some certainty: communication, flexibility, guidance and sector specific support. JT commented that media coverage was still predominantly England-focussed. Wales’s control plan was our route map and people could make a judgement on when we would get to the various alert levels. There was a possibility that the English and Welsh dates would end up being the same/similar in some respects. Other comments included:

- ~ There was a worry that the Chancellor would cut furlough and other support mechanisms as everything would be open in England and there would be no funding for Wales.
- ~ Min MHWWL said that we could start to look to test events and feed in. However s/c accommodation would be first. If s/c was not opened then we would need to police second homes, therefore this was an important first step. One member reported that it was clear that some second homes were already in use in some communities.
- ~ Some felt that the English position was not too far-fetched and given the public health position was better in Wales we could move more quickly and it should be called a “reopening programme”. It needed to be kept simple and we could get back quicker and lead the way.
- ~ Others felt that the opening date for s/c should be confirmed and that some thought should be given to product – perhaps some test events that the visitors could participate in or work with NRW to bring forward natural product.
- ~ RH understood regarding the lack of product and asked whether it was best not to open s/c at all. Members did not agree; s/c needed to open.
- ~ JT said that there had been a commitment to consider opening s/c before Easter-Good Friday was 2 April.
- ~ Some thought weekend opening was better – so allow access the week before. Some may not open without those from England allowed to travel – there was therefore the potential for lack of supply.
- ~ There could also be surprise competition from student accommodation opening up for visitors.

7. There were 3 schools of thought at the WLGA in terms of reopening i. health first with a phased reopening, ii. quicker opening with hospitality and attractions too and iii. Some concerned that relaxation of restrictions were going too quickly. Other comments included:

- ~ RH felt that whenever we opened, Wales would be deluged with visitors. Members urged that visitor services such toilets, parking to be thought about and provided from the word go to avoid unsavoury scenes like last year which upset communities.
- ~ JT asked what could we reasonably provide to help sort this? Toilets, signage - pretty much the suite of things offered under *Brilliant Basics*. The DM and RH were about to join a call with LAs to discuss the resources they need. It was suggested that the utilities companies be contacted too. LVW explained that that had already been done and NRW, RSPB etc to go over lessons learnt.

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- ~ Motorhomes were raised and the need for them to have better access to facilities so that problems like littering were eradicated. JT commented that Visit Wales strongly supports the motorhome sector and the value they add.

8. Min MHWWL asked members how they might respond to vaccination passports – what were they planning in this space. Some felt it was a violation of human rights – WG was keen to hear views from the industry. Comments included:

- ~ Not all were in favour of vaccination passports/cards – mainly because most under 35s won't have one for a while. Perhaps a regional approach was the answer.
- ~ JT said it was open to the group to approach WG as a cohort for a funding bid for comms around this issue.
- ~ JT asked for vaccination passports to be a substantive agenda item for the next meeting so people could air their views. JT would invite a WG vaccine colleague to speak to the group.

9. JT also told the group of a second round of the Sector Specific Fund with £30million for SMEs and large businesses in tourism, hospitality and leisure – going live for triage on 8 March. This would mean £1,500 per job for operating costs over February and March. Micros would be referred to NDR, furlough and discretionary funding. JT was also hopeful that the Chancellor would signal in next week's budget more consequential for Wales which would enable CRF2. JT refuted comments that WG was sitting on £1billion. Other comments included:

- ~ Details of future support welcome and group keen to work with WG to ensure on-going support. It was hoped furlough would continue. JT said that he would ensure that those not operating owing to the restrictions after March would be considered for further funds;
- ~ There were appeals for this to be done quickly as the ND Business Rates took almost a year to sort out for those businesses with the highest rateable value;
- ~ It was noted that DMCs in particular were struggling – they would continue to be hit by quarantine rules with international travel.
- ~ JT said that VW had fielded 30 people to work over 4-5 weeks to get the SSF2 money out as close to 31 March as it could. JT commended his team which had been amazing – the pace had been relentless but all were willing to “go again” – he was proud of his team and grateful for their hard work and commitment at such a difficult time.

Alyson Burke

1 March 2021