



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Health

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Health Protection (Travel Restrictions)
Regulations 2020: Department of Health

5 November 2020

Previously information had to be provided to passengers at three points: booking, check-in and during the journey. Now, in addition to this, information needs to be provided to passengers between 24 and 48 hours before departure. That ensures the most up-to-date information on exempted countries is made available to the passengers in time for them to decide whether they want to continue with their travel plans. Aside from that, all other changes are in order to make the information, which must be provided at those four times, more explicit on the face of the regulations. Previously, a high-level list of the information which needs to be provided was included rather than specific text to use. That led to differences in the information provided by operators for flights into Northern Ireland and those arriving into other UK jurisdictions.

Whilst travellers will still be signposted to local websites and information points where appropriate, the uniformity on information requirement is much easier for passengers to understand and for operators to provide on a consistent basis.

That is a short summary of the changes made in the three sets of regulations. We are happy to address specific queries that the Committee might have.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): The letter we received from the Minister indicates that he expects the Joint Biosecurity Centre to publish a revised methodology in relation to publication. Have you any sense of the anticipated timeline for that revised methodology, Gillian or Elaine?

Ms Colgan: They have just looked at the methodology again, and I think that there will be another *[Inaudible.]* Sorry, there was a lot of feedback there.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Elaine, you are also blank on our screens. Do you have your camera switched on?

Ms Colgan: Yes, I have my camera switched on. I am not sure why the video is not working.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. We are hearing you, so go ahead, Elaine.

Ms Colgan: Thanks. The Joint Biosecurity Centre reviewed the methodology again this week with the Chief Medical Officers (CMOs), so I understand that there will be a further iteration, which will be published online. Information has already been published from the previous methodology. The most up-to-date information is not available at the moment, but we should not have to wait much longer for it.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. When you say that it should not be much longer, do you mean weeks? What is your thinking?

Ms Colgan: No, I do not think that it will be weeks. As I said, they only reviewed it again this week with the CMOs, so I would hope that it would be published in one to two weeks. That is my understanding, but I will certainly pass on that the Committee wants to see that quickly.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Thank you, Elaine. My next question is probably for Gillian. How is compliance with the new regulations in SR 2020/215 being monitored?

Ms Hynes: Sorry. Elaine, can you handle that question, please?

Ms Colgan: Sorry, Colm. I will take that one if that is OK.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK.

Ms Colgan: You will probably have identified that no enforcement body, as such, is named in the regulations. The two bodies that enforce those regulations are the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). They have powers in their existing legislation that sets them up as bodies to inspect records of operators who are bringing passengers into the UK via their respective routes. They will enforce those regulations by looking at the records in the first instance.

Aside from that, discussions have taken place with a view to potentially putting a bit more of an onus on operators to check passenger locator forms (PLFs). However, plans for that will probably not be in place until 2021. Again, the same two bodies will enforce that.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. Have any operators been fined, to date, for non-compliance?

Ms Colgan: Not in any of the regions of the UK as yet. We keep up to date and always ask that the CAA and the MCA consider operators that specifically land in Northern Ireland and do not just look at flights and ferries into other areas.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): OK. I will check if other members want to come in. Colin McGrath has his hand raised on the screen, but I am not sure if that is from the previous session. Do you have a question about these SRs, Colin?

There was no response from Colin. I will move on to Gerry and come back to Colin.

Mr Carroll: Thanks for the presentation. I want to ask about SR 2020/216. Has any benchmarking or balancing been done? I saw on the news this morning that Greece is apparently considering further restrictive lockdown measures. Has that been considered for the Greek islands of Crete and others that are affected by the regulations?

Ms Colgan: Yes, Gerry. Greece is one of the countries that we are looking at closely. At this point, the levels of cases are not such that we need to think about removing it, but it is one that we are watching closely.

Mr Carroll: I have a quick follow-up question. Elaine, I made this point in a previous Committee meeting, and I think that you may have been away at that stage. It is not meant flippantly, but given the rise in cases here, has any consideration been given to restricting travel generally into the island. It is a bit of a last resort, but considering that our infection levels are quite high compared to other countries, has the Department done any work or research or given any consideration to the benefits of restricting most, if not all, international travel into the island?

Ms Colgan: The information that we have from the CMOs and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) is that that type of approach is more effective when local case numbers are lower, because the number of imported cases would potentially be a greater proportion of the total cases that we would see in Northern Ireland. While it is something that we continue to look at in Northern Ireland specifically, as well as that in the other UK regions, you would look more closely at that sort of measure when the Northern Ireland case numbers are lower.

Mr Buckley: As countries are added to or taken from the list, people with existing holiday bookings face the decision of whether to go to a destination, even though they could face isolation when they return or arrive. Airlines say that, even though there may be travel restrictions in place, individuals cannot get their money back unless the flight is cancelled. That leaves them in financial hardship and in a situation of debating whether they should go. Have there been any discussions with airlines or insurers about a better way of going about that?

Ms Colgan: We have not had any engagement locally, although the Department for Transport has been engaging with operators. My understanding is that, for insurance purposes, it depends largely on what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice says. The European rules around refunds kick in thereafter. It is not something that we have been specifically looking at in our context. However, it would be prudent for anyone who finds themselves in that situation to seek some advice online via NI Direct or some of the citizens' organisations.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): There has been some news reporting in recent weeks about a particular strain of COVID-19 that emerged among agriculture workers in Spain. I think that it has been established that, potentially, 60% of the cases in England and 40% of the cases here are from that strain. Has that sparked any kind of review of the overall travel arrangements and the impact of travel as a source of transmission?

Ms Colgan: I missed that in the news; I was not aware of that. Let me look at that and talk to the Chief Scientific Adviser about it to see whether there is anything that we need to look at in that respect.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): It struck me as something that was fairly significant. It could, perhaps, provide some evidence that illustrates the real need to have a very joined-up system here on the island of Ireland and between and across all the islands. Travel could be a bigger factor than we previously understood it to be. I appreciate that you will address that with the CSA.

Do members have any other questions for Gillian or Elaine before we go in to our consideration? Thank you both for coming today and for your presentations and answers to the questions.

Health Protection (Coronavirus Public Health Advice for Persons Travelling to Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): The regulations require operators of commercial transport services that bring passengers to the North from outside the common travel area to provide specific information to passengers in a particular manner. The information will include public health information and information on the requirement to complete a passenger locator form and to self-isolate for 14 days on arrival. In addition to the existing occasions on which operators must provide information, the SR introduces an additional requirement to provide the specified information 24 to 48 hours before the scheduled departure time. The regulation will cease to have effect after the end of one year. The regulations came into effect on 31 October and are subject to negative resolution. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has no comment to make regarding this SR. Do members have any further issues with the SR?

If not, I ask members to agree formally that the Committee for Health has considered SR 2020/215 — the Health Protection (Coronavirus Public Health Advice for Persons Travelling to NI) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 — and has no objection to the rule. Are we agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Are members also content to note the departmental response regarding travel regulations?

Members indicated assent.

Health Protection International Travel (Amendment No. 14) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): The regulations add the Greek islands of Lesbos, Tinos, Serifos, Santorini and Zakynthos to the list of countries and territories exempt from the 14-day self-isolation requirement. The regulations came into effect on 31 October and are subject to negative resolution. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has reported that these regulations were laid in breach of the 21-day rule but that she is content with the Department's reason for that breach.

Have members any further issues with this SR? No. I ask members to agree formally that the Committee for Health has considered SR 2020/216, Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations 2020 and has no objection to the rule. Are we agreed?

Mr Chambers: It was No. 14, Mr Chair. You said "No. 4". I am being pedantic.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Sorry, yes. Detail is important, Alan. We will observe the proprieties. I ask members to agree formally that the Committee for Health has considered SR 2020/216, Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 14) Regulations 2020 and has no objection to the rule.

Members indicated assent.

Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 15) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): This rule adds the Greek island of Crete to the list of countries and territories exempt from the 14-day self-isolation requirements and omits Italy, San Marino and Vatican City state from that list. Those regulations came into effect on 31 October and are, again, subject to

negative resolution. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has confirmed that her report will advise that these regulations were laid in breach of the 21-day rule but that she is content with the Department's reasons for that breach.

Have members any further issues that they wish to raise in connection with this statutory rule? No. I ask members to agree formally that the Committee for Health has considered the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 15) Regulations (NI) 2020 and has no objection to the rule. Are we agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew): Are members also content to note the departmental response regarding travel restrictions, which is contained in your pack?

Members indicated assent.