



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Health

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Health Protection (Coronavirus, International  
Travel) (Amendment No. 27) Regulations  
(Northern Ireland) 2020

28 January 2021



**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Apologies, Members. There is a departmental official here. This SR is SR 2020/355, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 27) Regulations (NI) 2020. The relevant papers are at tab 7 of your pack. The departmental official will brief members on this provision. It is via negative resolution. This will be the last opportunity for the Committee to consider it. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has reported that the SR was laid in breach of the 21-day rule but that she is content with the Department's reason for that breach. I welcome, by video link, Mr Bryan Dooley, who is the head of health improvement policy branch in the Department. Hi, Bryan. You are very welcome to our meeting. Can you hear me OK?

**Mr Bryan Dooley (Department of Health):** Yes, thank you, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** OK, Bryan. Go ahead, please, with your briefing. Thank you.

**Mr Dooley:** OK. I have actually got SR 2021/6, which is the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021, so I am not quite sure. Can you repeat the SR that you just referenced? Was it 2021/2?

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** I have SR 2020/355 in my brief. Clerk, can you clarify?

**The Committee Clerk:** That is what we are expecting, Chair. If it would be helpful, we could move on to another item, get this checked and come back to it.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Yes. We will move on to correspondence, and someone will check with Bryan that we are on the same page.

**Mr Dooley:** Thank you.

*The evidence session was suspended from 12.33 pm to 1.10 pm.*

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** I am reverting to our briefing session with Mr Bryan Dooley. I reiterate that we are dealing with SR 2020/355, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 27) Regulations (NI) 2020.

**Mr Dooley:** Hello, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** So, Bryan, as discussed, it is SR 2020/355. I refer members to papers at tab 7 of the pack. Bryan is here to brief members on the provision of this SR, which came into operation on 23 December, the same day that it was made. It is via negative resolution, and the end of the statutory period is 9 February. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has reported that this SR was laid in breach of the 21-day rule but that she is content with the Department's reason for that breach. I welcome Bryan Dooley back to our meeting. Bryan is the head of the health improvement policy branch in the Department. Bryan, can you go ahead and brief our Committee, please?

**Mr Dooley:** Thank you, Chair, and apologies. SR 2020/355 relates to the South African variant that was identified in late December. England placed a travel ban on passengers coming from South Africa, and that was replicated by the four nations. It was made in Northern Ireland on 24 December and came into effect early that morning. There are obviously no direct flights from South Africa to Northern Ireland, but there were people travelling through who would have been in South Africa in the preceding 14 days. This regulation required those people to self-isolate with their entire household. That is really the ethos of the regulation: requiring people who have been in South Africa in the preceding 14 days to self-isolate with their entire household. This was one of the first variants that had emerged after the UK Kent variant. At that time, risk assessments indicated that it was possibly more transmissible, so urgent action was taken, and that is why we did not meet the 21-day rule. Does anybody have any questions?

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** OK, Bryan. You sound a wee bit patchy to me. I was able to follow it all OK, but it was a little patchy. If you have access to a headset, that might work better.

**Mr Dooley:** Sure.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Bryan, are you aware of any cases of that? Was there monitoring of the isolation or additional support required, given the isolation requirements? Are there direct examples of that having taken place?

**Mr Dooley:** I am struggling to remember from a month ago. I know that the Public Health Agency (PHA) monitored that. I do not think that there were any cases, but I will have to confirm that. We were obviously particularly concerned by this because this was the highest-risk variant that had been identified at that time. I can get back to you on what monitoring was implemented, but I am fairly confident that the PHA had measures in place.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** OK. Given the concern around a number of new variants — their increased transmissibility, their potential increased mortality and the potentially reduced efficacy of some of the vaccines in dealing with them — and given that we are a single epidemiological unit, what cooperation has taken place North/South? Can you update us on what is going on to improve the system for dealing with variants and travel generally?

**Mr Dooley:** Yes, I can, Chair. From the start, we have received cooperation from our Southern colleagues if they identify variants. In the last week, there has been quite significant movement. We have engaged with colleagues, and there has been an announcement from the Minister for Transport in Dublin that they will share data with us and start collecting the address on the passenger locator form, which they had not done up to that point. When we engaged with officials yesterday, they confirmed to us that they were able to do that. We do not yet have a timeline for when they can share the data, but they definitely will be doing so. That is a significant improvement on the previous situation.

We have also instituted an interim solution, which will hopefully be implemented from next week, whereby people who are coming into Dublin and transiting to Northern Ireland will be sent a text message with the contact details so that they can complete a passenger locator form for Northern Ireland/UK and so that we can begin to quantify the numbers and where they are coming from etc. That interim solution was relatively speedily initiated last week. We are hoping to complete the details of how it will operate in the next week and have it in operation by the end of next week. That is quite a big improvement on the previous situation.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** It is welcome that that information is being shared. Are you saying that there will be passenger health locator forms coming from — the South have now agreed to share the forms South to North. Bearing in mind the Kent variant, as you referred to it, will there be forms available for the North be able to share about people who have travelled from England or Kent? Is that the second part of what you indicated there? Will that be in place?

**Mr Dooley:** Yes, that is possible. We have not got to that part of it yet, but there will be reciprocal information.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** The Minister indicated pre-Christmas that he was working on the passenger locator forms, so do you have a time frame for when those will be in place and operational?

**Mr Dooley:** I am afraid that we do not. The pace that we can move at is dependent on our colleagues down South. They have gone to their Information Commissioner to confirm what information they can share and who they can share it with. It is about operational things such as whether the information can be shared directly with us as a Department or whether it can be shared with, for example, the PHA, which would be preferable. We are hoping to sort those operational details shortly. Until we do that, we cannot give you a timeline.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** I welcome that, Brian, but I am further asking you whether there will be a passenger health locator form available for us to share North/South about people who travel from England and who may travel onward into the South.

**Mr Dooley:** I do not see why not, but I cannot officially confirm that. I presume that we will be sharing the information, but they have not actually asked for it. Presumably, that will happen.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks for that, Brian. I am interested in the process for introducing this type of regulation. I presume that it has been introduced because there is a concern that the South African variant may pose a significant risk. Is that right?

**Mr Dooley:** Yes. With the regulation, we have greater powers of enforcement.

**Mr Sheehan:** Who is responsible for advising on the introduction of new regulations in that regard?

**Mr Dooley:** We get advice from a number of different sources. We obviously take advice from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser. We are also liaising with colleagues in the UK in particular, because their regulations are very similar to ours. One of the sources of influence is the CMO group, which discusses these matters on an almost weekly basis. Policy colleagues and the Chief Medical Officers amongst the four nations determine the direction of travel.

**Mr Sheehan:** Of course it is right that we should introduce measures to protect citizens here from any significant risk that arises. When the UK variant — the Kent variant, as it is called — became dominant across the water, no effort was made to protect citizens here from it. Do you have any idea why that was the case?

**Mr Dooley:** I am afraid that I cannot answer, because I was not working on this at that time. It emerged over a period of time, so it is difficult to determine when exactly the point came at which it was identified as a significant risk. I would not say that we have not been protecting people here from variants that have emerged from wherever they might have, but I am afraid that I cannot answer that question at the minute.

**Mr Sheehan:** Data has emerged this week that suggests that 68% of the cases of coronavirus here in the North may be the UK Kent variant. The point that I am making is that that new variant did not just waft in on an eastern breeze, as someone said. Do you agree with that? It was obviously brought in on aircraft, ferries or whatever.

**Mr Dooley:** Yes, obviously it has travelled via people.

**Mr Sheehan:** Given that the British Prime Minister and the chief scientific and medical officers in England have said that the UK variant is much more transmissible and may have a higher mortality rate, it certainly poses a significant risk to the population here, does it not?

**Mr Dooley:** If that is accurate, yes. I am not sure whether that mortality rate has been confirmed; I am not close enough to the scientific advice, so I would have to take advice on that before I could answer.

**Mr Sheehan:** You are aware that Boris Johnson said that.

**Mr Dooley:** I believe that he did.

**Mr Sheehan:** OK.

**Mrs Cameron:** Thank you, Bryan, for your attendance. I welcome the fact that there is finally some movement on the passenger locator forms. It has been an incredibly long year. The issue around travel was raised way back at the start of the pandemic. It is disappointing that it has taken this length of time, but I welcome the fact that we are getting there finally; hopefully, that will all come in the fullness of time. All of that information sharing from every direction is vital in a pandemic.

Bryan, do you have any figures available around how many travellers from South Africa have arrived in Northern Ireland since the rules took effect? Of that total, how many came through GB and how many came through the Irish Republic?

**Mr Dooley:** I am not sure that I can answer that, but it is something that we can look at.

**Mrs Cameron:** If you have that information and you can provide it, that will be very welcome. Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** I do not see any other indications from members, Bryan, so thank you for coming today and briefing us and taking questions on that. If you could provide any additional information that you committed to providing, that would be great. For now, we can let you go. Thank you, Bryan.

**Mr Dooley:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Members, we will now formally consider SR 2020/355. Do members have any further issues that they wish to raise in relation to this SR? No? Therefore, I ask members to agree formally that the Committee for Health has considered SR 2020/355 — the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 27) Regulations 2020 — and has no objection to the rule. Are we agreed?

*Members indicated assent.*