

Easing Covid-19 restrictions - Islands Consultation – March 2021



Please consider the options below and select one. You can expand upon this selection in the text box below

Island communities move in lockstep alongside the rest of the mainland on 26th April (and therefore are part of the relaxed freedom to travel across LA boundaries). This would mean islands currently in level 3 would remain in this level and those currently in level 4 would move to level 3 at the same time as the rest of the mainland.

Island communities move individually to a different lower level of restrictions (and therefore continuing to restrict travel to and from islands for essential purposes only)

Other (please fill in details below)

Please use this space if you wish to provide any further information to us on the proposed options for easing the current Covid-19 restrictions:

Please see below text of an email sent to Councillor Robin Currie and Aileen Campbell MSP on Monday 22nd March:

Dear Robin,

Thank you once again for organising the Teams meeting on Friday afternoon. Following the meeting we, as Iona Community Council, decided to undertake a quick survey to try and ascertain whether there was already consensus on the island. Although there is a verdict from our survey, we do not feel there is consensus at present.

We feel it is important to highlight the limitations of this survey. The survey was conducted over an extremely short timescale via our ICC email list and on our closed Iona Residents Facebook Group. This of course means not all residents may have been aware of it or able to respond. A screenshot of the survey wording is attached for information.

As was mentioned on Friday, we also feel there is an issue with a lack of clarity around what is being asked of island communities. We are aware that people have different interpretations of what is being asked and what the implications would be (including the time scale of how long these additional restrictions might be in place for).

Due to the quick deadline for this survey there wasn't time to seek clarification from Scot Gov or indeed to facilitate proper discussion and information sharing among the island community. This was reflected in some of the comments which raised questions around travelling to visit friends and family, highlighted that it was a difficult question and stressed the importance of supporting our local businesses. Some comments from people supporting level 2 seem to assume ongoing business support.

Iona has a resident population of around 140 adults.

There were 95 respondents.

5 non-residents (5.5%): 1 non-response, 2 each for tiered options

40 prefer Level 2 (43%)

53 prefer Level 3 (57%)

One thing that is clear is that there is an urgent need for a decision on this. Island residents and businesses are currently in the difficult and uncertain position of not knowing what the situation is likely to be from 26th April. This puts us at a clear disadvantage to the Scottish Mainland.

To that response we would now like to add some further comments on this consultation.

As Mull Community Council has indicated, it is not clear what the rationale is for consulting on this question instead of Scottish Government taking an evidence-based decision. Without knowing why we are being asked the question, and in what context, it is impossible to properly respond to the consultation. When the Levels system was first introduced much was made of the fact that the Scottish Government would decide what levels would apply where, that decisions would be data and risk assessment driven and that areas would not be negotiating about what level they would be in.

It has also not been made clear why this question needs to be asked at all. What is the specific problem or issue that has been identified? What additional harms are the Scottish Government seeking to protect the islands from, as opposed to the Scottish mainland? It has not been explained on what basis the islands might need additional protection: age demographics? healthcare resources? economic structure?

It has not been made clear what the timeframe will be for any additional travel restrictions. From the Timetable it looks likely that these restrictions should be eased along with other restrictions on the mainland on 17th May but this has not been confirmed.

Without knowing why it is felt these additional restrictions might be necessary, it is difficult to see what the exit strategy might be. What will change between 26th April and 17th May?

- If the concern is that the islands are more vulnerable than the mainland in public health terms then the only variable we can see is the pace of vaccination. Currently, by 26 April everyone on islands aged 50+ will have had a first dose, and everyone aged 70+ those with underlying conditions will have had both doses - by 17th May there will be no change.
- If the concern is that there will be large visitor numbers due to restrictions on foreign travel and pent up demand, then what will change by delaying re-opening of the islands? If anything, delaying could increase the pent up demand, potentially causing more issues a few weeks later while businesses will have lost out on at least 3 weeks potential trading.

If additional protection for island communities is necessary, has the Scottish Government considered any mitigations other than travel restrictions?

If the data suggests that areas should be in Level 2 but that is felt to carry too much risk could that be addressed by adjusting particular aspects of the Level? We were fortunate to have a brief period in December when the Level 2 restrictions were relaxed to allow us to meet in private homes so there is precedent for making changes or exceptions to specific parts of the restrictions. In this case, if there are particular aspects of the Level 2 restrictions that are causing concern, could those be adjusted?

As our response above to Robin Currie states, and as is shown in our previous points: it is not clear what is being asked of us. There is a real lack of information and clarity which makes it, in our view, impossible to provide a robust response to the consultation. Comments from our quick survey also demonstrated that people were making different and sometimes incompatible assumptions.

The questions as set out in this consultation document don't resolve these problems, including there is still not a complete picture as to what the different options might mean. Two critical issues are:

- 1) **Timeframe** for how long additional restrictions could be expected to last.
- 2) **Business support.** In Level 2 many island businesses would be permitted to open but realistically this would not be viable without visitors. Comments in our survey indicated that some were assuming support would be available while others stated that without more information on this issue it was an impossible question to answer.

At the time of our survey it also wasn't clear exactly what was meant by "some restrictions on travel". This has been made slightly clearer in the wording of the questions in this consultation but there is still some confusion about the implications. One particular issue which has been raised is whether travel restrictions could permit islanders to see off-island friends and family.

We are also concerned about the method for carrying out this consultation. It is not clear who is eligible to respond or how responses will be monitored and weighted. In fact, we have to assume there will be no weighting between different responses as no information is being asked for on the template. While this may have been intentional to allow for anonymous responses, it raises a few immediate concerns.

- How can you monitor the responses to ensure that there is adequate representation from island communities?
- How will you ensure that responses are in fact from island communities?

We can foresee a situation where different areas might have different needs and preferences. While it might be difficult (or indeed unworkable) to have Mull and Iona living under different restrictions, it seems feasible that for instance Orkney or Shetland could have different priorities to islands in Argyll & Bute. This consultation doesn't seem to allow for that.

In the meantime, this issue is already causing direct damage to our island businesses: external evidence shows that bookings are lagging behind those of mainland businesses. It is imperative that Scottish Government urgently makes a decision and puts in place any necessary supportive action.

In general we are very much in favour of consulting with communities to ensure island needs are properly and adequately considered in policy decisions, but the rationale, purpose and methodology all have to be properly thought through. **Unfortunately in this case, we are concerned this consultation may actually be detrimental to the islands. It is potentially divisive, delays decision, disadvantages island based businesses, and makes it more difficult for island residents to plan.**

We have made an attempt to consult with residents of Iona, but the lack of clear information and the short timescales have made that difficult. **We are aware that Mull Community Council put out a statement** in which it said

"This issue has the potential to be divisive and no response either supporting a move to level two or remaining in level three would be an accurate representation of the many voices here. For the past twelve months our island community has followed the advice given by the Government and their scientific advisors. As a council we support this approach continuing."

As Iona Community Council we also support that approach continuing.

Finally, following are some Iona specific points:

- **It is very likely that it will not be viable for retail and hospitality business on Iona to re-open until visitors are able to return.** This has implications for considerations of business support but also for well-being. There are unlikely to be many more opportunities available to residents of Iona under Level 2 with travel restrictions than currently under Level 3.
- **Iona is solely accessible via the island of Mull**, so our mainland 'traffic' has to have access through Mull
- **There is already a corridor to the mainland open** and active for essential travel: delivery drivers, council staff, health staff, etc.
- **Our secondary school children are weekly boarders on the mainland at Oban High School (OHS).** This is of course essential travel, but would there be any implications for the large proportion of households with OHS children? Would they be expected (or required) to be in permanent self-isolation until travel restrictions were lifted?

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Please send your replies back to us at: IslandsResilienceCovid-19Mailbox@gov.scot