

Treatment of Convalescent Persons within the Compulsory Isolation Model in Ascension

Executive Summary

- The principle of compulsory isolation is to safeguard against the introduction of COVID-19 into the community.
- Evidence available from the UK Health Security Agency indicates that an individual who has recovered from COVID-19 has a negligible risk of re-infection within 28 days of confirmed infection and subsequent recovery.
- Recovery from a previous infection is therefore relevant when assessing what isolation or restrictions measures it is necessary to apply to individuals in order to protect others.
- If an individual travelling to Ascension is able to provide reliable documented evidence of recovery from a previous COVID-19 infection where the most recent positive test result was based on a sample taken within the 28 days before their arrival then, absent other factors, they will not be required to undergo compulsory isolation on arrival at Ascension.
- If an individual recovers from a confirmed case of COVID-19 whilst in Ascension, determined by providing two non-infectious test results within a 72-hour period then, absent other factors, they will have their isolation or restrictions brought to an end.

Background

1. The SARS Coronavirus type II (COVID-19) poses a serious risk to Ascension Island, its community and the limited medical resources available within the territory. As a result it is necessary for AIG to ensure that adequate measures are in place to protect the island community from COVID-19 whilst that risk remains.
2. The measures in place have been kept under constant review throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and continuously adapted in light of new evidence, developing understanding of the virus and as additional tools (such as testing) have become available.

Issue

Current safeguards

3. As a small territory with limited resources, it is vital that good decisions are taken, and that these are underpinned by the best available evidence.
4. An effective isolation and quarantine (compulsory isolation following arrival) policy is currently in place.¹ This is intended to safeguard against the introduction of COVID-19 into the community, to protect the critically vulnerable hospital service from unnecessary risk of exposure and to allow the continued operation of island services and businesses.

¹ Policy on the Isolation on Arrival of Persons Travelling from Affected Areas:
<https://www.ascension.gov.ac/public-document/policy-on-the-isolation-on-arrival-of-persons-travelling-from-affected-areas-v2-3>

The current approach is predicated on the fact that Ascension, unlike most of the rest of the world, is in the fortunate position of not having established spread of the virus in the community.

5. In order to safeguard against the introduction of COVID-19 into the community, current AIG policy requires a period of strict compulsory isolation on arrival for travellers from affected areas. It is to be observed by all arrivals reasonably suspected by the Senior Medical Officer (SMO) to be potential sources of COVID-19. This is enforced using the powers set out in the *Public Health (Coronavirus) (Temporary Provisions) Regulations 2020*.
6. The powers set out in the *Public Health (Coronavirus)(Temporary Provisions) Regulations 2020* to impose compulsory isolation (regulation 13), or restrictions short of compulsory isolation (regulation 14), are principally exercised in respect of arrivals whom the SMO has reasonable grounds to suspect are or may be infected with coronavirus and who therefore pose a risk of passing on the virus to others. These powers are exercised only when the SMO considers it necessary and proportionate to do so in order to safeguard against the risk of that person passing on the virus to others.

Evidence concerning the effect of recovery from a previous infection

7. As territories with widespread vaccination have relaxed previously strict public health measures, infection rates, both detected and assumed, have been steadily increasing. As such, the understanding of the impact on individuals of vaccination, as well as infection, has developed.
8. In August and September 2021 AIG received advice from experts in the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) regarding the likelihood of re-infection in convalescent COVID-19 patients (i.e. those who have recently recovered from a previous infection of COVID-19). As further evidence emerged following the Omicron variant becoming globally dominant, additional advice was provided. It is understood that recovery from a previous infection provides an individual with a high level of immunity against COVID-19 for at least a limited period following their recovery and in particular during the period immediately after recovery. This is based on the current understanding of cross-immunity and susceptibility to reinfection with regard to known variants².
9. Noting the infection rates in feeder territories to Ascension, it is likely that an individual meeting this description will arrive at Ascension. As such it is necessary to ensure that the protocols in place for managing arrivals to Ascension continue to accurately reflect and effectively respond to the real world environment.
10. Therefore, if an individual is able to provide documented evidence which satisfies the SMO that the individual has recently recovered from a previous infection then, absent other factors, that individual is unlikely to be considered to pose a risk of passing on the virus to others. In that case, the requirement for that individual to isolate, or to continue to isolate, could be removed without undermining the effectiveness of the overall system of managing arrivals to the territory.³⁴

² Correspondence between Dr Nick Gent (UKHSA) and Dr Bill Hardy (AIG) on 30 August 2021

³ Correspondence between Dr Nick Gent (UKHSA) and Dr Bill Hardy (AIG) on 07 September 2021

⁴ Correspondence between Dr Nick Gent (UKHSA) and Dr Bill Hardy (AIG) on 25 March 2022

11. This principle aligns with that of the quarantine free air travel corridor that has been in place since May 2021 between the COVID-19 free islands of Ascension and St Helena, and previously between Ascension and the Falkland Islands. Due to the protocols in place prior to and during the flight, as well as on arrival at Ascension, the SMO is able to satisfy themselves that when certain criteria are met the risk to the public from those arriving on the flight can be effectively managed. As such, compulsory isolation on arrival may not be applied to certain categories of passengers.

Principles

12. As stated in AIG's *Policy on the Isolation on Arrival of Persons Travelling from Affected Areas*, public health COVID-19 measures should seek to ensure:

- the community is sufficiently safeguarded from direct transmission of COVID-19;
- community-acquired infection and spread is prevented from becoming established.

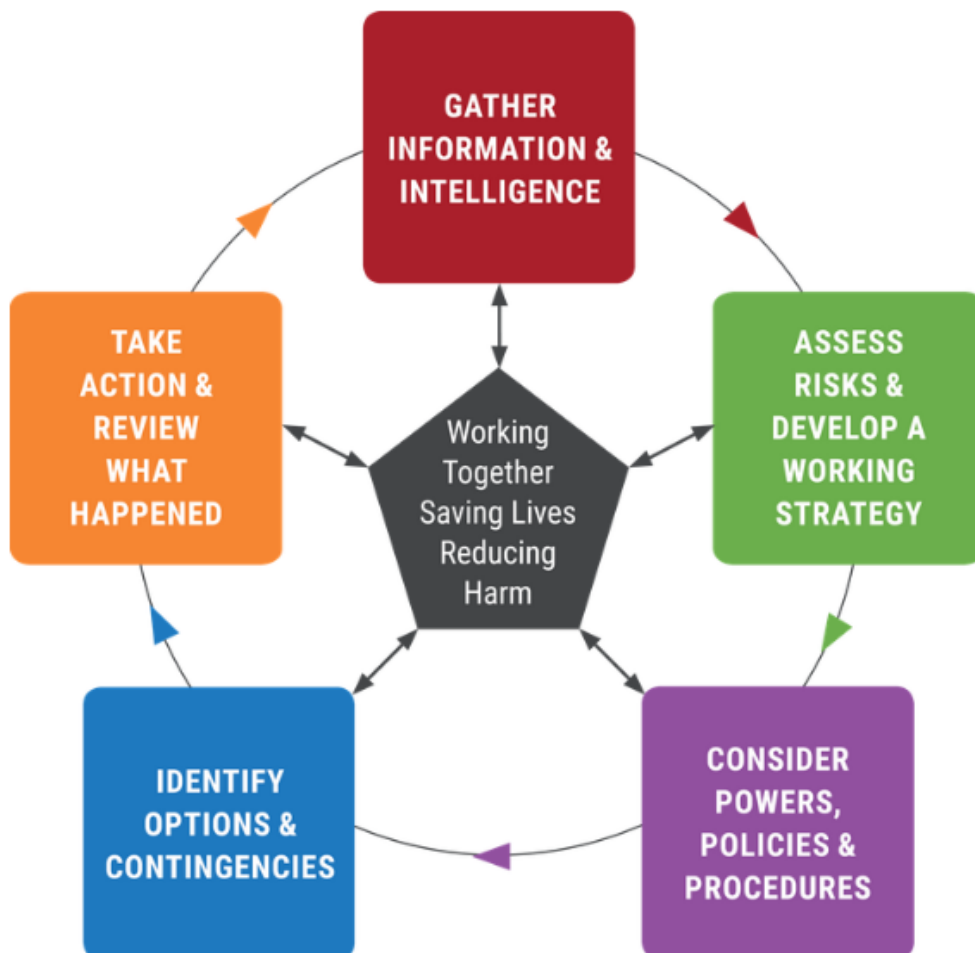
13. Decisions on the measures being applied should:

- be based on the best scientific evidence available at the time;
- be kept under constant review and be adapted in light of new scientific evidence that becomes available.

Actions and considerations

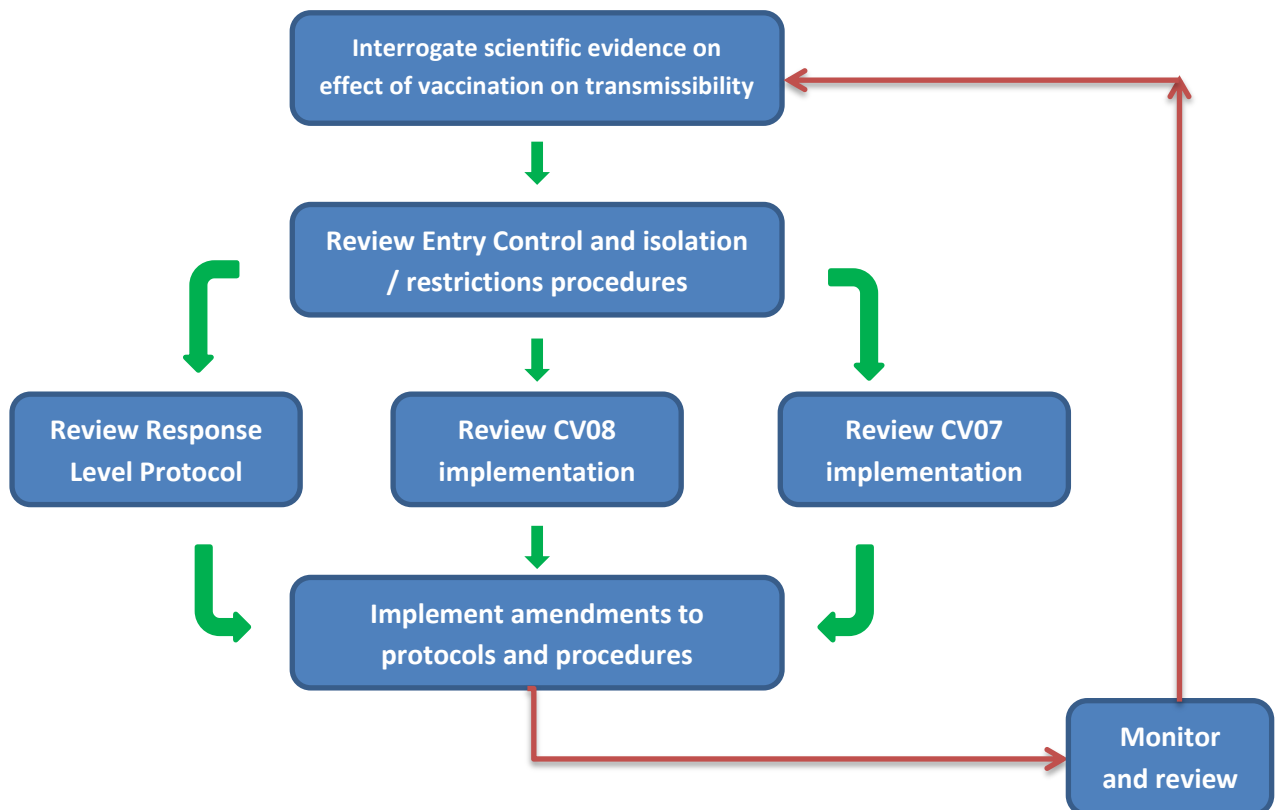
Decision-making process

14. When considering measures to safeguard against COVID-19, the decision-making process followed by AIG is broadly:



Process for considering adaptations to isolation protocols

15. Applied specifically to considering potential adaptations to the protocols for the compulsory isolation of arrivals, the decision-making process looks as follows:



Convalescent arrivals

16. Based on further advice from experts in the UKHSA, a new category of “**Convalescent COVID-19 individual**” is included in the *Policy on the Isolation of Arrivals from Affected Areas*. The risk posed by such an individual is such that, absent other factors, their isolation or continued isolation is unlikely to be necessary in order to protect others.

17. AIG defines a “convalescent COVID-19 individual” as: **an individual who has recovered from a previous COVID-19 infection where the most recently documented confirmation of infection is a PCR test result based on a sample taken not more than 28 days before the individual’s arrival in Ascension.**

18. For the purpose of this definition, an individual will be considered to have “recovered from a previous COVID-19 infection” if they return both: (a) a negative pre-departure PCR test result (i.e. within 72 hours of scheduled departure for Ascension), and (b) a negative PCR test result on arrival at Ascension.

19. **Process:** if an individual seeks to have isolation or restrictions measures waived on the basis that they are a “convalescent COVID-19 individual” as defined above, then the following process applies:

- a. The individual must make a request to the Chief Immigration Officer and the SMO **not less than five working days** prior to the scheduled arrival date at Ascension. The individual must provide acceptable supporting evidence of their previous COVID-19 infection, a copy of which may be retained on file. The SMO

may also request further medical information from the individual as necessary for their request to be considered.

- b. If the SMO is satisfied with the supporting evidence provided then the SMO will make a *provisional* decision that the individual may forego isolation or restrictions on arrival. That decision is contingent on the individual's pre-departure and arrival tests both being negative, and remains provisional until the individual arrives in Ascension and result of the individual's arrival test is known.
- c. If the SMO is not satisfied with the supporting evidence provided then the individual may be subject to isolation or restrictions measures on arrival as appropriate according to their vaccine status and in line with AIG's *Policy on the Isolation on Arrival of Persons Travelling from Affected Areas*.
- d. Once a provisional decision has been made, the CIO will inform the individual (and where applicable with regard to isolation accommodation, their employer) of that decision.
- e. An individual who subsequently returns a positive pre-departure test may not be permitted to travel to Ascension and will need to make a further request once they have recovered and their travel has been rearranged.
- f. The SMO will make a final decision once the individual arrives in Ascension and the result of their arrival test is known. Whilst they are awaiting the result of their arrival test they will be required to observe compulsory isolation, either in their own accommodation if suitable, a dedicated isolation accommodation or a separate dedicated isolation area where they must remain with no contact with anyone until test results are known. As with anyone placed under compulsory isolation, this is a legal requirement enforced by the *Public Health (Coronavirus)(Temporary Provisions) Regulations 2020*.

20. **Acceptable supporting evidence:** supporting evidence is likely to be considered acceptable if it is in the form of a document issued by either: (a) a public sector organisation in the country or territory from which the individual has travelled, or (b) a private sector business approved by the government of that country or territory to provide PCR testing services in respect of COVID-19 at the time the relevant PCR test was processed (such as for use for travel).

21. It has been confirmed by UKHSA that in the context of COVID-19 convalescence, vaccination status has little impact if a 28-day window of convalescence is applied⁵. As such the above adaptations will be applied to all individuals, regardless of vaccination status.

22. However, as with all COVID-19 protocols currently in place, these will ultimately be considered on a case-by-case basis and applied at the discretion of the SMO based on their clinical judgement and assessment.

Duration of period of deemed convalescence

⁵ Correspondence between Dr Nick Gent (UKHSA) and Dr Bill Hardy (AIG) on 03 September 2021

23. Some territories are allowing arrivals to benefit from a period of convalescence of 90 days following a previous infection and subsequent recovery (e.g. USA, Falkland Islands, etc.) when considering what impact a previous infection has with regard to quarantine protocols. Whilst some territories may be willing to accept a greater level of comparative risk, based on Ascension's specific circumstances a more conservative period of 28 days following previous infection and subsequent recovery has instead been decided upon.
24. The application of a 28-day window of deemed convalescence seeks to recognise and take advantage of the effect on immunity of recovery from a previous infection, whilst also taking a precautionary approach in recognition of the limited medical facilities within Ascension and the impact that community transmission would be likely to have on hospital admissions.

Positive individuals already present on island

25. If an individual recovers from a confirmed case of COVID-19 whilst in Ascension, determined by providing two non-infectious test results within a 72-hour period then, absent other factors, they will be treated the same as a convalescent COVID-19 individual arriving at Ascension and will have their isolation or restrictions brought to an end.

Impacts of adaptations

26. Based on advice received, AIG has a high-level of confidence that the adaptations proposed will not increase the risk of COVID-19 exposure to the general public or wider community.
27. However, this could be viewed as a relatively significant change in terms of the public perception of the compulsory isolation protocols currently in place. As such this will require careful handling and will need to be effectively communicated to island partners, the general public and territories with which AIG is able to apply reduced or waived quarantine air travel corridors.

Next steps

28. These adaptations can be safely and effectively introduced into the current system without disruption. In light of the evidence, and given that isolation and restrictions measures have to be justified under the relevant Regulations on a case-by-case basis, it is intended that they are brought in **with immediate effect**.
29. Given this could be perceived to be a relatively significant change to the system of compulsory isolation, an accompanying public information campaign will be put in place to reassure the public that the changes still provide a robust and effective safeguard against COVID-19 incursions into the community.