Government used misleading data to keep wet pubs closed – LVA & VFI

The Government used misleading data and information to keep wet pubs closed, according to the Licensed Vintners Association (LVA) and Vintners Federation of Ireland (VFI).

In a strident rebuttal of the information published by the Government, the vintners representatives have highlighted 14 different flaws, deceptive uses of data and incomplete considerations.

The vintners have characterised the Government report as a “smear on the sector” which amounts to a “politically motivated hatchet job on wet pubs”.

In particular, the vintners highlighted that the Government report:

- Does not show any evidence to suggest that wet pubs pose a greater risk than outlets serving food;
- Deliberately highlights wet pubs when the evidence was just as relevant to the reopening of universities and specific sporting events;
- Does not account for Dublin being placed in Level 3+ long before the rest of the country;
- Uses spurious correlation to imply causation.

In light of the flawed nature of the information keeping wet pubs closed, the two representative bodies have demanded that wet pubs be allowed to reopen at the same time as the rest of the hospitality sector on Friday 4th December.

“It is absolutely astounding that Government is using a flimsy, misleading document to keep the wet pubs closed,” said VFI Chief Executive Padraig Cribben. “Their so called evidence is littered with deceptive uses of information and massive gaps in their analysis. It is a smear on the sector, a politically motivated hatchet job on wet pubs. How any serious decision maker could use this deeply inadequate report as a rationale for decimating half the industry tells us a lot about the levels of consideration shown by this Government towards the pubs of Ireland,” he said.

“That such flawed and weak material is being used to keep the wet pubs closed is disgraceful.” said Donall O’Keeffe, Chief Executive of the LVA. “When you consider the impact this is having on tens of thousands of people working in pubs across Ireland, the people who supply those pubs and all the various families involved it is a shameful approach that is being adopted by Government. Given the obvious defects in their report, the Government must now reverse their decision and allow the wet pubs to reopen at the same time as the rest of the hospitality sector. Any other decision will rightly be regarded as malice towards the wet pubs,” Mr. O’Keeffe concluded.

The detailed list of rebuttals put forward by the LVA and VFI are as follows:

- The document has no comparison or offers no evidence on the rate of infection risk in wet pubs compared with outlets serving food. It makes no suggestion that wet pubs are inherently more risky than outlets where food is served.

- The opening of the wet pubs outside of Dublin occurred at the same time as the reopening of universities and “specific sporting events” took place – ie county finals. The data that has been framed against wet pubs can be applied as strongly to those other events. It is not possible to attribute specific growth to individual aspects of the reopening process.

- Page 6 of the EY Report lists the main outbreak sources for Wave Two on a county by county basis. Pubs are not listed as one of the sources in any single county.
- Dublin v other counties – the apparent correlation is not endorsed by demonstrated causality, and it is an over-simplistic analysis where other contributing factors are not analysed. Moreover, it is focusing on a small sample of locations in Ireland. Analysis from other European countries (e.g., England – Leicester and Bolton, Spain – Madrid, Sweden or Norway) and much larger samples, point out that pub openings did not (consistently) produce an increase in infections, nor pub closures produce a drop in infections; countries which maintained the on-trade open have managed reductions in transmission comparable with ones who closed it down (the common factor appears to be reductions in overall mobility to decrease contacts primarily in ALL indoors settings, not in the on-trade).

- The research seeks to contrast the rise in infections in Dublin, where the wet pubs did not open, against the rest of the country where the wet pubs did reopen. This approach is flawed and misleading.
- The reason the wet pubs did not reopen in Dublin was because Dublin had already experienced a rise in the infection rate, which led to the Government moving Dublin to Level 3+. This meant a wide range of restrictions were implemented across the capital, which did not apply in other counties.

This makes it impossible to provide a like for like contrast. When you consider the vast number of differences that applied between Dublin and the rest of the country at the time the wet pubs reopened on 21st September, it is extremely misleading to attribute variations in the infection rate simply to the difference between wet pubs being open or closed.

Other differences which applied in Dublin, but were not applied to the rest of the country* when the wet pubs reopened included: no intercounty travel, people required to work from home unless absolutely necessary, visitors to private homes and gardens limited to one other household, cancellation of on campus activities and classes moved online in Dublin’s four universities, religious services moved online, public transport was to be used only by essential workers, no indoor training classes, no matches or other sporting events outside of professional, elite or inter-county sports, all cinemas and cultural attractions closed, libraries limited to call and collect, cafes closed for indoor service, restaurants closed for indoor dining, gastropubs closed for indoor dining.

*Donegal also moved to Level 3+ on 26th September.

- If wet pubs were a significant factor, a similar trend to infection rates should have been experienced in Donegal, which operated under a similar rules to Dublin from 26th September. Closure of wet pubs indoors in Donegal and its move to Level 3 on 26th Sept does not appear however to have had any significant impact on rate of infection in this county. Infection rates in Donegal remained the highest in the country throughout the period.

- Despite wet pubs remaining closed in Dublin, the hospitality sector being banned from indoor service and a range of other restrictions being implemented from 19th September, the infection rate continued to grow substantially. According to the EY report, in 27 of the 31 Local Electoral Areas (LEAs) in Dublin, the 14 day incidence rate per 100k population peaked more than 2 weeks AFTER Dublin moved to Level 3+. In fact the data suggests the infection rate in Dublin peaked on 21st October – one month after Level 3+ was introduced.
- The daily number of cases notified by the Department of Health also highlights that the rate of infection continued to grow long after Dublin moved to Level 3+. On 18th September there were 116 cases in Dublin. It takes 14 days for restriction measures to make an impact. Yet on 10th October (22 days later) the Department of Health notified 241 cases in Dublin. This represents an increase greater than 107%.
- The report acknowledges that the areas around University College Cork and NUI Galway saw higher increases than the rest of the country when these universities reopened. It also states “this difference was reduced when the universities went online”. The report also shows that those counties with universities had an increase in numbers of about 5 times the national average.

- The research does not look or examine the impact of mobility/people movement on the difference between infection rates in Dublin and the rest of the country. Dublin moved to Level 3 on 19th September, restricting travel to within the county for all but essential purposes. Inter-county travel remained possible for the majority of the country for the next three weeks. The possibility of this as the key driver of the different rate in Dublin is not acknowledged or accounted for. Whereas it points towards mobility reduction as a key factor in other counties with incidence reduction (eg. see Cavan specific page of Government report from EY).

- The document is selective in terms of counties it examines, which has an influence on its conclusions. In addition by focusing on some specific local electoral areas, it relies too much on small population or clusters samples to draw very significant conclusions.
- For example, it relies heavily on County Cavan local electoral areas to draw conclusions on wet pubs, particularly the Ballyjamesduff electoral area. This electoral area accounts for half of one per cent of Ireland’s total population. (0.054%, based on 2016 Census figures – source CSO).

- The selective use of local examples also fails to examine the more than 100 local county finals which took place between football and hurling in different counties at various grades and age groups.

- The document relies on evidence from the ‘Stanford’ study which looked at infection rates but omits key elements and recommendations in this study, namely:
  - The study does not recommend closure of on-trade to prevent infections from occurring, but recommends hygiene measures and reduced occupancy as the best pathway
  - Compliance with regulations, including mask wearing, was not examined
  - The study did not differentiate among types of venues or between those with or without on-premise dining. It did not suggest a complete shut down of the on-trade or wet bars while not in lockdown.

- Despite the term ‘workplace’ being recognised in the report as one of the main outbreak sources in 12 of the 26 counties during the second wave, no similar analysis has been conducted on workplaces.

- The overall approach of the research is to use spurious correlation to imply causation.