



6th January 2022

By Email: Ernest.hilaire@govt.lc

Honorable Minister Dr Ernest Hilaire
Minister for Tourism, Investment, Creative Industries, Culture and Information
3rd Floor, Sir Stanislaus James Bldg.
Waterfront,
Castries
St Lucia

Dear Honorable Minister Dr Hilaire,

The SLHTA would like to thank you, your team and the Ministry of Health for convening the urgent meeting held yesterday in light of the current escalating, but not unexpected circumstances that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed us in once again. It was apparent at the meeting that careful consideration was employed in ensuring that all relevant stakeholders were present.

What seemed equally apparent however from the discussions and outcome of the meeting, was that we are yet to fully grasp the consequences and global ramifications of delayed or inaction on matters of such urgency.

In that regard the SLHTA urges the authorities to **immediately consider amendment to our local protocols to complement those established by the CDC's 5-day isolation ruling for COVID-19 positive visitors**, thereby facilitating their departure from Saint Lucia upon receiving a negative COVID-19 test on the 6th day of isolation.

We are fairly assured that American Airlines, Delta and JetBlue are among airlines currently willing to accommodate travel of these persons.

The fact is that the international community, including in our key source markets are already moving in that direction, and we have seen Britain not only reduce the isolation period, but has now altogether removed the pre-arrival tests for its nationals.

We are not alone in making this request, other hospitality stakeholders such as the Southern Taxi Association assure that they too are willing to support a protocol for transportation of exiting visitors who test negative after their 5-day isolation. Overall tourism transportation service providers have indicated their support and look forward to revised protocols.

The Association cautions that failure of the destination to acknowledge the current developments and trends and evolve our practices to meet those of the international community harbors grave diplomatic implications for our island.

The accommodation sector, in enforcing the local protocols imposed by the Ministry of Health, will now effectively be acting as detention facilities for foreign citizens whose home laws allow for their safe return. Not only can these actions have serious legal implications for the Government of Saint Lucia and our private sector as we continue to process complaints from visitors being denied their legal right to return home, but they can also lead to cancellations, and that benefits no one.

The UK amended protocols for returning nationals void our current discussion for separate departure processes and facilities for visitors who have served a 5-day isolation period.

We must accept that failure to process these departing visitors will congest our hospitality industry, artificially inflate our COVID-19 positive numbers and place further threats on our fragile healthcare system. We cannot afford to hesitate while other regional countries are adapting and proving themselves more resilient to the current threats.

For instance, effective Friday 7th January travelers are permitted to travel to Barbados with a valid Rapid COVID-19 test done one day prior to arrival in Barbados, to work alongside the 3-day requirement for a negative PCR test.

It is notable that in every public health press release to the nation great emphasis is placed on the importance of adhering to the public health protocols namely washing of hands etc. yet a lack of faith is now being demonstrated with respect to these same protocols as we exaggerate the value of segregated departure areas at HIA. We beg to question the purpose and logic of these exercises given that, as of tomorrow, UK nationals returning home will not be differentiated upon departure as being COVID-19 positive or negative and will all be traveling in an enclosed aircraft.

The SLHTA was heartened to hear in his New Year message the Prime Minister state that we cannot afford the luxury of lockdowns and another 2020 or 2021, similarly we want to posit that in line with his public stance, our country must avoid the temptation of knee-jerk reactions to dealing with new variants and collaborate with regional counterparts to adopt a harmonized approach in managing and co-existing with COVID-19. Our current position, if not adjusted, would inevitably be punishing an industry that has led by example and has had the majority of our workforce fully vaccinated.

The SLHTA reiterates the urgency of the island's response to this matter and believes that an evolved response does not have to compromise the safety of local tourism and travel professionals. The SLHTA supports all feasible measures implemented to safeguard first and foremost the safety of our citizenry and is committed to working with all agencies to ensure that this is never undermined in the process.

We want to caution strongly that vacillation on this matter will only put legal, diplomatic and personal rights at threat. We assure the Cabinet of Ministers of our full support and commitment to work alongside them to ensure the amended protocols are effectively and safely implemented, just as we urge them to keenly consider the repercussions of failing to act quickly and decisively on this matter of synchronizing our policies with that of our major tourism markets.

Respectfully,



Paul Collymore

SLHTA President



Noorani M Azeez

SLHTA Chief Executive Officer

CC:

Honorable Prime Minister Philip J Pierre

Minister of Health and Wellness, Honorable Moses Jn Baptiste

Cabinet Secretary, Mr Benjamin Emmanuel

Permanent Secretary of Tourism, Ms Donalyn Vittet

Chief Medical Officer, Dr Sharon Belmar-George

Chairman, Saint Lucia Tourism Authority Mr Thaddeus Antoine

Chairman, National COVID-19 Management Centre Mr Cletus Springer