



Wes-Kaapse Provinsiale Parlement  
Western Cape Provincial Parliament  
IPalamente yePhondo leNtshona Koloni

Ref Number:

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**Report 17/2021**

**Ref: The theme of the day, the Western Cape Government's communication with residents and "Information and mis-information on (COVID-19).**

**Report of the Ad hoc Committee on COVID-19, in performing oversight over the work of the provincial executive authority as it responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, including oversight over any part of the provincial executive authority, any provincial department, any organ of state and any provincial entity involved in activities dealing with the pandemic, on the themes/meetings covered for September 2021, as follows:**

**The Ad hoc Committee on COVID-19 consists of the following members:**

Mr R Allen (DA)  
Mr D America (DA)  
Ms D Baartman (DA)  
Ms L Botha (DA)  
Mr G Bosman (DA)  
Mr F Christians (ACDP)  
Mr C Dugmore (ANC)  
Mr B Herron (GOOD)  
Ms P Lekker (ANC)  
Mr P Marais (FFP)  
Ms W Philander (DA)  
Mr A van der Westhuizen (DA)  
Ms M Wenger (DA) (Chairperson)  
Ms R Windvogel (ANC)  
Mr M Xego (EFF)

**Alternative Members:**

Mr R MacKenzie (DA)  
Ms M Maseko (DA)  
Ms N Nkondlo (ANC)  
Mr K Sayed (ANC)  
Mr D Smith (ANC)

**Procedural Staff:**

Ms W Hassen-Moosa, Procedural Officer  
Ms S Jones, Procedural Officer  
Ms B Daza, Senior Procedural Officer  
Mr M Sassman, Manager: Committees

## **1. Introduction and Background**

The Ad hoc Committee on COVID-19 (the Committee) was established by the Speaker of the Western Cape Provincial Parliament on 14 April 2020 in accordance with Standing Rule 119(1) (b) of the Standing Rules of Western Cape Provincial Parliament. The Committee was tasked with the responsibility to perform oversight over the work of the provincial executive authority as it responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, including oversight over any part of the provincial executive authority, any provincial department, any organ of state and any provincial entity involved in activities dealing with the pandemic.

The meetings have been held virtually, so as to comply with COVID-19 lockdown regulations issued by National Government, as well as a decision of the Programming Authority, to enforce social distancing rules.

## **2. Election of Chairperson, Adopted Themes and the Rules of Engagement**

On 17 April 2020, Member M Wenger (DA) was elected to serve as the Chairperson of the Committee in accordance with Standing Rules 82(1) and 85. The Committee adopted 12 themes around which it would address the COVID-19 pandemic. The 12 adopted themes were as follows:

- 2.1 Health Department Responses and Preparations
- 2.2 Policing, Security and Police Brutality
- 2.3 Food Security
- 2.4 Protection of the Vulnerable
- 2.5 Disaster Management and Local Government Oversight
- 2.6 Economic Recovery, Support and Livelihoods
- 2.7 Transport and Infrastructure
- 2.8 Schooling and Education
- 2.9 Human Settlements
- 2.10 Citizen Surveillance
- 2.11 Intergovernmental Relations and Community Cooperation
- 2.12 Government Finance and Budgets

## **3. Additionally, the Rules of Engagement during virtual meetings were indicated as follows:**

- 3.1 All meetings would be open to members of the public and media via livestreaming;
- 3.2 All Members microphones must be muted at the beginning of the meeting to avoid background noise;
- 3.3 Members are to flag Points of Order in the Chat Function of Microsoft Teams (the application through which virtual meetings are held);
- 3.4 All videos and audio must be switched off to improve the quality of the connection; however, if a Member/Minister/HOD/Official is speaking, they may put on their audio and video;
- 3.5 Participants must switch off their microphones once they are finished speaking;
- 3.6 In terms of maintenance of order, in accordance with the "Directives for Sittings of the House and Meetings of Committees by Electronic Means", ATC'd on Friday, 17 April 2020, Section 8 states that "when a Member is considered to be out of order by the presiding officer, the presiding officer may mute the microphone of such a Member and call such a Member to order"; and
- 3.7 Section 10 of the Directives ATC'd on 17 April 2020 speaks to the application of Standing Rules. Section 10 states that "in instances where these directives are not clear or do not cover a particular eventuality in respect of sittings of the House or meetings of the committees by means of videoconferencing, the Standing Rules must apply as far as this is reasonably and practically

possible and, in instances where they cannot be applied, the ruling by the presiding officer must be final”.

#### **4. The themes/meetings covered in September 2021**

Theme 11: Intergovernmental Relations and Community Cooperation

#### **5. Overview and background**

On 3 September 2021, the Committee invited the Department of the Premier, COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group and Twitter influencers Sugan Naidoo and Ridhwaan Suliman to brief it as follows:

#### **5.1 The Western Cape Government’s communication with residents on matters pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic**

The Committee invited the Department of the Premier to brief it on the Western Cape Government’s communication with residents on: general information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, behaviours to limit the spread of COVID-19, safety of COVID-19 vaccines, vaccine registration and availability, and information and misinformation on this virus.

#### **5.2 The COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group**

The Committee invited the COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group to brief it on its core business of communicating on the pandemic. They were also requested to brief the Committee on the collaboration of actuaries and how it came about, the information and education strategies, the Group’s responses to the pandemic, particularly in SA and insights on information and misinformation on the virus.

#### **5.3 Twitter influencers Sugan Naidoo and Ridhwaan Suliman**

The Committee invited Twitter influencers Dr. Ridhwaan Suliman and Mr. Sugan Naidoo to brief it on social media information sharing during the pandemic as well as the drivers that led to them becoming COVID-19 information influencers. They were also requested to discuss important lessons learned over the past 18 months with regards to communicating, information and misinformation on this virus.

#### **6. The Western Cape Government’s communication with residents on matters pertaining to general information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic**

#### **6.1 Presentation by the Department of the Premier**

Ms. F Steyn, Head Corporate Communications: Department of Health briefed the Committee on the Western Cape Government’s COVID-19 communication campaign. She indicated that the first positive COVID-19 case in the Western Cape was confirmed on 11 March 2020. This led to an immediate activation of the provincial Outbreak Response Team which was established to deal with all COVID-19 incidents.

Weekly digital press conferences were and continued to be held on issues related to COVID-19, vaccination roll-out plans and updates on the various waves. As part of the Communication drive, a dedicated COVID-19 website and Vaccination Dashboard was established to provide current

information on the province's response to the pandemic and on the safety and efficacy of the vaccine.

As part of the COVID-19 third wave and vaccination communication, Premier Winde conducted radio shows e.g. Community Safety Radio Show: Simulcast from Radio Zibonele and Radio Helderberg (Khayelitsha Hotspot Communication). This took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> Thursday of each month, between 18:00pm – 19:00pm. The show is interactive and deals with various topics related to COVID-19. Six radio advertisements in all three official languages were produced from 7 June 2021 to 31 July 2021. Further hereto, Community Safety Radio shows were held as part of the awareness drive and is still being aired. Members of the public were also urged to utilise social platforms to raise questions and communicate with the Department of the Premier should they require more information on the subject matter.

Print newspapers in all three official languages were also utilised as part of the drive to affect behavioral change. These adverts remind citizens to stay safe by adhering to the usual regulations i.e. wearing a mask, sanitising, keeping a safe social distance, keeping gatherings outside and being extra cautious if they had comorbidities. The print publications included George Herald, Knysna Plett Herald, Mosselbay Advertiser, Oudtshoorn, Courant, Athlone News, Bolander, Plainsman, Vukani, False Bay Echo, Ons Kontrei, Impact News, Isolabantu, Karoo Stem, Swartland Joernaal, Witzenberg Herald, Dizindaba, Tygerburger, People's Post, Die Hoorn, Paarl Post, Eikestadnuus, Helderberg Gazette, District Mail, Swartland Gazette, Weslander, Hermanus Times, Breederivier Gazette, Worcester Standard, City Vision – Khayelitsha, Lagunya and Lwandle/Nomzamo.

Areas that were identified as hotspots received special attention in the form of simulcast, bi-weekly radio shows on two community radio stations (Radio Zibonele and Radio Helderberg), which focused on vaccine hesitancy and the importance of getting vaccinated. The Community Safety Department's Campaign focuses on the Eastern Substructure and Khayelitsha region and commenced in April 2021 and will run until January 2022.

Through the utilisation of social media platforms, the Department of the Premier was able to reach a total of 738, 210 people. The purpose of the campaign was to educate and create awareness about the importance of flattening the curve. Facebook proved to be an effective platform for the type of content produced. Over 60% of the content created for the campaign was in isiXhosa and Afrikaans. The English language posts turned out to be the preferred posts.

Premier Winde also provided input on the subject matter. He indicated that professors and doctors remained the best source of information on the pandemic. The Communication Strategy of the Western Cape Provincial Government had been informed by advice from medical experts. He stated that the Western Cape Government COVID-19 dashboard contained all the relevant information and statistics tracking virus prevalence in communities. It also focused extensively on the prevalence of fake news and also dealt with "Frequently Asked Questions". He indicated that the province's COVID-19 Task Team was assisted by the Premier's entire research component to ensure that information on COVID-19 was broadcasted to all persons in the Western Cape as a means of eradicating stigmatisation of the vaccine in communities and to urge residents to get vaccinated. Areas with high hesitancy rates have been identified and have been targeted for awareness campaigns. These programmes look at why there is a hesitancy to vaccinate and address those reasons. Collaborations with religious leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu were formed as part of the drive of creating awareness to combat the rapid spread of the virus. Individual reports also highlighted the impact of social media. Learners played a pivotal role in the transmission of information to their grandparents.

Local government was also tasked with the same directive. The Coronavirus Task Team consists of diverse participants from government, civil society and business. The weekly digital press conference presentations had assisted with risk mitigation. Members from across the political spectrum were applauded for supporting the Western Cape Governments (WCPG) Awareness Programme by communicating and sharing it with their constituents. He indicated that in Du Noon, video content had been the medium of choice as their COVID-19 combat strategy. The West Coast municipalities opted for the loud hailing medium and in the Overberg region, each municipality had their own dashboard that contained pertinent information on how many residents had registered and how many had been vaccinated.

## **6.2 Vaccine registration and vaccine availability**

There are ongoing debates on the efficacy of Ivermectin and Dexamethasone for the treatment of the coronavirus. Attempts to initiate trials have been strongly refuted by universities as well as the medical fraternity.

The Premier informed the Committee that he was aware of the social media content distributed by Dr Susan Vosloo. He indicated that the WCG reacted to the video immediately. He stressed that doctors are the best communicators on the pandemic, but they cannot be the only communicators on the pandemic. According to healthcare data, doctors are the highest utilisers of the vaccine. He indicated that he would be worried if doctors were hesitant to take the vaccine but they are not. The WCG tried all the available alternatives and championed transparency and openness in dealing with the coronavirus response. Dr Saadiq Kariem, the Acting Head of the Department of Health, corroborated the Premier's statement about the WCG's response to misinformation that had emanated from registered medical practitioners statements regarding the vaccine.

## **6.3 Concern**

A concern was raised by one of the Members about the possibility of making the vaccination mandatory. The Premier indicated that the COVID-19 vaccine had not been made mandatory and that it is still the individual's choice to be vaccinated. He expressed his concern regarding claims that children were being coerced to be vaccinated when the option was not made available to children.

## **6.4 Findings**

Discovery has made it mandatory for its staff to be vaccinated. Discussions were held regarding the WCG stance on mandatory vaccination for its staff. The Premier indicated that other countries had already instituted mandatory policies. Discussions about a mandatory policy had gained momentum in all spheres of society and businesses. He elaborated on the utilisation of an e-passport for international travel as the vaccine certificate is deemed to be insufficient. Discussions were being held at national level to institute the Electronic Vaccination Data System linked as a quick response code to an individual's mobile phone to ensure connectivity even when traveling.

Businesses have started to provide incentives to promote the utilisation of the vaccination. Game Stores provides a discount to customers who are able to produce their vaccine certificate as a means of protecting the economy and frontline workers.

## **7. Presentation by the COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group**

7.1 The COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group (the Group) briefed the Committee on its core business. Discussions were held on the Group's collaboration with other actuaries and how it came about. Mr Stuart McDonald, Co-founder of the Group, provided a brief outline about the formation of the voluntary group, its activities and successes since its inception. He indicated that the COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group was formed in early March 2020 by several individuals who had become very concerned about the spread of the virus.

The Group comprises of 16 members which includes medical experts, actuaries with epidemiological backgrounds and catastrophists. The aim of the Group was to serve as a forum to learn, educate, inform and influence information on the COVID-19 crisis constructively. The Group would dispense rapid, credible information on the virus while disseminating short bulletins on the pandemic. Information is gathered on COVID-19 and utilised for research modelling to gather statistics on excess deaths, hospitalisation cases, and evidence about future waves and death projections. This is to provide awareness on the virus and to address longevity, mortality, epidemiology and medicine. Actuaries, epidemiologists and longevity specialists gathered to speak out to clear up/combat misinformation. The main objective was to provide factual unbiased information about the vaccine. Social media and main stream media platforms were utilised to promote actuarial data to further combat misinformation. The benefits of vaccines were tracked and the mathematics simplified for the average person to comprehend that unvaccinated people are more susceptible to contracting the virus which could lead to hospitalisation and possible death, as opposed to those who have been vaccinated.

Mr Louis Rossouw, Group Head of Research and Analytics, provided a brief synopsis from a South African perspective about the benefits of an early lockdown. He reported that the South African Government's response to the pandemic was derived from statistics obtained from other countries' response to the pandemic. A slow inadequate response to the outbreak would have resulted in catastrophe. Internationally the slow response to the virus resulted in a higher death rate, whereas in South Africa the death rate at the time was relatively low in comparison. Data warehouses were set up which provided guidance on how to approach emergent variants and risk mitigation. The coronavirus mutates less rapidly than the flu virus although it seems the immunity from vaccines wane more quickly which prompted further discussions on the need for frequent boosters.

He informed the Committee that booster shots would have to be administered as an additional protection against variant variations to boost the initial shot. He also indicated that to avoid the emergence of further variants from infecting more people equitable vaccination distribution should transpire. Herd immunity can only be achieved if the vaccine ratio administered matches the total population. Current bias against the vaccine prevents people from taking the vaccine, therefore openness and transparency is required to dispel the misinformation. Once the endemic stage is reached with a combination of booster shots and public awareness, a semblance of normality might be achieved. Behavioural changes e.g. wearing masks in public spaces, wearing masks in public transport, washing and sanitising hands and rescheduling certain mass events from winter to summer months could also become permanent ways of combating future variants.

In conclusion a group of actuaries who contributed its efforts to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic were awarded the Judges' Award for their contribution to the industry. Their research and analysis

was all done voluntarily, shared freely and was showcased as the risk management and modelling skills of actuaries.

## 7.2 Concerns

South Africa has advanced genomic sequencing capabilities, which allows it to detect new variants relatively quickly. Concern was raised that, because of this capability, South Africa was labelled as the origination of the variant, rather than the first to identify it, which resulted in South Africa being red-listed, perhaps unfairly.

The Group admitted that combating disinformation was challenging. They stated that there are two types of disinformation namely the sceptics and the alarmists. The Group engages with sceptics by providing factual information that nullifies the outcry. Rather than focusing on the extremes, the Group suggest the uncertainty around those assumptions be reviewed. Things are not always as bad as they seem. It is challenging as a small volunteer group to mitigate alarming messages of big media, but they indicated that there has been some successes.

## 8. Presentation by Twitter influencers Sugan Naidoo and Ridhwaan Suliman

8.1 Dr Ridhwaan Suliman, Senior Researcher at Council for Industrial and Scientific Research (CSIR), spoke in his personal capacity about his experience on tracking and communicating about Covid-19 trends on social media platforms. He stated that he mainly shares analysis and trends but also engages with other groups to receive information on COVID-19 e.g. the National Policy Data Observatory, the MAC technical working group and views regular interviews and updates posted in the media. He indicated that utilising data to counteract fear, uncertainty, misinformation and conspiracy theories dispels any concept for misinformation and conspiracy theories. He creates graphs by using applied mathematics and reliable data sources on the pandemic to promote simple, clear, accurate and unbiased information on COVID-19.

There are a lot of reliable sources available. The Western Cape dashboard was listed as a useful tool to find information on COVID-19 and to ask pertinent questions pertaining to the virus. He informed the Committee that access to provincial test numbers shared on a daily basis would be useful. The Western Cape made these statistics available via the provincial dashboard but it needs to be done for each province. He suggested reporting data by specimen date, rather than reporting solely on the date is useful in understanding trends such as testing and COVID-19 deaths. He advised the Committee that simple and clear messaging, consistent and accurate reporting would gain public trust. He also indicated that to have the data downloadable would be useful.

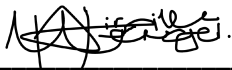
8.2 Mr Sugan Naidoo, High School Teacher and COVID-19 Influencer, informed the Committee that collating information on COVID-19 proved to be challenging as the available information did not adequately portray information on new infections and new deaths. Previously everything was done manually but improvements have since been made. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases has since made some Excel spreadsheets available. However, not all Excel and CSV files are made available on the public forum.

He advised that the time utilised on sharing COVID-19 related information varied as it depended on the availability of information that he collated to report on. The preparation and collation of information for media and radio interviews are time consuming and could take up to 20 to 30 hours a week during waves and minimum of an hour to two hours per day to collate. This he indicated, is due to the fact that the information needs to be researched and carefully notarised prior to it being disseminated on social media platforms.

He stated that as a teacher, he understands that scientific data can be difficult to comprehend. It becomes overwhelming for students who do not fully understand how to read and unpack the data received. He raised his concern about teacher training being inadequate. He advised that being educated on data, numbers and statistics from a foundation level could be beneficial for all as we are living in an era where data and statistics are always used. This would require more science graduates apply into the teaching profession which would in turn strengthen the South African education system.

**9. Acknowledgements**

The Chairperson thanked Premier Winde, Dr Malila, representatives from the Department of, the Premier, the COVID-19 Actuaries Response Group and Twitter influencers Mr Sugan Naidoo and Dr Ridhwaan Suliman. The Chairperson also thanked Members for their participation in the meeting.



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**MS M WENGER (MPP)**  
**CHAIRPERSON OF THE AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON COVID-19**

**DATE:**