

Coronavirus – at least another three weeks of lockdown

The following is the statement on COVID-19 given by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon on Thursday 16 April 2020 at St Andrew's House, Edinburgh:

As you may have heard, a decision was taken a short while ago by all four governments across the UK to extend the current lockdown rules.

In Scotland, this decision of the Scottish Government is in accordance with advice from the Chief Medical Officer and from our scientific advisory group, chaired by Professor Andrew Morris.

Their clear advice to me is that these measures must stay in place for a period of three more weeks at least.

I want to briefly set out now the Scottish Government's view of the impact that the lockdown restrictions have had on transmission of the virus so far; why we have taken the decision to extend these restrictions; and also the factors we will be considering in the coming weeks to inform decisions about the way forward beyond that.

Firstly, our view of the impact of the lockdown restrictions so far.

And here I want to stress that the news is positive – and I thank all of you for the part you are playing in that.

Early indications are that the lockdown restrictions have resulted in a slowing down in the rate of community transmission of the virus.

And while we of course can't be complacent, that slow down appears to be reflected in a stabilisation of the numbers being admitted to hospital and intensive care.

And while of course it's hard to be optimistic when every day we are reporting significant numbers of people who have died from this illness – and sadly that is likely to continue for some time yet – we do hope that as a result of the slow down in the rate of transmission we will also see the number of deaths decline too.

In short, the very difficult sacrifices you are all making are working. They are slowing the spread of the virus. They are helping to protect our NHS. And they are saving lives.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you to each and every one of you.

However, I must ask you to continue to make these sacrifices for a bit longer.

The clear advice I have been given at this stage is that these lockdown measures must stay in place for at least three more weeks.

And let me briefly set out the reasons for that.

Although we do believe – as I have just said – that these restrictions are having the desired effect, we are not yet confident that transmission has slowed sufficiently to ease up on them.

Our advice is clear – if we were to lift any of these restrictions now, we would risk an immediate and potentially exponential resurgence of the virus.

And that could result in our NHS being quickly overwhelmed, it could result in even more cases in our care homes and it would also mean much more loss of life.

And it could lead to the re-introduction of even more stringent restrictions in future – with substantially more damage to the economy as a result.

In short, all of the progress we have achieved together in these last few weeks – through high compliance with the lockdown restrictions – would be lost.

Now difficult though this is, I hope you will all agree that this is a risk we simply cannot take.

That is why I am asking all of you to continue to comply with the rules. That means staying at home except for a limited number of permitted purposes, like exercise and getting essential supplies.

It means staying at least two metres apart from other people when you do go out.

It means not meeting up with people from other households. And it means isolating yourselves completely if you or someone in your household has symptoms of COVID-19.

It also means continuing with the simple but vital things – like washing your hands regularly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

Now, I know all of this is hard – and it is getting harder with every single day that passes.

But I know too that you understand the necessity of it.

However, I also understand that you want to know as far as possible what might lie beyond the next three weeks.

As we keep saying, these are truly unprecedented circumstances. So – as I have always said – I will not pretend to have answers to questions before I do.

But I will always seek to be open about what I do know, and

also about what we are doing to try to establish the answers that we don't have yet.

I intend to set out more over the next week or so about the work we are doing to plot a way forward – the criteria and factors we are considering, the process of assessing options, and the framework in which we will seek to reach these decisions.

But let me share just a few brief thoughts just now.

First the hard part. This virus is not going to simply disappear.

Unfortunately, we are going to have to live with it for some time to come.

We hope of course that in due course scientific advances will offer some of the solutions.

A vaccine eventually, we hope. Along the way, perhaps, treatments that can mitigate the symptoms. And perhaps antibody testing that will tell us if and to what extent we are developing immunity.

But for now, all of that is in the future.

Until then – and for the foreseeable future – living with this virus is likely to mean some form of restriction on our normal way of life.

But our challenge is to find, if we can, a better balance than the one we have now.

That is important because while we know that the current lockdown measures are absolutely essential right now, we also know that they have consequences of their own – consequences for our economy, for our living standards and for our physical and mental health.

So we have to consider if and to what extent we can continue to suppress the virus and minimise the harm it can do, while restoring as much normality as possible to our everyday lives.

Let me clear, that will not be easy and these decisions will be complex.

And as we take these decisions, there are a number of factors we must consider.

Firstly, we must closely monitor the spread of the virus – before we can even begin to ease or revise any restrictions we must be confident that the number of people in hospital and intensive care and the numbers of people dying from the virus, indicate that it is well and truly in retreat.

We also need to consider the different options for easing and revising some of the restrictions and what impact each of these is likely to have – on the spread of the virus, on the capacity of our National Health Service to cope, on the economy and on equality and wellbeing more generally.

And when we do incrementally ease any of the restrictions, we must consider what we need to do instead to keep the virus under control – for example, testing and surveillance, contact tracing and isolation of people with symptoms.

All of that work is underway within the Scottish Government – fully informed by our scientific advice – and through discussion with the other UK governments. We are also seeking to learn from other countries where appropriate.

And in coming days I will set out more detail of the Scottish Government's decision making framework and the factors involved in it.

I want to give you as much confidence as I can that, while we don't yet have all the answers – no country does – we are developing a plan to help us plot the best course forward.

In the meantime, thank you again for all you are doing.

We are all feeling the pressure of these restrictions in our own lives. And we are we are all worrying too about family, friends and colleagues.

Many of you are also worrying about your jobs and how you'll pay the bills.

The Scottish Government will keep doing all we can to help with all of that.

But we are also being reminded right now of what really does matters in life.

The bravery and dedication of our health and care workers, and indeed so many others who are keeping essential services going.

The value of family and community – of pulling together even as we stay apart.

The fundamental and enduring importance of love, kindness and solidarity.

So let's hold on to all of that as we get through these difficult times.

And we will get through these difficult times.

We will get through if we all keep doing the right thing – for our own sake and for the sake of each other.

So please, please keep doing the right thing.

Help us slow the virus down even more. Help us protect the NHS. Help us save lives.

Please stick with the rules.

Please stay at home to save lives.

Thank you all very much indeed.