

# **Coronavirus – reaction against lockdown with low numbers in East Lothian**

**by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter**

**Anger over the inclusion of East Lothian in the Central Belt lockdown has been sparked, after it was revealed that the county recorded the 12th lowest number of positive Covid-19 cases last week.**

While other local authority areas in the NHS Lothian health board areas showed concerning numbers of positive tests, East Lothian remained at the lower end of the scale with 45 positive cases recorded last week – a rate of 42 cases per 100,000 people.

Now, East Lothian MSP Iain Gray (Labour) has called on First Minister Nicola Sturgeon to revert to using local authority boundaries after he branded the health board decision “baffling and extremely frustrating”.

Mr Gray said: “The latest Public Health Scotland data shows that East Lothian has a lower weekly rate of new cases than anywhere else in the NHS Lothian area, significantly so in the case of Edinburgh and West Lothian.

“However, because NHS boundaries are so large, these new restrictions will affect us in the same way as other parts of the Lothians with much higher infection rates.

“Bizarrely, it also means that some local authority areas with higher rates than us in health boards outside the Central Belt will not be subject to the same level of harsher restrictions.

“This is a confusing, inconsistent and unfair approach which lacks robust evidence and reasoning.

“I know many local people, especially those in the hospitality sector, will find it baffling and extremely frustrating.

“I have written to the First Minister to highlight this and urge her to revert to using local authority rather than NHS boundaries for implementing the new restrictions.

“This would allow for a more targeted approach and hopefully enable businesses in East Lothian to continue with their recovery rather than facing a further two-week closure.”

Conservative Councillor Craig Hoy, ward member for Haddington and Lammermuir, hit out at the “indiscriminate lockdown”, asking: “Why are hospitality businesses in Gifford being lumped in with Govanhill?” as he also called for a more localised approach.

In other local authority areas covered by the NHS Lothian shutdown, the number of positive tests last week were far higher.

In Midlothian there were 65 cases, giving a rate of 70.3 per 100,000, while West Lothian had 200 cases with a rate of 109.2 per 100,000, and in Edinburgh itself there were 769 positive cases last week, pushing its rate to 146.5 per 100,000 people.

Mr Hoy, the Scottish Conservative candidate for East Lothian for next year’s Holyrood elections, said: “Why are hospitality businesses in Gifford being lumped in with Govanhill as part

of the Scottish Government's so-called 'Central Belt' lockdown?

"It is increasingly clear from the continued spread of Covid-19, which is now the highest in the UK, that the Scottish Government's strategy hasn't worked.

"The First Minister has now announced an indiscriminate lockdown with ill-defined promises of support to East Lothian businesses.

"Our vital hospitality sector urgently needs more financial support and reassurance."

And he added: "The decision to impose a hospitality ban based on health board area rather than local authority boundaries is regrettable." "Our small towns and villages, cafes, pubs and restaurants are at the heart of our communities. To force these businesses to close when Covid infection rates remain relatively low is very worrying." "It could signal last orders for local hospitality operators who are already struggling through these very difficult times." Mr Hoy called on Scottish ministers to announce urgent support in light of their decision. He said: "Small businesses in East Lothian, especially those in the hospitality industry, are running on empty." "The SNP must outline the specific details of what financial support is available to protect those affected by these new restrictions."

East Lothian's MP Kenny MacAskill (SNP) warned that nowhere was safe from the virus as he called for more support for the hospitality industry.

He said: "It's disappointing and hard for many. However, the evidence is clear that the virus is rising all over the country. Indeed, it's happening across Europe and that's why similar measures are being taken in Ireland, France and Belgium to name but a few.

“No country or area is safe, and we know it travels across countries, as well as counties.

“I know how hard this is for the licensed trade and hospitality sector and further action needs taken to support them.”

However, Michelle Ballantyne (Conservative), MSP for South Scotland, said: “It seems the Scottish Government has forgotten that much of the Lothians is in fact rural, with the NHS Lothian health board stretching all the way to the east coast at Bilsdean and down to North Middleton in Midlothian.

“It seems ludicrous that pubs on the far side of the Pentlands are being treated with the same heavy hand as those in George Square or Leith.

“While I understand the need to protect public health, these new restrictions are a blunt instrument which have been applied without thinking.

“Rural hospitality is already struggling due to the SNP’s crusade against alcohol. My fear is that these next 16 days will be the final nail in the coffin for so many of our rural pubs and eateries.”

The Scottish Government has been asked for a comment.

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