Students will be offered tests before going home for Christmas

The Scottish Government announced plans today to support students at Scottish universities to return home safely.

Thousands of students in Scotland will be offered tests for Covid-19 under plans to allow those who want to return home at the end of term, to do so safely.

In a statement to Parliament, Further and Higher Education Minister Richard Lochhead outlined the measures being taken by colleges and universities to support the safe return of up to 80,000 students ahead of the winter break.

The plans include a widespread Covid-19 testing scheme, which the Scottish Government expects to roll out by the start of December. Enabling easy access to testing for students with Covid-19 symptoms has already proved to be effective in controlling outbreaks.

Now Scottish students will be included in a UK-wide initiative to test some asymptomatic students prior to the end of term. The government is working in partnership with institutions and the UK Government's testing programme on the logistics of offering both lateral flow testing — a new rapid test currently being used in Liverpool, which can deliver a Covid result in about 15-20 minutes — and if needed a more sensitive PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test, which may take up to a day or longer to produce a result.

The other measures outlined by Mr Lochhead include:

- that all students will receive early, clear advice on staying safe
- that those who chose to stay in student accommodation over the holiday period will also be well supported
- that there will be staggered and early departure from campuses, with universities being asked to make any necessary adjustments to scheduling, to ensure in-person teaching and assessment ends early enough to allow students time to get home at the end of term

Any student who wants to return home for the end of term, is being asked to voluntarily reduce their social mixing for two weeks before going home. This means going out only for essential reasons and exerciseAll college and university students travelling home will be given advice on how to do so safely, which includes following the public health advice on the use of public transport.

Mr Lochhead said:"Covid 19 is a challenge for all of us, our students included.

"We have all worked hard to support students in gaining an education this term, and like everyone else we have learnt and adapted as we have progressed.

"Our challenge is to look after the wellbeing of our students by enabling them to return home, while at the same time keeping them, their loves ones, and communities safe.

"Testing will play a role – but only a limited role. My message to students is, 'thank you for all your efforts, and please keep doing all you can to keep yourself and others safe'.

"I have no doubt the majority of students will want to act responsibly, and will follow the measures that will be set out."

Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Willie Rennie said: "The Scottish Government have been dragged to testing students. I have been urging the Scottish Government to undertake the testing of students since July so this plan is better late than never. The failure to do this in the autumn allowed new clusters of Covid-19 to break out across university communities.

"Students and universities need clarity about how these tests will be rolled out, what the testing window will be and whether tests will be made available at the end of the holiday period. "We also need to ensure that there is support available for those students who are unable to return home over the Christmas period, including mental health support where it is needed."

Scottish Green health spokesperson Alison Johnstone said:"I have consistently called for Scotland to show much more ambition on asymptomatic testing, so I welcome this move in the right direction on students.

"However, I'm concerned that the minister couldn't commit to the same robust testing when students return in January. We don't want to see the same mess of students being locked in halls again in the new year. Testing can't be a one-off initiative, it needs to be an ongoing commitment.

"It's also clear the Scottish Government is relying on the UK-wide privatised testing system when we could be building capacity in Scotland.

"It's vital the Scottish Government steps up its ambition on testing and contact tracing. It isn't accurate to say there was no evidence on asymptomatic testing until recently. I wrote to the First Minister with evidence in April."