

Coronavirus – disappointment at protection level for Edinburgh remaining the same

by Joseph Anderson Local Democracy Reporter

In the weekly review of Covid-19 protections set for Edinburgh, The Scottish Government decided to retain Edinburgh in Level Three for the next week.

Earlier this week, the Local Democracy Reporting Service said that Public Health Scotland officials had advised that Edinburgh should be moved down to Level Two.

The First Minister told MSPs at The Scottish Parliament: “We have also looked very carefully at whether Edinburgh should move to level 2 at this stage. Edinburgh is currently recording 68 cases per 100,000 people, which is below the Scotland-wide average, and its test positivity levels are also relatively low. However, cases in Edinburgh have risen slightly in recent days, and there seem also to have been increases in East Lothian and Midlothian. The imminence of the Christmas period has also had an impact on our thinking. A move to level two in Edinburgh would mean opening up significantly more services in Scotland’s second biggest city in the two weeks before Christmas.

“That move would carry significant risk of increased

transmission. For that reason, we want as much assurance as possible that the situation is as stable as possible before making that move.

“For that reason, and this has been a difficult decision, we have decided not to move Edinburgh to level two this week, but we will consider this again next week.”

Later in response to a question from Richard Leonard the Scottish Labour leader the First Minister said: “I understand the particular frustration that will be felt in Edinburgh. The Cabinet agonised over some decisions—those for Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and the City of Edinburgh. There has been a recent rise in cases. In the breakdown of today’s cases, the number in Lothian is—from memory—second only to Glasgow. There is a need for some caution. All Governments are struggling with the decisions. Cases are starting to rise again in some parts of the UK, and that might also happen in Scotland, as we ease up over the next few weeks: we cannot guarantee that it will not. We are taking a cautious approach in order to mitigate that risk.”

Politicians of all hues have had their say, and all are disappointed by the government’s decision.

Council Leader Adam McVey said: “I’m extremely disappointed. Our numbers are stable and have now been consistently within the rates of level two for some time. We know what a dire situation local businesses continue to face and the latest news will be yet another blow in the lead-up to the Christmas period – which should be their busiest time of the year. I’ve been strongly pressing for Edinburgh’s case to move to a lower level of restrictions when safe to do so. The data suggest that time should have been now.

“It’s thanks to everyone following the guidance that our numbers have fallen and it’s why the Capital’s expectation was rightly that we would be moving to level two. I’ve asked to

meet the Government as a matter of urgency to ensure **they** ~~the Government~~ give a full explanation to the people of Edinburgh of the public health advice that they have based their decision on. I'll also be pressing the case for additional financial support for our businesses who will need additional help following this decision.

"Despite this situation we need to continue to do everything we can over the coming week to continue to make progress – that means following the guidance, maintaining social distancing and washing hands and using sanitiser regularly."

Edinburgh Southern MSP Daniel Johnson, said: "I could accept that we have to be evidence-led, and I can accept that there are judgements involved, but on both of those counts, this decision: A – flies in the face of evidence, all of the measures are either moderate or low, and either stable or declining; and B – they've provided basically no justification.

"In fact the justification they've provided, what the First Minister said about Christmas shopping – I can tell you that the impact of this will be deeply damaging to businesses trying to trade despite restrictions, and the cost of this will be counted in lost businesses, lost livelihoods and lost jobs.

"It's also very clear that Public Health officials advised that Edinburgh be moved down to level two, and we know that's what they were saying directly to people in the council, it must have been what they were saying to the government and yet ministers have chosen to keep Edinburgh at level three and they need to explain that."

Conservative MSP for Lothian, Miles Briggs, said: "It is disappointing that Edinburgh has remained in tier three of lockdown restrictions, despite having Covid-19 rates that suggest Edinburgh could have been moved to tier two.

“The Scottish government must make balanced decisions that protect people’s lives and their livelihoods, especially for sectors such as hospitality in what would traditionally be the busiest month of the year.

“Now that the decision to keep Edinburgh in tier 3 has been made it is vital the finances made available from the UK government are made readily available to local businesses.

“Ministers must make the scientific guidance available for why each local authority should be in a given lockdown tier, so that MSPs can properly scrutinise decisions.”

Depute Leader Cammy Day said: “This is an outrage and slap in the face for the many businesses, individuals and families who have so carefully stuck to restrictions over the winter so far, suffering significant losses and missing out on seeing one another over the festive period.

“It’s down to them that our cases per 100,000 are lower than many areas around the country, including some already in level two, so we completely understand those who are questioning today’s decision to retain the current restrictions in Edinburgh. We will continue to do everything in our power to ensure this is recognised by the Scottish Government, and will be calling for them to reconsider and reverse their decision!”

Conservative councillor Susan Webber, said: “The city of Edinburgh, her residents and businesses have all affably respected the need to be careful and followed the guidance as presented to us by the SNP government because we all believed that should we do so there would be the opportunity to go back to Level 2.

“Remember we were disappointed at the last review to be held in level three. Today we have been left totally gobsmacked.

“Every piece of data indicates the city should be in level two, and in some cases level one.

“Our Public Health officials also were under the same illusion that we had all done enough to be able to get into level two.

“But despite all of our hard work and perseverance with living by the guidance and despite the very real damage this is doing to so many jobs and businesses across the city, the First Minister has chosen to keep our city in a level of lockdown that we do not deserve.

“Our capital city’s civic leaders need to do more than conciliate their masters at Holyrood.

“They need to shout from the top of the City Chambers that we deserve better than this.

“Why have a system of levels when you chose to ignore the data, chose to ignore the public health advice and indeed ignore the very system of levels you have created yourself?”