

Coronavirus – First Minister's statement in full

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon addressed MSPs in The Scottish Parliament this afternoon with a major announcement on likely dates in the weeks and months ahead which will be key on the path out of lockdown.

This is the text of Ms Sturgeon's speech:

Presiding Officer

My statement today will set out our next steps out of lockdown and back towards a way of life that is much closer to normality.

I intend to set out in some detail how and in what order we hope to ease restrictions between now and mid-May.

And I will set out, albeit in more general terms, our expectations beyond that.

I must stress of course – because it is simply an inescapable fact – that being able to deliver on the plans I outline today is dependent on continued progress in suppressing the virus and rolling out vaccines.

However, I do hope that this statement will provide welcome reassurance that brighter days are ahead of us.

Before turning to the detail, I will provide some context on the state of the epidemic, starting with a summary of today's figures.

597 positive cases were reported yesterday, this represents 3.8% of all tests carried out, and takes the total number of cases to 210,605.

440 people are now in hospital, which is seven fewer than yesterday. And 42 people are in intensive care, which is two more than yesterday.

I regret to report that in the last 24 hours, a further seven deaths have been registered. The total number of deaths, under that measure, is now 7,517.

Once again, I send my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one.

One week today, when we mark the first anniversary of lockdown, the whole nation will be invited to share in a minute's silence, as we reflect on those we have lost and on the painful sacrifices that have been made by so many over the past year.

Presiding Officer

We are currently recording across Scotland an average of 570 new Covid cases each day.

There are two points about that which it is important to make.

The first is positive. Case numbers have fallen sharply since the early part of this year, as a result of course of the tough restrictions we are all living under.

In January, we were recording more than 1,000 cases a day on average.

And even just three weeks ago, the average number of cases per day was 815.

So we have seen a significant reduction since then, which indicates the progress that has been made in suppressing the virus.

The second point is slightly less positive.

The 570 cases per day on average over the past week is up

slightly from an average of 490 the week before.

This is not a massive increase, but it is clearly not the direction of travel we want to see, so we will be monitoring it carefully – and taking it as a reminder that we have no room for complacency. Care and caution in the face of this virus continues to be essential.

What is unambiguously positive so far is the progress of the vaccination programme. We have now vaccinated:

- virtually all over 65 year olds;
- 59% of 60 to 64 year olds;
- 41% of 55 to 59 year olds; and
- 34% of 50 to 54 year olds.

In total, as of 8.30 this morning, 1,943,507 people in Scotland have received their first dose of the vaccine.

That represents more than 40% of the adult population, and is an increase of 34,516 since yesterday.

We expect around 400,000 vaccinations to be administered over this week, and we hope that level can be maintained through April, subject as always to vaccine supplies.

However, it is not just the scale of the vaccination programme that is positive. What we are learning about its impact is also hugely encouraging.

We can already see that it is having a significant impact on the number of deaths. According to National Records of Scotland, the number of Covid deaths in Scotland has more than halved in the past two weeks.

And there are now positive indications from research, including a study last week from Public Health Scotland, that the vaccines also reduce transmission of the virus. That is really significant.

This provides us with greater confidence than we had previously about the impact of vaccination on suppression of the virus.

And that in turn gives us more confidence about mapping a path out of lockdown, with a firmer indicative timeline for lifting restrictions.

We have of course announced and implemented some significant changes already.

Last week, the restrictions on outdoor gatherings and activities were eased slightly.

And as of yesterday, all primary aged children are back in school full-time and the phased return of secondary schools is also underway.

After the Easter break – which for some will be 12 April – we hope that all children will be back in school full-time.

Obviously, we will continue to monitor the impact of these changes.

However, I am able to set out now some further changes that we hope to be able to make in early April.

I can confirm, firstly, that we expect to lift the current 'stay at home' rule on 2 April.

Initially, though we hope for no more than three weeks, 'stay at home' will be replaced by guidance to stay local – in other words, not to travel outside your own local authority area unless for an essential purpose.

People will continue to be able to meet up outdoors, including in private gardens, in groups of no more than 4 from 2 households.

Our other changes in early April will take effect from Monday

5.

On that day, we expect contact sports for 12 to 17-year-olds to resume.

We also expect that from 5 April more students – particularly in further education – will be allowed to return to on-campus learning.

Colleges will prioritise those students whose return is essential – including those who are most at risk of not completing their courses.

That includes those who are taking qualifications in construction, engineering, hairdressing, beauty and related courses.

We also expect to begin the phased re-opening of non-essential retail on 5 April.

Click and collect retail services will be permitted to reopen from that date, along with homeware stores, and car showrooms and forecourts.

Garden centres will also be able to reopen on 5 April – which I know is important as we head towards the summer.

And last – but for some of us definitely not least – we expect hairdresser and barber salons to reopen for appointments on 5 April.

Presiding Officer

These changes will, I hope, make a real difference to people in a number of different ways

However, given the state of the virus and extent of vaccination, what I have just set out is the maximum we consider possible at that stage.

However, during April, we expect our vaccination programme to

reach an important milestone.

By the middle of April, supplies permitting – which is still a necessary caveat – we will have offered first doses of the vaccine to all nine priority groups identified by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

Those nine groups include everyone over the age of 50 and all adults with particular underlying health conditions.

They account for a significant majority of Scotland's adult population – and, crucially, cover groups of the population that between them account for approximately 99% of all Covid-related deaths.

So reaching that milestone – and taking account of the fact that it takes a couple of weeks for protection from the vaccine to kick in – will give us confidence to ease restrictions much more significantly from 26 April.

On that date, we expect all parts of Scotland currently in level 4 to move down to a modified level 3.

The island communities currently in level 3 will have the option to move at that stage to level 2. However, given what I am about to set out on travel restrictions, we intend to discuss that with these communities over the next couple of weeks.

Let me turn then to the position on travel.

We expect that from 26 April, restrictions on journeys within mainland Scotland will be lifted entirely.

However, if restrictions on socialising and hospitality are relaxed more quickly and significantly on the islands, there may be a need to retain some restrictions on travel to and from the mainland – to protect island communities from the importation of new cases.

However, rather than impose that decision now on our island communities, we intend to discuss it directly with them to determine what arrangements they consider will work best for their circumstances.

We hope that restrictions on journeys between Scotland and other parts of the UK and the wider common travel area can also be lifted, if not on 26 April, then as soon as possible thereafter.

However, we need to keep this under review, as part of our efforts to reduce the risk of new cases being imported into Scotland and we will update the position during April.

Reducing the risk of importing new cases – and new variants – is also directly relevant to the issue of international travel.

We intend to discuss with the aviation sector later this week how and when non-essential travel to some international destinations may be possible again.

Like the UK government, we are certain that this will not be achievable before 17 May. However, our view is that it may well not be possible for a further period after that.

And, even when overseas travel does resume, it is very likely that a requirement for pre-departure and post-arrival testing will remain in place for some time to come.

However, we will keep this issue under close review.

I want to turn now to the other changes we hope to make from 26 April.

On that date, we expect all remaining retail premises to re-open.

All tourist accommodation will be able to re-open from that date too, subject to any wider restrictions that remain in

place, for example, on hospitality.

We expect that libraries, museums and galleries will also reopen from 26 April.

Our expectation is that indoor gyms will reopen for individual exercise on that date.

Work in people's homes will resume from that date, as well as driving lessons.

And we expect that the limit on attendance at weddings, funerals and associated receptions will be raised to 50 people from 26 April.

From 26 April, the restrictions on outdoor socialising will be eased further too.

From that date, six people from up to three households will be able to meet outdoors – and with no mainland travel restrictions in place.

12 to 17 year olds will be able to meet outdoors with up to six people from six households.

Unfortunately, given that the risk of transmission is greatest inside our own homes, where it is much more difficult to comply with mitigations like physical distancing, we cannot yet say if it will be possible to have people from other households visit us indoors from this date.

However, given how important this is to all of us, we intend to keep this under ongoing review.

The hospitality sector will also begin to reopen from 26 April.

From that date, cafés, restaurants and bars will be able to serve people outdoors – in groups of up to 6 from 3 households – until 10pm. Alcohol will be permitted, and there will be no

requirement for food to be served.

We also hope, though this in particular depends on continued suppression of the virus, that there will be limited indoor opening of hospitality from 26 April too.

This will be limited initially to the service of food and non-alcoholic drinks until 8pm, and for groups of up to 4 people from no more than 2 households.

As was the case last year, venues will need to retain customers' contact details for three weeks after their visit.

Finally, we will advise that, from 26 April, people on the shielding list can return to work; children and young people on the shielding list can return to school or nursery; and students on the shielding list can return to college or university.

The Chief Medical Officer will write this week to everyone on the shielding list to provide more detailed advice.

As is obvious, the changes that we hope to make on 26 April are significant.

We will therefore need to monitor them carefully. For that reason we do not expect any further changes to be made before 17 May, three weeks later.

However, from that date, we hope that all level 3 areas – or as many as possible – will move to level 2.

We would hope, from that date, indoor hospitality could return to greater normality, with alcohol able to be served indoors and within more normal opening hours, though possibly with some continued restrictions – a requirement for people to book in 2 hour slots, for example.

The precise detail of any continued restrictions will depend on an assessment of the situation closer to the time. But we

will be aiming for us as much normality as possible.

On 17 May, we also hope that adult outdoor contact sports and indoor group exercises can resume.

We also hope that cinemas, amusement arcades and bingo halls will reopen from that date.

And that outdoor and indoor events – albeit on a small scale to begin with – will also re-start. We will confirm capacity limits with the events sector in the next few weeks.

We also hope that colleges and universities will return to a more blended model of learning from mid-May – meaning that more students can be on campus.

Further face-to-face support services will also resume – as will non-professional performance arts.

Finally, on 17 May, we expect restrictions on outdoor social gatherings to ease further.

And, if this has not proved possible before this date, we also expect that people will be able to meet up inside each other's homes again – initially in groups of up to 4 people from no more than 2 households.

Let me come back to that point because I know that the restriction on indoor meetings has been one of the hardest parts of lockdown for most of us to bear.

Unfortunately, though, it is necessary and I note that the easing of this restriction is not expected before mid-May in England either.

However, all of us yearn to meet with friends and loved ones indoors again, and I know this is especially important for those who live alone.

So we will keep this under ongoing review and will seek to

restore as much normality just as soon as it is safe to do so.

Presiding Officer,

I also want to give an update on business support.

In the past year we have provided more than £3 billion of direct support to businesses in Scotland.

And for the entirety of the next financial year, we will provide 100% rates relief for retail, hospitality, leisure and aviation businesses.

When I spoke in advance of the UK budget, I said that the strategic business framework, which supports closed businesses, would continue until June, even if some businesses were able to open before then.

However, a number of businesses have asked us to instead adopt a model of restart grants as we emerge from lockdown. We have decided to follow this advice.

So I can confirm that on 22 March, recipients of support under the Strategic Business Framework Fund will receive a final four week payment. There will be no new claims after that date.

And then on 19 April, recipients will receive a combined final payment comprising a further two weeks closure support and a one off restart grant.

For eligible retail businesses this will mean a payment on 19 April of up to £7,500 and for eligible hospitality and leisure businesses, a payment of up to £19,500.

This will provide support that is both more generous and also more flexible than previously envisaged.

Presiding Officer

The steps I have outlined today give a significant degree of

clarity for the period between now and mid-May.

The unpredictable nature of this virus means it is difficult to give quite as much clarity beyond that point

However, our hope and ambition is that from early June, all of Scotland will move to level 1 – which will allow for a further easing of restrictions.

And then by the end of June, we hope that all of Scotland will move to at least level 0.

Level 1 and even more so, level 0 will be a massive improvement on where we are now.

But those levels still involve some restrictions and so we hope that we will be able to get beyond even that – we will be assessing the situation on an ongoing basis, with a view to restoring as much normality as possible.

It is our fervent hope – and also our tentatively increasing expectation – that vaccination, continued and effective use of the test and protect system, and probably a continued compliance with precautions like good hand hygiene, will allow us to keep Covid under much greater control.

And that this will allow us to enjoy many of the things that we took for granted before the pandemic – for example, normal family gatherings where we can hug our loved ones, sporting events, gigs and nightclubs.

For me to set out a precise date for all of that right now would involve plucking it out of thin air – and I'd be doing it to make my life easier, not yours.

I am not going to do that. But I do believe that over the coming weeks – as more and more adults are vaccinated – it will be possible to set a firmer date by which many of these normal things will be possible.

And I am optimistic that this date will be over the summer.

I know I will not be the only one now looking forward – with a real sense of hope – to hugging my family this summer.

Presiding officer,

Three months ago – when we had to reimpose lockdown in the depths of December – it was a dark moment in an unbelievably tough year.

I know how difficult the last few months have been. And I will never underestimate – or stop being grateful for – the hard, painful sacrifices that everyone has made.

But now – thanks to those sacrifices and the success of the vaccination programme – we are in a much brighter position.

As we move further into spring, children and young people will be back in school full time. Shops and services will reopen. We will be able to travel more widely. We will be able see more of our friends and loved ones, and start to meet again in bars, cafes and restaurants.

As we move into the summer an even greater degree of normality – hopefully something much closer to actual normality, with the ability to hug those we love – will become possible. All of that should fill us with optimism.

This is certainly the most hopeful I have felt about the situation for a long time.

However, as you would expect, I do need to add a note of caution. I know this is the bit none of us want to hear, but the route back to normality does depend on continued suppression.

Right now, things are much better but hundreds of us are still getting this virus every day.

And last week, more than 200 people were admitted to hospital with the virus.

We are getting it under control. But it is still dangerous, and it is now even more infectious.

So we must continue to suppress it to the lowest level possible as we try to get our lives back to normal

So, for now, please stay within the rules.

Until April 2, please stay at home, except for specific purposes.

Please don't meet people from other households indoors.

And please follow the FACTS advice when you are out and about.

By doing this over the last long months, we have protected each other and saved lives.

By doing it in the few weeks ahead, we can make steady and sure progress back to normality.

And we will continue to protect each other as we journey towards those brighter days that I do firmly believe are now in sight.