

Coronavirus – some relaxation of the rules announced

Against a background of falling numbers of Covid-19 cases, the expectation today was that the government would agree to the relaxation of some of the restrictions. And they have.

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced them in an update to MSPs in the Scottish Parliament, warning that caution remains essential. She explained that while the R number is likely to be below 1 the new variant accounts for 90% of new cases, and as yet the government does not have any “real experience of how far and fast the new variant will spread”. For all of these reasons and even though everything is moving in the right direction “we cannot take our foot off the brake too soon”.

From Friday it will be possible for up to four adults from two households to meet outdoors, including in a private garden, and for either social or recreational purposes. But the cautionary approach remains, and the advice is to stay as close to home as possible. For 12-17-year-olds the news is even better as they can meet in groups of up to four with no requirement that the four people are from only two households. And in schools, all primary school pupils will return next week and current plans are for all pupils to be back in school full-time after the Easter holidays.

Outdoor non-contact sport will be permitted for groups of up

to 15, and from 26 March (providing that progress continues) communal worship for up to 50 people will be possible as long as they can respect two metre physical distancing. The relaxations will be published in full on Friday but there is a summary at the foot of this article.

Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, said: “We welcome the latest announcement from the Scottish Government that communal worship can potentially resume from 26 March with the possibility of up to 50 people in attendance, assuming physical distancing of 2 metres can be in place.

“Christians are Easter people, we live with hope in all circumstances, and the Church will be providing guidance to congregations to help them ensure that buildings are re-opened in a safe and responsible manner.

“While some congregations will adopt a cautious approach regarding the re-opening of our buildings – and others won’t have the practical means to do so – everyone will be very glad at this news and will already be looking forward to how most appropriately to celebrate Easter 2021.

“In whatever we do, we’ll be remembering that the God who raised Jesus from the grave has been faithful to us throughout the whole of this last year.”

Council Leader Adam McVey said: “This latest announcement is a clear sign that positive progress is being made in the fight against Covid. More people will be able to mix outdoors from Friday including young people meeting their friends, outdoor non-contact sport and organised group exercise, which will be allowed for 15 people, and up to 50 will be allowed to take part in communal worship.

“The First Minister announced that further easing of restrictions to help Scotland’s economy sector will be made public next week. It’s essential that our businesses are able

to safely open again to resume a more normal version of trading and we very much hope that circumstances allow that to happen. We will of course make sure that we continue to support our local traders, as we have done since the start of this pandemic.

“It is critical that we all continue to follow the national guidance to keep our communities safe. There’s no doubt that by sticking to the rules we have all played our part in driving down infections with the numbers for Edinburgh at one of the lowest levels since Spring last year. We can’t afford to let our guard slip and start ignoring all the precautions we’ve been following so carefully in the past few months. It’s important to continue observing the restrictions that are still in place and all work together to follow this path out of lockdown safely.”

Depute Leader Cammy Day said: “Today’s update for the latest lifting of restrictions is another positive step forward as we look to move out of lockdown towards some semblance of normality. Increasing the number of people who can meet up outdoors allows us to spend more time with loved ones and friends. It’s really good news that groups of four young people from different households will be able to meet as their wellbeing is so important. All our primary school pupils will be back next week and our high schools are preparing to welcome back pupils for face-to-face teaching as well.

“It’s essential that we observe this gradual, phased approach if we are to protect people’s health and safety while working towards the city’s successful recovery from the pandemic. We all want to keep the virus under control and everyone safe. The successful roll out of the vaccine programme and the fall in positive cases in Edinburgh is really welcome. However, right now our advice remains the same – stay at home and help to protect lives.”

NEW RULES

The First Minister announced that more people will be able to socialise outdoors following good progress in suppressing Coronavirus.

Up to four adults from two households will be able to meet locally in any outdoor space, including in private gardens, for social and recreational purposes as well as exercise from Friday 12 March. People should only go indoors if it is essential in order to reach a back garden, or to go to the toilet.

Outdoor non-contact sports and group exercise will also resume for adults in groups of up to 15 people from this date.

Young people aged 12 to 17 will be able to meet outdoors in groups of up to four people from four different households, participate in outdoor non-contact sports, and other organised activities in groups of up to 15 and travel across local authority boundaries to participate in such activities.

Should progress suppressing the virus continue, the Scottish Government intends to reopen places of worship with attendance limits increased from 20 to 50 where there is space for social distancing on Friday 26 March. A final decision will be taken on Tuesday 23 March ahead of Passover, Easter, Ramadan and Vaisakhi.

There will be a further ministerial statement on Covid-19 next week at Holyrood.