

Coronavirus – First Minister changes levels in some areas of Scotland

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, made a speech to The Scottish Parliament on Tuesday, to update members and the general public about the proposed moves to different levels of Covid-19 restrictions.

Today Ms Sturgeon confirmed that Edinburgh and Midlothian will remain in Level 2 for now, owing to the increase in case numbers and the fact that not everyone has had their second vaccination.

This is the content of her speech:

Ms Sturgeon said: “The total number of positive cases reported yesterday was 478, which is 3.1% of the total number of tests conducted. The total number of confirmed cases therefore is now 236,389.

106 people are currently in hospital – which is four fewer than yesterday.

And 10 people are receiving intensive care, that is two more than yesterday.

I’m also relieved to say that no deaths were reported

yesterday, and that means the total number of deaths registered, under the daily definition, remains at 7,669.

But again, I want to convey my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.

I can also give an update on the vaccination programme.

As of 7:30 this morning, 3,267,290 people had received their first dose of the vaccine. That is around 72% of the adult population – and it represents an increase of 16,152 since yesterday.

In addition, 30,978 people received a second dose yesterday, and that brings the total number of second doses now to 2,075,231. And that total number represents about 46% of the adult population.

Presiding Officer,

The decisions we have arrived at today are difficult and complex ones, and this reflects the fact that we are currently at a delicate and fragile point in what we very much hope is a transition to a different way of dealing with this virus.

In summary, we do believe that vaccinations are opening the path to a less restrictive way of dealing with Covid – one that is less driven by case numbers.

But because not all adults have been fully vaccinated with two doses to date, we are not quite there yet.

And as we make this transition – just to compound the challenge further – we are also dealing with a new, faster spreading variant.

This is, of course, a new development that has arisen since we set out our indicative routemap back in March.

All of this means that at this critical stage – to avoid being

knocked off course completely – we must still err on the side of caution.

And I will share more detail of all of this now.

The considerable downside that we face just now is the Indian, or April-0.2 variant – which was renamed last night by the World Health Organisation as Delta.

This variant is spreading faster than previous variants of the virus, and we now believe that it accounts for well over half of our new daily cases.

Because of that, Scotland's R number is almost certainly above 1 right now. And, as we know from past, painful experience, that makes our situation highly precarious.

Indeed, many public health experts are warning that the UK could – and I stress, could – now be at the start of a third wave of the virus, and obviously it would be wrong to completely ignore that warning.

However – and this is the considerable upside – we now have a significant advantage that we did not have in the first or second wave.

We are increasingly confident that the vaccines are effective – though we are closely monitoring the vaccination status of people admitted to hospital.

But we do now have evidence that the link between cases and serious illness, hospitalisation and deaths does appear to be weakening.

For example, since January in Scotland, the proportion of new cases which lead to hospital admission has reduced – on current estimates from 10% to 5% – although it is important to say that we are still assessing the recent impact of the new variant.

In addition, the length of time people are spending in hospital has also been reducing quite markedly since the new year – though, again, we are monitoring the data closely and carefully.

So, the emerging evidence is providing us with a firm basis to believe that in this next, coming phase of the pandemic, we will be able to deal with the virus differently and less restrictively.

However – and this is why I have described our current situation as a transition – although we are vaccinating as quickly as possible, and trying to speed up as much as possible, there is still a sizeable proportion of the population not yet fully vaccinated.

And full vaccination is vital. Protection against the Delta variant after one dose is not negligible – but it is not substantial either. It is after two doses that the protection becomes much stronger.

So if cases continue to rise significantly, for too long a period of time, while significant numbers are not fully vaccinated, we could still see a significant burden of illness and death, and severe pressure on our NHS.

And it might also be worth just pausing to reflect at this stage on what ‘protecting the NHS’ – which has been a key aim throughout this pandemic – means in this current context.

After coping with the pandemic for more than a year, the NHS is now seeking to get non-COVID treatment back on track.

That means protecting the NHS can’t just be about preventing it from being completely overwhelmed – although that is of course vital. It must also be about protecting its ability to get services back to normal.

So even although the health service ‘coped’ earlier this year,

when more than 2,000 people were in hospital – albeit I should say with enormous pressure on the workforce – that shouldn't be our benchmark. Anything remotely like that again would set back our efforts to get the NHS operating normally again.

So this is a key and a difficult moment.

We do remain on the right track overall. I remain confident that – with cautious, albeit difficult decisions now – we will enjoy much greater normality over the summer and beyond.

None of our decisions today – even in the face of rising case numbers – take us backwards.

And, while I know it is hard to think in these terms more than a year into a pandemic, that does represent real progress from the start of the year – back then, a new variant, and rising case numbers, did take us backwards into full lockdown.

That is not the case now, and because of the vaccination programme we can still look ahead with confidence.

But – and this is the difficult part – in areas where cases are relatively high or rising, our judgment is that a slight slowing down of the easing of restrictions, to allow time for more people to be fully vaccinated, will help protect that progress overall.

And that leads me to the decisions that we are setting out today.

It is important to recognise that the picture across the country is not uniform and so our decisions are not uniform either.

That is the benefit of the levels system – we don't need to apply a one size fits all approach with the same levels of restrictions in areas with low or more contained case numbers, as we do in areas with high or rising numbers.

However, a variable system also has its downsides. It is more complex, it is impossible to remove every anomaly, it is not without risk, and of course it can lead to a sense of inequity.

That is why it is important to set out as clearly as possible why different areas are subject to different restrictions, while recognising that these decisions are complex.

So let me turn to those decisions.

And, given that it has been in a unique situation for the past couple of weeks, I will talk about Glasgow first and separately.

I reported on Friday that the situation in Glasgow appeared to be stabilising.

And I am pleased to say that this remains the case.

Indeed, case numbers have fallen slightly in recent days – from 146 cases per hundred thousand people, to 129, and this provides further evidence that the major public health interventions we have seen in the past few weeks are having an impact.

In addition, although hospital admissions are rising, the vaccination effect means they are not, at least at this stage, increasing as fast as they might have done from a similar level of cases earlier in the year.

It is also important of course that we consider the harms caused by the virus, alongside the other harms that ongoing restrictions cause. These include wider health harms, social harms, and economic harms.

And these wider harms are not insignificant in Glasgow, given that it is now more than 8 months since, for example, we were last allowed to visit each other in our homes.

So taking all of this into account – and with the support of the National Incident Management Team – I can confirm that Glasgow City will move down to Level 2 from midnight on Friday into Saturday.

This means that people in Glasgow – as has been the case in most of the rest of Scotland since mid-May – will be able to meet in homes in groups of no more than 6, from a maximum of 3 households. It also means that indoor licensed hospitality can reopen, and that people can travel again between Glasgow and other parts of Scotland.

A number of venues will also be permitted to reopen, and outdoor adult contact sports can resume.

These changes are significant. As someone who lives in Glasgow, I know they will make a huge difference to quality of life.

But I ask everyone to remember that although stable and starting to decline, cases in Glasgow do still remain high – so please continue to be cautious.

In particular – and this actually applies to all of Scotland, particularly while we enjoy some better weather – although limited indoor meetings are now possible, it is still better to stay outdoors where possible. And in Level 2, groups of up to 8 people from 8 households can gather outdoors.

The last eight months – and perhaps the last couple of weeks in particular – have been really tough for Glasgow. So I want to thank everyone who has co-operated with the all the public health measures and stuck to all the rules and guidelines.

I will now turn to other parts of the country. And I'm going to first set out the difficult part of this statement.

There are a number of other local authority areas in addition to Glasgow that are not currently meeting the criteria for

Level 1, either in case numbers or test positivity.

Indeed, if we looked at just the raw numbers, it could be argued that some of these areas should be in Level 3.

However, our judgment – based on the emerging evidence of the impact of vaccines that I spoke about a moment ago on hospitalisation and our assessment of local factors and public health interventions – is that Level 3 would not be proportionate at this stage.

However, it is also our judgment that with case numbers as high as they are in these areas – and with a substantial proportion of adults not yet double dosed – it is safer, and more likely to protect our progress overall, if we hold these areas in Level 2 for a further period.

In addition to Glasgow, this applies to Edinburgh and Midlothian, Dundee, East Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire, the three Ayrshires, North and South Lanarkshire and Clackmannanshire and Stirling.

Now I know this will be disappointing – very disappointing – for people in these areas.

For these local authority areas, I should say we will be providing support to soft play and other closed sectors that had expected to open, or operate in a different way from 7 June. Full details will be provided by the Finance Secretary tomorrow.

But it is important to stress that this is a pause, not a step backwards.

And Level 2 is not lockdown. It does have an impact on opening hours of pubs and restaurants and the numbers that can attend certain events. But we can still meet indoors in limited numbers, and outdoors in groups of 8 people from 8 households. Hospitality remains open – indoors and outdoors – and so does retail, and there are no travel restrictions in place.

And taking a cautious approach now – while more people get fully vaccinated – does give us the best chance of staying on the right track overall.

So to everyone in these areas, please continue to be careful. Follow all of the important guidance on hygiene, distancing and face coverings. Keep getting tested. And come forward to be vaccinated as soon as you get the opportunity.

In more positive news, there are many parts of mainland Scotland where cases are at very low levels and broadly stable – or where case numbers might appear to be rising, but we are assured that they relate to clusters that are being managed.

So I can confirm that the following areas will move to Level 1 from 00:01 on Saturday morning.

Those areas are Highland, Argyll & Bute, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, Moray, Angus, Perth & Kinross, Falkirk, Fife, Inverclyde, East and West Lothian, West Dunbartonshire, Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders.

The full details of what that means are set out on the Scottish Government website.

But the main changes are as follows – the limits on meetings in indoor public places increase to 8 people from 3 households; and outdoors to 12 people from 12 households; 100 people as opposed to 50 can attend weddings and funerals; and

places like soft play and funfairs can reopen.

Again, I know these changes will be welcome. But please continue to be careful. That applies to all of us right now – and in particular it applies that meeting outdoors involves much less risk than meeting indoors.

Finally, Shetland, Orkney, and the Western Isles – and a number of small, remote islands – are already in Level 1. These communities are continuing to report extremely low numbers of new cases, and in many cases, a higher than average proportion of adults have received both doses of vaccine.

So these areas will move to Level 0 – again from 00:01 on Saturday morning.

Full details of what those changes mean can also be found on our website. But – for example – it means that people can meet indoors in groups of up to 4 households. Local licensing laws apply in hospitality, with no set nationwide closing time. And it means that the maximum attendance at weddings and funerals will be 200 – rather than 100 at Level 1, and 50 at Level 2.

Again, though, as well as asking islanders to exercise continued care, I would remind anyone travelling to any of the islands to use a lateral flow test before doing so. That way you will minimise the risk of taking the virus to any of these communities.

Presiding Officer,

I appreciate that today's decisions will feel like – and indeed are – a mixed bag.

That reflects the fact that we are in a transition phase. The vaccines do make the outlook positive, but the new variant means that the road ahead is still potentially bumpy.

So caution is necessary.

That said, no part of the country is going backwards today. Before the vaccines, that would have been impossible on case numbers like these.

But the vaccines are changing the game. And that means we can still be optimistic – very optimistic – about our chances of much more normality over this summer and beyond.

Indeed, in the days ahead, and while it may still feel a way off for many of us, we will publish more detailed work on what we expect life beyond Level 0 to look like, as that greater normality hopefully returns. Indeed, one reason for proceeding with more caution now, is to make it easier in future to resume that progress to Level 0 – and then beyond.

My last point – and this is the one I will finish on – is that, as always, all of us have a part to play in beating the virus back.

So please – get tested regularly. Free lateral flow tests are now available through the NHS Inform website. I would encourage again everyone to order these and test yourself twice a week.

The lateral flow tests give results in about half an hour – so they are a very quick and useful way of finding out if you might have the virus, even if you don't have symptoms.

Essentially, the more we all get tested, the more cases we find, and the more we break chains of transmission – so getting tested regularly is a way for all of us to contribute to the collective effort.

And secondly, make sure you get vaccinated when you are invited to do so.

That includes going for second doses – to repeat what I said earlier, second doses are vital in providing substantial protection against the virus, and in particular this new

variant of it.

If you can't make an appointment – and there will often be good reasons why that is the case – then please make sure you rearrange it.

If you haven't received an appointment letter yet and think you should have, you can go to the vaccinations page of the NHS Inform website to arrange your appointment.

Getting vaccinated is in all of our own best interests – whatever age we are, it makes it much less likely that we will become badly ill from COVID.

But it is also part of our wider civic duty to each other. It means that all of us can help suppress the virus and reduce the harm that it causes, and that will allow us to get to that phase of being able to deal with this in a less restrictive way than has been the case.

And finally, I would ask everybody to please continue to stick to the rules where you live, and follow the public health advice. Physical distancing, hand-washing, face coverings – all of this is still important for now. These basic precautions will reduce our chances of getting or spreading the virus.

So in summary – please get tested regularly, get vaccinated when you are asked, and continue to follow the public health advice.

If we all do that, then – despite a pause for part of the country today – we can keep on the right track, and we can then make progress, over the summer, to living much less restricted lives.

So let me end by thanking – again – everyone across the country for helping us do exactly that.”

Level Two restrictions are as follows:



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