

# **Coronavirus – Government changes the rules on self-isolation**

**Changes are being made to self-isolation rules for close contacts of Covid-19 cases to allow essential staff in critical roles to return to work to maintain lifeline services and important national infrastructure.**

It will be possible to apply to exempt those who work in critical roles where staff shortages are in danger of putting essential services, such as health and social care, transport and the provision of food supplies at risk.

Exemption will only be granted in respect of members of staff who voluntarily agree not to self isolate, and the employers' duty of care to all their employees must be respected.

Strict conditions will apply – staff must be double-vaccinated and in receipt of their second dose at least two weeks previously. They will also require to have a negative PCR test and to agree to undertake daily lateral flow tests.

Applications may be made through The Scottish Government website.

Exemptions will be made on a temporary basis and last only for as long as there is an immediate risk to business or service

continuity.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said: "It is essential that lifeline services and critical national infrastructure are maintained and we are implementing these changes now – ahead of possible changes to self-isolation rules for close contacts that may apply more generally in future – to ensure staff shortages do not put key services at risk.

"We have seen significant staff shortages in a small number of organisations in recent days and we have worked with them to protect services. Applications for exemptions are being considered from today and we will consider applications as they come in.

"Clinical evidence tells us we can safely and effectively release some critical staff from self-isolation, with appropriate safeguards. However, this is a very limited change at this stage, to be applied on a case by case basis and only where absolutely necessary.

"We will not allow key services to be threatened by staff shortages but equally we must continue to protect public health."

Willie Rennie MSP said: "I have been calling for something similar for some weeks as the risk of staff absence because of self-isolation is threatening to collapse essential public services like hospitals, GP surgeries and home care. That would have a significant impact on the health of people across the country.

"If the safeguards are right and the risk of the spread of the virus is low then this would be a sensible step. I want to study the details to make sure the SNP Government have got this right."

But Unite the union say that vaccination does not offer sufficient protection to workers, and that self-isolation is

still key. Unite has raised serious concerns directly with The Scottish Government over its approach to Level 0. The union say that according to the Scottish Government figures, 1,825 new cases of Covid-19 were recorded in the past 24 hours on 22 July. There were 22 new deaths reported of someone who tested positive for the virus over the past 28 days. In the week ending 20 July, on average 2,109 NHS staff, or around 1.2% of the NHS workforce, reported absent each day for a range of reasons related to Covid-19.

James O'Connell, Unite industrial officer, said: "There has been a growing number of cases of the delta variant in Scotland and we can't allow this to spiral out of control. While we understand there is a need and desire to return to normality, we have got to remember that vaccination is not immunisation. Unite's members particularly in those vulnerable sectors such as health and social care are extremely worried that we could see a new spike in hospital admissions, and it is the staff on the frontline having to deal with this."

"If you're identified as a close contact it potentially takes 48 hours minimum for the virus to be detected through a test so there is a potential for staff to be asymptomatic without knowing they are positive for a period of time. Using the hierarchy of control risk should be removed or at least minimised as much as it can be, therefore, in order to remove or minimise the risk of spread you should isolate not gamble using health and social care staff as the test. They look after the most vulnerable people in our society, is it worth it? The Government is putting a lot of emphasis on double vaccination which does not stop contraction of the virus, however, why are they not looking at reducing the time between vaccine?"

Under this new process, before a staff member who is a close contact of a positive case can return to work, they must fulfil the following criteria:

- be fully vaccinated, having had their second dose at least 14 days before exposure
- be asymptomatic, and be in possession of a valid vaccination record ([available from NHS Inform here](#))
- have evidence of a negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test
- return a daily negative lateral flow test for up to 10 days after exposure
- fully comply with any PPE requirements, hand hygiene and other infection control measures

Staff who cannot reasonably isolate from on-going exposure to a COVID positive household member will not usually be asked to return to work.

Applications can be made via the Scottish Government website and will be required to demonstrate:

- that the organisation meets the definition of CNI as set out here [Critical National Infrastructure | CPNI](#)
- how self-isolation is impacting critical functions and services
- what steps have already been taken to address this pressure
- the impact of no action
- the scope of the requested exemption – location, number of staff etc
- whether they are currently engaging with a local IMT regarding outbreak management

Health, social care and local services will have a different process and this will be communicated separately.