

Coronavirus – Scotland moving beyond Level 0 from Monday

The wearing of face coverings in indoor settings will remain mandatory even as Scotland moves beyond Level 0, but the legal requirements on gatherings and physical distancing will remain in place from Monday.

The First Minister told a virtual meeting of The Scottish Parliament that she expects some of the measures which have been employed to keep Covid-19 at bay will remain in place for some time to come.

Home working remains the preferred option for now, and employers will be advised to consider a hybrid model in future – as the First Minister said The Scottish Government is doing.

Organisers of outdoor events of more than 5,000, and also organisers of indoor events with more than 2,000 attendees will have to ask for permission, which will be reviewed on a case by case basis, but night clubs and everywhere else which has been closed until now will reopen.

It will remain possible for the government to restrict the spread of outbreaks in local areas by using travel restrictions if necessary.

Ms Sturgeon said: "It is the combination of the steady decline in cases, the success of vaccination helping to weaken the link between cases and serious illness, and of course our understanding of the social, health and economic harms that continued restrictions cause – all underpinned by our obligation to ensure that any restrictions that remain in place are lawful, in other words that they are both necessary and proportionate – that forms the basis for our decision today to move beyond level 0.

"The move beyond level 0 will entail the lifting of most of the remaining legally imposed restrictions – most notably on physical distancing and limits to the size of social gatherings.

"It also means that from 9 August, no venues will be legally required to close."

An app will be launched next month which will allow travellers to carry vaccine details for international travel on their phones.

Test and Protect will remain in place so that a visit to a restaurant means that diners have to divulge their full details. If the app "pings" someone however then it will no longer mean automatic self-isolation is required. Anyone who is double-vaccinated with at least two weeks passed since their second dose and who has no symptoms will be able to end self-isolation if they return a negative PCR test. The same conditions will also apply to anyone aged between five and 17 years old, even if they have not been vaccinated. The requirement to take a PCR test will not apply to children under the age of five.

Test and Protect will change for schools with a more targeted

approach so that whole classes will not have to self-isolate as a matter of course. Guidance on the new approach is issued by the government today, allowing fewer young people to self-isolate in future and for a shorter period of time. For the first six weeks of term the same measures will remain in place – for example staff must keep a distance of one metre away from staff and pupils. Masks will remain essential for the first six weeks, but this will be kept under review.

Vaccination

One of the conditions of moving beyond Level 0 is that enough people have been vaccinated. At this point over 92% of those aged over 40 have had two doses of vaccine. Young people aged between 12 and 17 with specific health conditions are now being invited for vaccination, following advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

Ventilation will be improved in schools and child care centres and the government has set aside £10 million for local authorities to carry out any necessary works. The First Minister said that the use of CO2 monitors is a valuable measure of how well ventilated a space is, and that every school must assess the quality of their ventilation.

All school and university pupils are encouraged to take a PCR test before the beginning of term and to test themselves regularly after that.

The First Minister reminded everyone that the best idea is to get vaccinated, test yourself regularly and if you test positive or have symptoms get a PCR test.

She also advised meeting others outdoors as much as possible while the weather remains good, and if you are indoors then opening windows to allow better ventilation. She counselled that everyone should continue to avoid indoor crowded places and to use hand washing and gel as a means of protection.

Ms Sturgeon said: “The move beyond Level 0 will entail the lifting of most of the remaining legally imposed restrictions – most notably, on physical distancing and limits to the size of social gatherings. It also means that from 9 August, no venues will be legally required to close.

“This change is significant and it is hard-earned. The sacrifices everyone has made over the past year and a half can never be overstated. However, while this move will restore a substantial degree of normality, it is important to be clear that it does not signal the end of the pandemic or a return to life exactly as we knew it before Covid struck.

“Declaring freedom from, or victory over, this virus is in my view premature. The harm the virus can do, including through the impact of long Covid, should not be underestimated. And its ability to mutate may yet pose us real challenges.”

Political response

Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar, asked the First Minister to take vaccination centres to the people to ensure those in low uptake areas are not left behind. He said: “There is definite light at the end of the tunnel, however, we are also at a crucial point for Scotland’s recovery.

“It is good to see positive improvements in the rate of cases and numbers in hospital, and as restrictions ease we need to ensure people are being kept safe.

“That means recognising that a new period in our fight against the pandemic needs a new approach.

“As we move beyond level 0 it is important that we do everything to protect the freedom people can now enjoy again.

“It means retooling our vaccination effort to target those places where it lags and preparing it for the next big challenge.

“The last few weeks have underlined the importance of Test and Protect and if increased testing is the alternative to self-

isolation then we cannot allow the resourcing of the test and tracing system to again be neglected.

“But we all know how key vaccination is and so we must maintain the progress and intensity of the programme.

“In recent weeks the 7-day rate of vaccinations has reduced and there are still thousands of young people awaiting their first, never mind second dose. We should be doing all we can to remove barriers to vaccination and encourage uptake.

“So can I ask the First Minister what plans there are to make vaccination more accessible for those in need of a dose?

For the hardest to reach, we need to take vaccination centres to the people, not people to the vaccination centres. Will we see pop up clinics at sporting events, universities, colleges and train stations and when will that commence?

“In low uptake areas, will she consider door-to-door vaccinations to increase uptake in those postcodes?”

The First Minister said that door-to door vaccination programmes would probably not be the preferred route.

Scottish Conservative Leader Douglas Ross said: “The success of Scotland and the UK’s vaccine scheme means we can now look to move forward and remove almost all Covid restrictions.

“The changes to self-isolation rules towards a test-first system, as we proposed previously, are welcome. This should prevent young people and the double vaccinated from having their lives unduly disrupted.

“However, continuing with so many Covid restrictions indefinitely will hold Scotland’s recovery back. These restrictions will have serious consequences for businesses, family finances and young people’s education.

“We have moved beyond Level 0 but the government are still clinging to control over large parts of people’s lives.

“The goalposts have been moved again. We are now stuck in a new Level -1.

“Clear communication is essential to maintaining public trust and compliance. This new halfway house could create confusion.

“People have sacrificed and tolerated severe constraints on their lives with impressive dedication because it was necessary and the public health data supported the decisions.

“But people are losing patience with these last-minute extensions and limitations on their lives without enough of a justification or a clear idea of what comes next.

“The ongoing threat of local lockdowns and travel bans does not reflect the success of the vaccine scheme.

“While they make sense in some other settings, prolonging the use of face masks in schools will limit young people’s learning and prevent a return to normality in classrooms.

“Social distancing is now in a grey area where the legal restriction is gone but the guidance remains in force. That limbo will be unhelpful to businesses.

Scottish Greens co-leader Patrick Harvie reiterated his party’s concerns about domestic vaccine passports. The First Minister indicated that the Scottish Government is currently considering the use of vaccine certification for “certain higher risk venues in future.”

Mr Harvie said: “I’m concerned that there is still a worrying emphasis being placed on the idea of issuing Covid status certificates – so called Covid passports.

“The First Minister referred to their use in relation to accessing higher risk venues, but without physical mitigations, the use of certification may risk giving people a false sense of safety and potentially make venues less safe.

“The introduction of vaccine passports also raises human rights implication if our ability to go about our daily lives is dependent on our health status, and presents inequality

issues, particularly for those who work in those high-risk venues, but who may not themselves be fully protected.”

COVID PASSPORTS

The First Minister announce that the new app referred to above is being finalised and will be available in September.

She said: “Presiding Officer, I can also confirm that we continue to consider very carefully the possible, albeit limited, use of Covid status certification for access to certain higher risk venues in future.

“We are currently developing an app to make access to Covid status certificates – which will include vaccination details – easier for international travel. This will be launched next month.

“The app will have functionality to support the use of such certificates for domestic settings should we decide that this is appropriate.

“However, I want to assure Parliament that we do not underestimate the ethical, equity and human rights issues associated with Covid status certification, and we will keep members updated and consulted on our thinking on this issue.”

Alistair Carmichael MP, interim leader of the Scottish Conservatives believes this is a move towards what he calls illiberal. domestic vaccine passports.

He said: “We are moving ‘beyond level zero’ which sounds a little like something that would break your calculator if you typed it in. Despite the slightly confusing wording the next step towards relaxing restrictions is good news for many, particularly in the tourism and hospitality trade.

“However, the First Minister has flip-flopped again on domestic vaccine passports. Just last week John Swinney said

that wouldn't be the right approach. Now vaccine passports are not just back on the table, the app paving the way for them is coming to our phones.

“We all know that this government loves centralisation but such a scheme would be a massive imposition on people and on businesses. Instead of spinning the First Minister needs to rule them out for good.”