

Concerns about safety at Edinburgh's Christmas market

Concerns have been raised about the safety of Edinburgh's Christmas market after crowds of people were seen without masks and confusion over the enforcement of test and trace.

Scenes of large crowds packed into the Princes Street market have appeared on social media over recent days, with many commenting on the lack of social distancing and mask wearing.

Currently, no restrictions on crowds or gatherings are in place in Scotland, however The Scottish Government has warned the reintroduction of some measures to curb the spread of the virus are highly likely as the Omicron variant rips through the population.

The government says it is expected the latest mutation – which is rapidly spreading across the capital – will become the dominant Covid variant in Scotland within days.

Council chiefs say they are continuing to “monitor announcements” on the spread of Covid-19.

Underbelly, which the council pays to run the market, said test and trace is “in operation at all sites within Edinburgh's Christmas with QR codes available at each site entrance”.

But staff working for Edinburgh's Christmas said test and

trace is not currently in place on the site.

One witness told the Local Democracy Reporting Service the market is a “free for all” with stewards not ensuring people complete test and trace and only instructing visitors where to enter and leave.

In a post online, one person dubbed the festive attraction “Omicron Market” and said they saw “thousands of tourists packed in like sardines with zero social distancing.

Another wrote: “Just back from Edinburgh Christmas market, the place was absolutely full. Mask wearing to the minimum.”

Someone else said: “The queue for the Christmas market in Edinburgh was clearly about 20 minutes long, rammed full of people smushed together, and I didn’t see a single mask between them.”

An attendee added there is “zero crowd control” and “hardly anyone wearing masks”.

A City of Edinburgh Council spokesperson said: “We continue to monitor announcements from the Scottish Government, Health Protection Scotland and other partners to ensure we manage this developing situation as effectively as possible.”

An Underbelly spokesperson said: “Covid-19 has been fully considered in planning Edinburgh’s Christmas and we continue to work closely with The Scottish Government and The City of Edinburgh Council to create a safe environment for all of our visitors and staff.

“Almost all of our attractions and events are outdoors, and we have significantly increased the circulation space for visitors this year by expanding the markets and attractions into West Princes Street Gardens and George Street.”

“Edinburgh’s Christmas is an unseated outdoor event, we are working within the current Scottish Government guidelines, and

so although Test and Trace is advised to all guests by Edinburgh's Christmas staff, it is not mandatory."

Underbelly promises on procedure

At a meeting of the Culture and Communities Committee on 19 November Charlie Wood, Underbelly Director, said to councillors that the security of their staff and audiences has always been their first absolute priority and now in particular they are taking steps to protect against Covid-19.

Mr Wood said: "I think everyone already knows that there are three sites this year – the ice rink in George Street, the arena in East and West Princes Gardens.

"Edinburgh's Christmas have gone through the Event Planning and Operations Group (EPOG) process with all agencies including NHS Lothian and the City Safety team and Environmental Health team.

"All procedures will continue to be assessed during the operation.

"I think a key point is information and how we share that with our staff and those attending.

"We will ask our visitors to comply with these rules. If anyone has symptoms, test positive or told to self-isolate then they are advised not to come to Edinburgh's Christmas sites or events."

Each of the three sites will operate under a total capacity of 4,000 people at any one time, and all visitors will have to scan a QR code when they come onto site. All staff will be advised to take three lateral flow tests each week.

Charlie Wood continued: "We have few indoor sites this year but where there are any we will ensure that there is good ventilation. Good hygiene is promoted across all sites and

everyone will be advised to wear masks where required/ All trading staff – so all people engaging with the public – will be required to wear a mask while on site.

“Cleaning will be carried out on a loop – both front of house and back of house focusing on any areas where any person has touched a surface, ensuring that all traders comply with Food Standards Scotland compliance and guidance.

“Entry to all rides and attractions is now contactless. On market stalls all areas which are touched will be sanitised on a loop. The Santa Grotto in West Princes Street Gardens will be cleaned between every session and at the ice rink, skates will be cleaned each time they are used.”

by Donald Torvill Local Democracy Reporter

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