

Coronavirus – new measures to be introduced from midnight on Friday

Following the First Minister's address to the nation and her statement to The Scottish Parliament on Tuesday, additional measures to manage the increased risks of transmission associated with Omicron will be introduced from midnight on Friday.

As Omicron continues to spread, The Scottish Government has set out new guidance and measures to take effect in a bid to stem the flow of transmission, keep businesses and services open, and protect against any additional pressure on health services.

The government advice states there is evidence that the new, highly transmissible Omicron strain of Covid-19 can infect those who have been vaccinated, or previously infected. Therefore it is considered necessary to reintroduce some protections to prevent hospital admissions.

Guidance has been updated on reducing social interaction at home or in indoor public places to a maximum of three households at any time, with everyone encouraged to take a lateral flow test before meeting. This will also be reflected in updated guidance for visiting care homes – with no more

than two households to visit a resident at a time – and in hospitals, with no more than two visitors at any time. In all settings, people should take a lateral flow test before meeting, to support people to continue to connect with their loved ones.

Additional funding of £100 million to ensure the Self-Isolation Support Grant is available to those who need it, and a £100 million financial package for eligible businesses is to be made available.

As the First Minister was on her feet in the chamber at Holyrood, UK Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced funding for the devolved nations in a press release sent just after 2pm. Since additional in-year Barnett funding will not be confirmed until early next year, HM Treasury has made additional funding available to the devolved nations to allow them to tackle Covid-19 with any new measures.

The Treasury has not yet confirmed the amount of the funding but Chancellor Rishi Sunak said: “We are working with the governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to drive the vaccine rollout to all corners of the United Kingdom and ensure people and businesses all across the country are supported.”

This money appears to be an advance on Barnett consequential rather than any new money. The First Minister said to MSPs on Tuesday that the Scottish Government had £100 million ready to help businesses deal with the economic fallout of the latest round of measures. The Scottish Government cannot borrow and so is reliant on HM Treasury for funding which they can raise by borrowing if needed.

The Scottish Government confirmed that business support funding has been allocated to help businesses adhere to the necessary public health measures. It will support businesses in hospitality and food supply, and in the culture sector

where crucial bookings have been lost during this key trading period. The Finance Secretary, Kate Forbes will engage with affected sectors of business immediately to consult on and confirm the details of support. The government confirms that money will be available as soon as possible.



The First Minister addressed the nation on Tuesday night from St Andrew's House PHOTO The Scottish Government

BOOSTER VACCINATIONS

The government continues to accelerate the Covid-19 booster programme with the online portal for 18-29 year-olds opening on Wednesday and the waiting period following vaccination reduced from 15 minutes to five minutes. (This last measure is in line with UK government guidance in England. Covid-19 boosters will be prioritised over the remainder of the flu

vaccination programme to speed up vaccination times and enable more appointments.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said: “Getting fully vaccinated is the best thing any of us can do to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and the country. So please, book your booster jab as soon as possible. Speeding up vaccination is essential and I want to assure the nation that it is the government’s top priority.

“While we are speeding up vaccination, we must also try to slow down Omicron. That is why we are also proposing today, albeit reluctantly, some further protective measures. I am appealing to everyone to follow today’s advice, to help slow Omicron down while more of us get our boosters.

“I am not asking anyone to ‘cancel’ Christmas – but in the run up to and in the immediate aftermath of Christmas, I am asking everyone to reduce as far as possible, and to a minimum, the contacts we have with people in other households.

“We are not banning or restricting household mixing in law as before – we understand the negative impact this has on mental health and wellbeing – but we are asking everyone, and we will issue strong guidance to this effect, to cut down as far as possible the number of people outside our own households that we are interacting with just now. This will help break transmission chains.

“Turning to Christmas Day specifically – or Christmas Eve or Boxing Day or whenever you have your main family celebration – we are not asking you to cancel or change your plans, and we are not proposing limits on the size of household gatherings. Places of worship will also remain open, with appropriate mitigations. But we will issue guidance to help you make Christmas safer.

“Omicron will be especially concerning to people on the Highest Risk List – the Chief Medical Officer will be writing

to all of you shortly with further advice and assurance.”

Further guidance on additional measures announced by the First Minister will be published by the end of the week.

These include:

Businesses, service providers and places of worship asked to take all reasonable measures to avoid crowding, encourage wearing of masks and support distancing in their premises

This will include guidance to ensure that people who can work from home, do so – for those in sectors where working from home is not possible, regular testing with lateral flow tests should be undertaken

Reinforcement of protective measures in retail and other settings including distancing, managing customer flows, and protective screens

Reinforcement of protective measures in hospitality settings including collection of contact tracing information and measures to reduce crowding

Guidance to increase mask wearing in outdoor crowded areas such as Christmas markets or festive celebrations

The Scottish Government’s strong recommendation continues to be that everyone should take a lateral flow test beforehand, on any occasion that you will be meeting another household, as an important way we can all reduce the risk of unknowingly spreading the virus to other people.

The Scottish Government guidance is that it remains vitally important to strictly adhere to all public health advice, being stringent around use of face coverings in all required settings, isolating for the full period when advised to, and ensuring good ventilation in spaces where households will mix.