

Coronavirus – restrictions to come into effect on Boxing Day

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced to MSPs at Holyrood that there will be new restrictions introduced from 26 December in an effort to slow the spread of the new omicron variant.

These measures will last for at least three weeks and will mean that most sporting fixtures will become spectator free while the accelerated booster programme is allowed to take effect.

Parliament will be recalled next week between Christmas and New Year and will review the situation at 11 January 2022.

From 05:00 on 27 December, to minimise the risk of widespread transmission, there will be a requirement for one metre physical distancing between adults in all indoor hospitality and leisure settings, including:

- pubs, bars, restaurants, cafes and other settings where food and drink is served for consumption on-site
- leisure settings including gyms, theatres, cinemas, bingo and snooker halls and bowling alleys
- museums, galleries and other visitor attractions

Table service will be required in settings where alcohol is served for consumption on the premises.

Physical distancing will not be required in places of worship or on public transport, however existing mitigations for these settings will continue to apply.

In addition, from 05:00 on 26 December, to help ease pressure on emergency services and reduce the risks of transmission in large crowds, attendance at large events will be limited – to 100 people for indoor standing events, to 200 people for indoor seated events, and to 500 people for all outdoor events seated or standing. Organisers of large professional sporting fixtures will have discretion over whether to admit spectators up to these limits.

This means that events such as Edinburgh's Hogmanay is cancelled for the second year in a row, partly to avoid crowds gathering but also to minimise the risk of people travelling to and from the capital. In addition the cancellation of such events is designed to take the pressure off emergency services.

The daily figures were announced by Public Health Scotland and show that 5,242 positive cases were reported. With 39,493 new tests for Covid-19 the test positivity rate is 14.9%. There were 9 new deaths registered and 37 people are in ICU as well as 515 people in hospital. More than 4.3 million people have had their first dose of vaccine and 2.6 million have had their booster dose. In Lothian 1,220 positive cases were reported.

Guidance will be updated to advise against indoor activities where physical distancing cannot be maintained, including non-professional adult contact sports, from 26 December.

A package totalling £375 million, including £175 million of additional funding from the Treasury, will be made available to support sectors affected by the latest protective measures to combat Omicron. An update will be provided on the breakdown and allocation of funding as soon as possible.

Ministers will consider how Covid certification could be

expanded to cover a wider range of indoor settings to support them remaining open once the booster programme is complete.

Ms Sturgeon said: “The rate of vaccination acceleration in an age cohort with, to date, lower levels relatively speaking of booster protection underlines the vital importance of everyone getting booster jags as quickly as possible. However, as the booster roll-out is completed – and bearing in mind that it takes around a week for immune protection to take effect in individuals – we must also act to slow down the spread of cases.

“This is not a choice between protecting health and protecting the economy – if we don’t stem the spread of the virus, both health and the economy will suffer.

“I totally understand the temptation to delay; to hope, after two long years of this, that further steps might not be necessary. But we are already seeing a significant impact from staff absences across the economy and public services – we must do what we can to stem this. We know from experience that if we wait until the data tells us conclusively that we have a problem, for example, with hospital admissions, it will already be too late to act to avoid that problem.

“Booster jags are our best line of defence against Omicron and they are what will get us through and out of this difficult phase I believe. Last week, I said that our target was to have 80% of the eligible population vaccinated with boosters by the time the bells strike on Hogmanay. I can confirm today that we are now confident that we have the capacity to meet that target, but to reach it, or get as close to it as possible, we need everyone who is eligible to come forward.

“Getting fully vaccinated is the best thing any of us can do to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and the country, so please do get boosted before the bells.

“Our advice is to stay at home as much as possible, but if you

are meeting other people, test before you go – every time – and test as close to going as possible. This is really important for family gatherings on Christmas Day or Boxing Day.”