

Coronavirus – government lifting restrictions in staged approach

The Scottish Government has announced a new gradual approach to relaxing protective Covid-19 measures to help Scotland manage and recover from the ongoing pandemic. These are all set out in its updated Strategic Framework.

In a statement to Parliament, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon confirmed the details of the updated guidance to manage Covid-19 primarily through public health advice, vaccination, and treatment rather than legal restrictions.

The First Minister also set out an indicative timescale for remaining legal protections to be lifted:

- vaccine certification will no longer be legally required from Monday 28 February, although the app will remain available so any business that wishes to continue certification on a voluntary basis to reassure customers will be able to do so
- current legal requirements on the use of face coverings, the collection of customer details for contact tracing purposes, and for businesses, service providers and places of worship to have regard to guidance on Covid and to take reasonably practicable measures set out in the guidance are expected to be lifted on 21 March,

subject to the state of the pandemic
access to lateral flow and PCR tests will continue to be
free of charge, ahead of a detailed transition plan
being published on the future of Scotland's test and
protect programme in March

People who test positive for Covid-19 will continue to be
asked to self-isolate to reduce the risk of infecting other
people. Any changes to the recommended period of self-
isolation will be considered on an ongoing basis.

The First Minister said: "Covid is unfortunately still with us
and we must therefore remain vigilant and prepared for the
threats it poses. But today's new framework is an important
moment in our recovery. It marks the point at which we move
away, hopefully sustainably, from legal restrictions, and rely
instead on sensible behaviours, adaptations and mitigations.

"Our return to normality must go hand in hand with a
continuing determination to look out for and after each other.
All of us have a part to play in ensuring a safe and
sustainable recovery, so please continue to follow public
health advice on getting vaccinated, testing as regularly as
appropriate, wearing face coverings when required or
recommended, and keeping rooms ventilated.

"All of this still matters, even as we lift the remaining
legal requirements. It is how we can keep ourselves and each
other safe, as we recover from Covid and look forward together
to brighter and better days ahead."

Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross said: "I welcome the
First Minister's decision to move away from blanket legal
restrictions towards an approach based on public health
guidance.

"Two weeks ago, the Scottish Conservatives published our own
blueprint for living with Covid, titled Back to Normality. It
focused more on personal responsibility and trusting the

Scottish public to make their own adjustments to protect themselves and their families.

“When our plan was published, the Health Secretary branded it reckless, yet today large parts of it have been adopted by the Scottish Government.

“They’re moving face masks from law to guidance, finally scrapping vaccine passports and getting rid of mass testing. Reckless two weeks ago, government policy today.

“The demise of the discredited vaccine passport scheme is particularly welcome – and long overdue. There was never any evidence that the policy worked, yet it led to huge expense and inconvenience for businesses.

“In her statement the First Minister said her government is moving to a system of representative sampling, away from mass testing. Yet she has chosen to create a fight with the UK Government over this issue, just weeks before she plans to scale back testing anyway.

“Nicola Sturgeon said that ‘using restrictions to suppress infection is no longer as necessary as it once was. And given the wider harms caused by protective measures, it is no longer as justifiable either.’

“Against that backdrop, there is no justification for her extending the government’s emergency Covid powers for a further six months.

“Throughout this pandemic, Scottish businesses have been an afterthought for this government – and that remains the case. This document is supposed to be a plan for living with Covid, yet it appears from the First Minister’s response to me in the chamber that she didn’t even consult businesses before publishing her plans.”

Scottish Labour’s Health and Covid Recovery spokesperson

Jackie Baillie said: “At times of crisis it is more important than ever for both governments in Scotland and the UK to work together in the interests of Scots, but instead we see conflict.

“Scottish Labour have set out our plan for living well with Covid, designed to keep people safe, provide them with certainty, and build resilience into our services. The continuation of testing, contact tracing and isolation is central to this.

“The First Minister talks about a transition phase in which testing will remain free of charge – but provides no clarity on what will happen after or what categories free testing will apply to.

“We also have no information about how risk levels will be determined, and what this will mean in practice.

“At a time when people are looking for more certainty about the future, there are not yet answers on the fundamental measures that will be in place to protect Scots.

“We were promised a framework, but this looks like a progress report.

“Public health is devolved – the First Minister must tell us now if she is going to fund testing and contact tracing in order to protect Scots.”

Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Alex Cole-Hamilton said: “The gaps in our testing and contacting tracing operations were punishing. The delays ramping those up pushed Scotland into tighter restrictions. So we should not make that mistake again given the possibility of future variants.

“Testing is an important warning light. People want to have the confidence that they are going to be able to access lateral flow tests for free as they need them, regardless of

their background or income. That should be within the new framework.

“I’m glad to see the end of mandatory vaccine passports, but I’m concerned about allowing businesses to demand them without a clear, defined public health rationale.

“It is in defiance of the fact that you can have a vaccine passport and still have Covid.

“These were supposed to be an exceptional measure to drive up vaccinations, so why is the First Minister normalising vaccine passports indefinitely?”

Stephen Montgomery, spokesperson for the Scottish Hospitality Group, said:

“We welcome the Scottish Government’s new Strategic Framework and the decision to downgrade the remaining blanket restrictions to guidance in the coming weeks, and will now take the time to digest its contents. The Scottish Hospitality Group has consistently campaigned for the removal of unnecessary burdens on our sector and today is a significant step in the right direction.

In particular, we welcome the end to the COVID passports scheme and test and protect, which places a heavy bureaucratic burden on hospitality venues with little beneficial effect to protecting our customer’s health. There are a number of details which will require further thought and consultation, and we would have liked to see a clearer and faster transition to the end of restrictions and mandatory use of masks, as keeping these for a further month does nothing for rebuilding consumer confidence.

As the owners of Scotland’s best-loved pubs, clubs, restaurants and hotels, we will continue to do all that we can to keep our customers safe and we know that our loyal customers will welcome this step towards normality. Our focus now turns to restoring public confidence in

Scotland's much-loved hospitality venues and focusing entirely on supporting our sector to recover. We look forward to continuing to work constructively with the Scottish Government to help us to do so."