

# Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's speech 22 September 2020

Thank you Presiding Officer.

I want to update the chamber on additional restrictions that the Scottish Government believes are now necessary to get COVID back under control as we enter winter.

I will also set out why these measures are essential, and the principles and priorities that have guided our decisions.

First, though, let me provide a summary of today's statistics.

Since yesterday, an additional 383 cases of COVID have been confirmed.

That represents 7.6% of people newly tested, and takes the total number of cases to 25,009.

A total of 73 patients are currently in hospital with confirmed COVID, which is the same as yesterday.

And 10 people are in intensive care which is two more than yesterday.

I am also sorry to report that in the past 24 hours, one further death has been registered of a patient who had tested positive.

The total number of deaths in Scotland under that measurement is now 2,506.

That reminds us of the impact of COVID. These deaths are not just statistics – they are of real people whose loss is a source of heartbreak and my condolences go to everyone who has lost a loved one to this illness.

Today's figures reflect the course the virus has taken in recent weeks.

In mid-July, we were recording an average of nine new cases every day.

Around four weeks later, that had risen to an average of 52 a day.

Three weeks after that, it was 102.

And as of today the average daily number of cases is 285.

We have also seen an increase in the percentage of tests coming back positive. In late August, that percentage was consistently below 1%.

Today it is over 7%.

The R number is above 1 again, possibly as high as 1.4.

Now it is worth stressing that this growth in cases - because of the collective sacrifices we all made to drive infection levels down over the summer period - is from a low base.

It is also, at this stage, far less rapid than it was in March.

But it is rising, faster than we can be comfortable with and we cannot let it continue unchecked.

And while in recent weeks, the biggest number of new cases has been in people under the age of 40, we now see an increase amongst the older population too.

And unsurprisingly, in light of that, hospital and intensive care admissions and also deaths are starting to rise as well.

All of this underlines what, for me, is, and always has been, a key point,

We cannot and must not be complacent about COVID.

It kills too many old and vulnerable people. And for younger, healthier people, while the risks of dying from it are much lower - though not non-existent - it can still result in long term, serious health problems.

That's why action to bring it back under control is necessary - and to bring the R number down again, the action we take now must go beyond the step we announced almost two weeks ago to restrict indoor and outdoor gatherings to six people from two households.

Over the weekend and in the course of yesterday the Scottish Government considered a range of options.

On Saturday, I had a discussion with other devolved administrations, and I spoke to the Prime Minister yesterday.

I also took part in this morning's COBR meeting.

I'm please to say that at that meeting, all four UK governments committed to suppressing the virus to the lowest possible level and keeping it there.

Our challenge in the weeks to come is to ensure our actions are commensurate with this objective.

Following on from the COBR meeting, measures to further control the virus were agreed at the Scottish Government Cabinet.

I can confirm that we will introduce measures on hospitality similar to those outlined for England by the Prime Minister a short while ago - and thereby align as far as possible with the rest of the U.K.

However, the advice given to the Cabinet by the Chief Medical Officer and the National Clinical Director is that this on its own will not be sufficient to bring the R number down.

They stress that we must act, not just quickly and decisively, but also on a scale significant enough to have an impact on the spread of the virus.

And they advise that we must take account of the fact that household interaction is a key driver of transmission.

To that end, we intend - as Northern Ireland did yesterday - to also introduce nationwide additional restrictions on household gatherings, similar to those already in place in the West of Scotland.

I will say more about the detail of these measures shortly and, of course, full details will also be published on the Scottish Government's website.

But first let me be clear about the priorities that have guided our decisions.

And it is essential that we do think in terms of priorities. Faced with a global pandemic of an infectious and dangerous virus, it is not possible to do everything and it is not possible, unfortunately, to live our lives completely normally.

No country is able to do that just now.

So instead we have to decide what matters most to us and make trade-offs elsewhere to make those things possible.

Of course, the most important priority for all of us is saving lives and protecting health.

But there are other priorities too.

Firstly, we are determined to keep schools open and young people in education. That is vital to the health, wellbeing and future prospects of every young person across our country.

Second, we must restart as many previously paused NHS services as possible, so that more people can get the non-COVID treatment that they need. Our NHS must be equipped this winter to care for those who have COVID - and it will be.

But it must be there for people with heart disease, cancer and other illnesses too.

And, third, we must protect people's jobs and livelihoods - that means keeping businesses open and trading as normally as is feasible.

To achieve all of that, we must stop the virus from spiralling out of control and we can only do that if we accept restrictions in other aspects of our lives.

Now the more positive news is that because we did drive COVID down to low levels over the summer, and because we now have Test & Protect in place and functioning well, the restrictions can be more targeted than was the case earlier in the year.

The measures I am announcing today are tough - I am not going to pretend otherwise - but they do not represent a full scale lockdown of the kind imposed in March.

Indeed, on the contrary, today's measures are an attempt to avoid the need for another lockdown.

I also want to address talk that there has been in recent days about restrictions being needed for six months or more.

It is certainly the case, that until scientific developments such as a vaccine change the game in the battle against COVID, it will have a continuing impact on our lives.

But that doesn't necessarily mean that all of the new restrictions I am announcing today will be in place for six months.

By acting early and substantially, our hope is that these new measures will be in place for a shorter period than would be the case if we waited longer to act.

In the first instance, we will review these measures in three weeks - although given the nature of this virus, it is important to be clear that they may be needed for longer than that.

So let me set out the package of measures that we hope can bring COVID back under control.

I will focus first on those areas where we intend to reinforce existing guidance and provide better support for compliance.

Firstly, everyone who can work from home, should work from home.

That has, of course, been the Scottish Government advice throughout, but we are reinforcing and underlining it today.

To employers, if you have encouraged workers back to the office who could be working from home, please rethink that now.

We know not everyone wants to work from home – and we know it has an impact on our town and city centres - but with the virus on the rise again, home working limits the numbers of people on public transport and limits the numbers of people gathering together for lengthy prolonged periods indoors. That is why it is so important.

Now we want employers to comply with this advice voluntarily as indeed the vast majority do. But we want to be clear today that if necessary we will put a legal duty on businesses to allow home working where possible.

Second, we intend in the coming days, through media and social media, to reinforce the central importance of the FACTS advice - face coverings, avoiding crowded places, cleaning hands and hard surfaces, keeping two metres distance and self-isolating and booking a test if you have symptoms.

At the start of the pandemic, compliance with basic hygiene measures was very strong.

That really does make a difference - we know that - and it is just as important now, perhaps even more so, as it was back then.

So I am asking everyone today to make a conscious and renewed effort to comply with all of this advice.

And third - and related to that last point - we will introduce a package of support for people who are asked to self-isolate.

Self-isolation of people with symptoms awaiting a test, people who test positive and household and other close contacts of such people is absolutely essential to helping break the chains of transmission.

But we know self-isolation is hard. It asks a lot of people and, for some, the financial implications make it even more difficult, perhaps even impossible.

So we intend, firstly, to raise awareness of the importance of self-isolation and what it entails. I believe that ensuring people fully understand why we are asking them to do difficult things and exactly what it is they need to do is the first crucial step to ensuring compliance.

Next, we are working with local authorities to ensure that when someone is asked by Test & Protect to self-isolate, they will be contacted proactively and offered essential practical support - for example help with delivery of food and other essentials.

And, most importantly, we will introduce financial support of £500 for those on low incomes.

More detail of this scheme will be published shortly.

As I said yesterday, we will keep issues of enforcement for non-compliance with self-isolation under review.

However, our judgment at this stage - particularly given the spirit of solidarity that is so essential in this fight against COVID - is that supporting people to do the right thing is much more effective than threatening harsh punishment if they can't.

Presiding Officer,

Let me turn now to the new restrictions that we consider are necessary to bring the virus back under control.

First, as I indicated earlier, we will introduce a strict nationwide curfew for pubs, bars and restaurants.

From Friday, pubs, bars and restaurants will be required to close at 10pm.

Now, people sometimes ask me why we don't just close pubs again altogether - and I understand that sentiment.

The answer - to be frank - is that we are seeking to find a balance between action to suppress the virus and the protection of people's jobs and livelihoods.

If the Scottish Government had greater powers to borrow money, or the ability to extend the Job Retention Scheme, for example, it is possible that we could reach a different balance of judgment on some of these issues.

But we don't.

So this decision today means that we can reduce the amount of time people are able to spend in licensed premises, thereby curtailing the spread of the virus, while still allowing businesses to trade and provide jobs.

This is the best balance we can strike for now.

But I want to be clear with the hospitality trade about this.

Notwithstanding the economic implications, further restrictions, including possible closure, will be unavoidable - locally or nationally - if the rules within pubs and restaurants on hygiene, face coverings, table service, maximum numbers in groups, and the distance between them are not fully complied with.

I want to thank those businesses, I believe the majority, that are making huge efforts to ensure compliance.

However, to ensure that this is the case for all, we will be providing resources for additional Environmental Health Officers and asking local authorities to significantly step up inspection and enforcement.

Let me turn now to the most difficult part of today's announcement - further restrictions on household gatherings.

We know from the data available to us through Test & Protect that a high proportion of new cases come from social interactions between different households in our homes.

We also know from Test & Protect - and perhaps more so from our own experiences - that it is much more difficult to maintain physical distance - and have, for example, good ventilation - inside our own homes.

We also know that when the virus infects one person in a household it is highly likely to affect others in the same household. It will also infect people visiting that household, who will in turn take it back to their households.

Therefore, difficult though this is, any serious effort to reduce the R number below 1, which must be our objective, must take account of this key driver of transmission and it must seek to break that driver of transmission.

So after careful consideration, we have decided that from tomorrow, to be reviewed every three weeks, and with exceptions that I will come on to, visiting other households will not be permitted.

To be clear, this extends the restriction that has been in place across the West of Scotland for the past three weeks to all of Scotland. Regulations giving effect to this change will come into force on Friday, but I am asking people to comply from tomorrow.

One of the reasons we have decided to do this is that our early data suggests this restriction is starting to slow the increase of cases in the West of Scotland.

So if we take the difficult decision to extend it nationwide now, in an early and preventative way, we hope it will help to bring the R number down and the virus back under control.

There will be exceptions for those living alone, or alone with children, who form extended households; for couples in non-cohabiting relationships; for the provision of informal childcare by, for example, grandparents; and for tradespeople.

But for everyone else visiting each other's houses will, for now, not be permitted.

These new restrictions apply to people's homes - in other words, to private indoor spaces.

Rules for meeting other people in public indoor spaces that are subject to strict regulation and guidance, remain the same – you can meet with one other household only and in groups of no more than six people.

As I said earlier, we will be working with local authorities to strengthen inspection and enforcement in indoor public places and enforcement action, including closure if necessary, will be taken against shops, pubs, restaurants or other premises that do not ensure compliance.

You can also continue to meet with one other household in groups of up to six people outdoors, including in private gardens.

Outdoors, though, we intend to exempt children under 12 - both from the limit of six and the limit of two households. There will be no limits on the ability of children under 12 to play together outdoors.

And young people aged 12 to 18 will be exempt from the two household limit - they will be able to meet together outdoors in groups of up to six, though we will need to monitor this carefully and let me stress that this is outdoors only.

And let me say to teenagers in particular - I know how miserable this is for you and I am so grateful for your patience. We are trying to give you as much flexibility as we can at this vitally important time of your lives. In return, please work with us and do your best to stick to the rules, for everyone's sake.

Presiding Officer,

The last new restriction I want to cover today relates to travelling by car. It may seem minor but it is important.

We know, again from Test & Protect data, that sharing car journeys presents a significant risk of transmission.

We are therefore advising against car sharing with people outside your own household.

Finally, I think it's important that I indicate today, in light of the current situation, that the route map changes with an indicative date of 5 October are unlikely now to go ahead on that timescale.

Presiding Officer

I also want to touch briefly today on an issue that has been the subject of media speculation in recent days - namely the possibility of a so called circuit breaker, timed to coincide with the October school break, and during which people would be given much more comprehensive advice to stay at home.

The Scottish Government has not made any decision at this stage to implement such a policy - however, we are actively keeping it under review.

What I would say to people now is this. Please think of the October break as an opportunity to further limit social interaction, particularly indoors.

And, given that this is a global pandemic, please do not book travel overseas for the October break if it is not essential.

Finally, I want to say a few words to people who were shielding earlier in the year. I know you will all be feeling particularly anxious.

However the best way to keep you safe is by reducing the spread of the virus in our communities – which is what today's measures are all about.

The steps I have outlined today will help keep you safe, so please follow the guidance for the general population with great care.

And if you haven't signed up for our text alert service, please do so.

Fundamentally, I want to assure you that your safety is uppermost in our minds.

But we do not believe that asking you to return to shielding is the best way to secure it, given the impact it would have on your mental and physical health. In our view, all of us acting together collectively to reduce the spread of the virus is a better way to keep you safe.

Presiding Officer,

These are the changes we are making now. I can't and will not rule out the need to make more - nationally or locally - in the weeks to come.

Suppressing the virus and getting R below 1 again is essential and we will act in a way that can achieve that.

Indeed, we intend to publish soon an overall strategic approach to escalation in areas with particularly high rates of transmission.

However, I am acutely aware that the restrictions I have announced today will not be welcome.

But it is our judgment they are absolutely essential.

Inevitably, some will think they go too far and others will think they don't go far enough.

But we have tried to get the balance as right as possible - and to act urgently and in a substantial and preventative way now to try to get the situation under control quickly.

We judge that this will give us the best chance of avoiding tougher or longer lasting measures later.

But I know that doesn't make this any easier.

Many people, me included, will find not being able to have family and friends in our own homes really difficult – especially as the weather gets colder.

But today's measures – although tough - are not a lockdown. They are carefully targeted at key sources of transmission. And we believe they can make a significant difference, while keeping our schools, public services and as many businesses as possible open.

However the success of these measures depends on all of us.

The decisions that we all make as individuals in the weeks ahead, will determine whether they work, and how quickly they can be lifted.

That fact isn't just a reminder of the responsibilities we all owe to each other – it is also a reminder that we are not powerless against this virus.

None of us can guarantee that we won't get it, or pass it on. But we can all make choices that significantly reduce our own risk, and help keep our communities safer.

So please, make those choices. Stick with this.

Please don't meet people in their homes or your home - because that is where the virus often spreads.

Limit how often you meet up with people in public places - and abide by the rules in force there.

Work from home if you can.

Follow the advice on self-isolation if you have symptoms, test positive, or are a contact of someone with the virus.

Download the Protect Scotland app.

And when you do meet other people, remember FACTS at all times.

Face coverings

Avoid crowded places.

Clean your hands and surfaces.

Keep a two metre distance from other households.

And self-isolate and book a test if you have symptoms.

Keeping to all these rules isn't easy – but they remain the best way for all of us to protect ourselves, each other, the NHS and ultimately save lives.

Presiding Officer,

All of this is incredibly tough - and six months on, it only gets tougher.

But we should never forget that humanity has come through even bigger challenges than this one - and it did so without the benefits of modern technology that allow us to stay connected while physically apart.

And though it doesn't feel like this now, this pandemic will pass.



It won't last forever and one day, hopefully soon, we will be looking back on it, not living through it.

So though we are all struggling with this - and believe me, we are all struggling - let's pull together.

Let's keep going, try to keep smiling, keep hoping and keep looking out for each other.

Be strong, be kind and let's continue to act out of love and solidarity.

I will never be able to thank all of you enough for the sacrifices you have made so far.

And I am sorry to have to ask for more.

But if we stick with it - and if we stick together - I do know we will get through this.