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Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's speech - 16 December 2020

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Coronavirus update from the First Minister: 16 December 2020



Good afternoon, thank you for joining us.

I'll give you some warning in advance - my update is going to be slightly longer than normal today because I've got a few updates that I want to cover.

I'm also going to touch a little bit on Christmas which I know is of huge interest to everyone.

But firstly as usual I'll cover today's statistics.

There were 689 positive cases reported yesterday.

Which is 5.9% of the total number of tests, and means that the total tally of confirmed cases is now 108,438.

140 of today's new cases were in Lothian, 109 in Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 92 in Lanarkshire and 91 in Ayrshire and Arran.

The remaining cases are spread across eight other health board areas.

1,031 people are currently in hospital which is an increase of 35 of yesterday. 49 people are in intensive care which is 4 more than yesterday.

And I'm sorry to report that 38 additional deaths have been registered in the past 24 hours, of patients who first tested positive over the previous 28 day period.

The total number under that daily measurement therefore is now 4,173.

However, National Records of Scotland has also just published its usual weekly update - which as well as deaths of people who had been confirmed through a test as having COVID, also includes cases where COVID is a suspected or contributory cause of death.

Today's update shows that by last Sunday, Sunday just passed, the total number of registered deaths linked to COVID - under that wider definition - was 6,092.

224 of those deaths were registered last week - that is eight fewer than in the previous week.

154 of those deaths occurred in hospitals, 62 in care homes, and eight at home or in other, non-institutional settings.

Now the fact that the death toll, under this wider measurement, has now passed 6,000, is clearly another reminder of the devastating impact that COVID has had and it is, of course, another very distressing milestone.

Every single one of these deaths is a source of grief and heartbreak to a family somewhere across the country.

So yet again today, I want to send my thoughts and my condolences to everyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one during the course of the pandemic so far.

Now in a moment Dr Steedman, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, is going to provide an update on our vaccination programme.

Before then though I have three issues I want to update you on as briefly as I can.

The first is an issue I have to give an update on relating to the Protect Scotland app.

This is an update that is relevant to around 900 people who were advised by the app to self-isolate for ten days, and who received that notification between one minute past midnight on Monday morning, and 8.30 am on Tuesday morning.

During that 32.5 hour period, we would normally expect, given current prevalence of the virus, around 250 notifications to be issued – instead, 900 notifications were issued. And we have realised that this is because during an upgrade to the app it was configured in an overly sensitive way over that period.

I want to reassure people that the issue has been identified and has now been fixed.

But it does mean that some people will have received notifications in that period, who do not actually need to self-isolate.

So this is a message to anyone who was notified to self-isolate between one minute past midnight on Monday morning, and 8.30 on Tuesday morning, if you got that notification telling you to self-isolate, then please call our National Contact Tracing Centre that's 0800 030 8012. That's 0800 030 8012.

That will enable you to speak to a specialised contact tracer, to see whether or not you actually need to self-isolate. If you are one of the people who have been notified incorrectly they will advise you of that.

That's something I, obviously, felt the need to update people on today, but I want to end this update with an assurance that the app has been working really well at all other times. This was a one-off blip as a result of an upgrade to the app and it has now been fixed.

So if you have received a notification at any other time, outside the time period I've just given there today, then please follow the app's advice as normal and self-isolate.

The second issue I want to cover today is that Public Health Scotland has, as it normally does on a Wednesday, published a number of reports.

However today, some of those reports show the impact of COVID on school staff and young people.

Obviously we are very keen, partly to help reassure young people, parents and teachers about the safety of schools that we understand more fully any impact on our schools.

Now amongst other things - and these are complicated statistical reports that I know journalists and others will want to take a bit of time to consider - but among other things they show that almost two-thirds of schools have not had any pupil cases of COVID.

Now as you might expect, that is an overall figure, the figure is different when we look just at secondary schools, where around two-thirds of schools have had recorded cases, and those figures are also different in areas where the level of prevalence in the general population is higher.

However even here, the reports show that the impact of COVID has often been relatively limited. For example in the final week of the survey, fewer than one-fifth of secondary schools had more than one case of COVID.

The data also looks in some detail at the impact on staff in schools. Which I know has been, and continues to be, an issue of concern for teachers and other adults working in schools.

Looking at the data since August, when the schools reopened, what the report shows, amongst other things, is that there is no evidence of any difference in the risk of hospitalisation for teachers, when compared to the general population.

In fact the risk of severe COVID actually seems to be lower in teachers than the population as a whole.

And antibody tests results for education staff were similar to the results for the general adult population.

So taken together, and there's a lot more in these reports than the headlines I have just shared with you and there will be detailed questions as people have the chance to consider these

reports fully.

But taken together they are an important contribution to our understanding of how COVID is affecting students and education staff.

In my view they support the view - while of course we will continue to listen very carefully to the concerns of teachers and others - they support the view that it has been right for schools to remain open.

But I hope the fact that we are ensuring that this kind of work is being done is also a demonstration of the fact that we are not complacent about the risks of COVID anywhere and we want to properly understand what the impact is in schools, and on pupils and teachers, so that that can continue to inform our thinking.

And obviously what these reports do show adds up to a tribute to the vast amount of work that has gone in to ensuring that schools can be open and be open safely.

So the final point I want to make on this - and before I do this let me say, I don't want to, I will never seek to underplay how difficult and stressful a term this has been for pupils, parents, and of course for all teachers, school leaders and staff - but notwithstanding that I think the findings in these reports do underline what a very good and important job all of these people have done.

So as we approach the end of this term, I want to the opportunity to thank each and every one of them.

I know this, for teachers in particular and others who work in schools, this has been a particularly stressful time and my grateful thanks are with all of you.

Now Public Health Scotland has also released figures on our pilots for community testing, mass community testing, of people who don't have symptoms of COVID.

They show that more than 15,000 tests of asymptomatic people were carried out in those pilots. 228 of these tests were positive.

Those cases may not otherwise have been identified. So the pilots do demonstrate that asymptomatic testing can help us break chains of transmission, and we will be considering the lessons of these pilots as we expand asymptomatic testing in the New Year and further into the future.

Now the final point I want to cover today, and I'm going to take a little bit of time on this, is arrangements for Christmas. I took part in four nations discussion yesterday, and again this morning, with the UK Government, and the governments of Wales and Northern Ireland.

These discussions, and the fact that they have happened, reflect that in parts of the UK cases are rising again. And in some parts of the UK rising quite rapidly.

Now Scotland's case levels remain, at the moment, lower than in the other nations, but even so we can't be complacent and we need to consider the evolving situation.

We intend to issue updated guidance, we hope later today, and we hope that this will be agreed on a four nations basis.

That is what we are currently working towards and those discussions are continuing. So they have not, at the time I came down to do this briefing, concluded yet.

But I want today, because I know there is intense and understandable interest in this. So I wanted just to run through some of the principles that the Scottish Government is working on.

Firstly, the pragmatic considerations that led us to agree some limited flexibility over Christmas have not gone away.

We recognise that in some cases the isolation caused by being alone over Christmas will in of itself cause harm to people's welfare.

And we understand that some people will simply not be prepared to leave loved ones alone over the whole Christmas period and perhaps, especially, on Christmas day.

I also recognise that some people will already have made plans for Christmas - and it's for those reasons that we decided, across the four nations, to give people some clear boundaries around the Christmas period, rather than seek to prohibit any interaction all together or, on the other hand, risk everyone just trying to set their own boundaries.

And on balance we, and I, still think that is the right approach to take.

So we don't intend to take away the flexibility - that in my view wouldn't be fair at this stage and it wouldn't be realistic either.

And indeed it may risk undermining, rather than strengthening compliance with the overall COVID guidance.

However, we and the Scottish Government do intend to strengthen the guidance about whether and how they should make use of the flexibility.

The guidance in Scotland is already a bit tighter than elsewhere but we hope we can come to a four nations agreement on a clear and united message to the public.

But let me be clear, not all of what I'm about to say right now is yet agreed with other nations.

And of course, I cannot and would not try to speak for them - but I wanted to set out for you the key elements of the advice that the Scottish Government has been, and will continue to give over the period ahead.

Firstly, and unequivocally, the safest way to spend Christmas this year, for you and for those you love, is to stay within your own household and in your own home.

And my strong recommendation is that this is what you should do if at all possible.

Any interaction that you do have with another household, should if at all possible, be outdoors. But if you do consider it essential to meet indoors with someone from another household, you should limit both the duration and the numbers as much as possible.

This point I want to stress in particular. The five day relaxation is a window of opportunity during which you can meet. It is not a period that we think it is safe, or sensible to get together for.

You should see it as a maximum, not a target.

My recommendation is that if you do form a bubble, you should not meet up with people in it any more than on one day over that period if possible, and you should not stay overnight unless it is unavoidable.

You should also limit numbers as far as possible. Three households is a maximum that tries to account for the fact that families comes in all shapes and sizes. But two would be better, in short, if you have to form a bubble, keep it as small as possible.

In Scotland we already advise an overall limit of 8 people and I recommend that you stay firmly within that. If you do feel you need to form a bubble and again, the smaller the better,

And lastly - we will recommend against travel from high prevalence to low prevalence areas of the UK, and we will issue more detail on that shortly.

Also, as I stressed on Monday, if you are intending to form a Christmas bubble, you should already be trying to reduce any unnecessary social contacts.

And this year, for most people, all of what I've just run through there will be the safer choices to make and I would encourage everybody to think very carefully about that.

If you haven't made plans to form a bubble yet, please don't. If you are still swithering, please decide against and if you have made plans but think they are not really essential, perhaps think about postponing until later in the year.

But if you believe your plans are essential - I understand that, but I am asking you to follow all of the advice I have just set out.

And please also follow guidance on what to do when you are indoors. That means keeping safe distance as much as possible, washing your hands and surfaces regularly, keeping windows open and avoiding eating from the same dishes.

I know this is incredibly hard for everyone. I have to say, I hate with every fibre of my being standing here trying to regulate how you spend Christmas, and I wish it was an easier or more binary decision. Just let people meet as they wish or ban it altogether.

But it is more complex than that - we are all human beings with human emotions and we are all going through a really tough time right now. No leader trying to encourage maximum compliance with restrictions can simply ignore all of that.

But equally, I have a duty to reach the best balance we can and be straight about what, within the boundaries of the law, we are recommending.

The reality is that this Christmas simply can't be normal. But we have every reason - every reason - to hope that next year's will be much more normal.

So hard though it is now. Let us all try to keep that in mind.

We are just about to hear, after all, an update about the vaccination programme from the Deputy Chief Medical Officer. And that does give us real hope of being able to enjoy safer meetings with our loved ones, in the not too distant future.

And it means that - for this Christmas - the best thing we can all do is help keep our loved ones as safe as possible.

And of course, between now and Christmas and then after the Christmas period we should all stick to the current rules and guidelines.

If you are in any doubt about what they are, use the postcode checker on our website.

But outside of island communities nobody should be meeting in other people's houses just now.

If you do meet other households, outdoors or in indoor public places, the limit is six people, from a maximum of two households.

Try to work from home when you can.

Download the app, avoid car sharing - and remember FACTS:

- face coverings
- stay away, avoid crowded places
- clean your hands and surfaces regularly
- keep a two metre distance
- and self-isolate, and get tested if you have any symptoms.

Doing all of this is tedious, it's hard, it's distressing, it's painful – and increasingly so for all of us. But it is necessary to try, as we hopefully approach this final stretch of this horrible pandemic, to keep ourselves and our loved ones as safe as possible.

So thank you for listening - and we will continue to update on any four nations discussions on this, or on any other matters as we go through the days to come.

But for now I will hand over to Doctor Steedman who will give us an update on the vaccination programme.

Was this helpful?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, but

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