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Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's speech 23 October

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Coronavirus update from the First Minister: 23 October 2020



Good afternoon everyone. Thank you very much for joining us today.

The focus of today's briefing is the new strategic framework for managing and living with COVID through the winter period and into next year.

For that reason, my opening statement today is going to be longer than usual, so I would ask you to bear with me but we will then move after it straight to media questions.

However before I talk about our new approach, let me give the daily report on COVID statistics.

The total number of positive cases reported yesterday was 1,401.

That represents 20.6% of people newly tested, and 8% of the total number of tests carried out.

493 of the new cases were in Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 413 in Lanarkshire, 169 in Lothian and 117 in Ayrshire and Arran.

The remaining cases were spread across 9 other health board regions.

The total number of confirmed cases in Scotland is therefore now 54,016.

I can also confirm that 975 people are in hospital – that is an increase of 41 from yesterday and 76 people are in intensive care, that is 2 more than yesterday.

And I very much regret to say that in the past 24 hours, 18 further deaths have been registered of patients who first tested positive over the previous 28 days and that takes the total number of deaths, under this measurement, to 2,688.

That reminds us, very starkly, of the devastating impact that COVID can have and I want, again, to send my deepest condolences to those who are currently grieving a loved one.

The figures I have just reported confirm the trends of recent weeks.

In the past week, 94 deaths have been confirmed under our daily figures.

The number of people in hospital has increased by over 60% - it has gone from 570 to 975.

And the number of people in intensive care has gone up by 50% - from 49 to 76.

People typically enter hospital a week to ten days after they first get symptoms of COVID and, of course, they may then need to go into intensive care after that.

So unfortunately, given that cases have risen sharply over much of the last month, these numbers for hospital admissions, ICU admissions and, unfortunately, a rising number of deaths are likely to continue to rise for some time yet.

However - and this is really important, it's a point I want to dwell on for a moment today - when we look at the most recent data for new cases, we do think we can see some signs of progress as a result of the sacrifices everyone is making just now.

And I want to give you a bit more detail of that today.

If we turn the clock back two weeks to Friday 9 October, we can see that in the week leading up to that date, the average number of new cases per day increased to 907 - that was an increase of 52% compared to the previous week.

In the week leading up to last Friday 16 October, the average number of new cases per day increased to 1,171 - that was an increase of 29% compared to the previous week.

And today, I can tell you that the average number of cases over the past week has been 1,255 - which is an increase of 7% on the week before.

In other words, cases are still rising - which is why we cannot be complacent - but the rate of increase appears to be slowing down, and that does give us grounds for optimism, albeit, it is still at this stage, quite cautious optimism.

And, given the life cycle of this virus, it is likely that the intervention having the biggest impact on helping slow the increase so far is the restriction on going in to other people's houses, which came into force towards the end of September.

It is probably still too early for us to be seeing the full impact on case numbers of the restrictions on hospitality which only took effect on the 9 October. So that effect has yet, we think, to kick in to the figures for cases.

So we are hopeful that we might see a further slowing, leading to a reduction in new cases, in the weeks ahead.

Now, I'm emphasising this point because I know that when you hear the daily figures just now – which are all pretty depressing – it's very easy to feel as though your hard sacrifices are not making a difference. But I want to emphasise – and I hope the figures I've just given you, do emphasise this – that your sacrifices are making a difference.

And it is because we keep needing to make a difference, that I am asking all of you to stick with it.

Let me turn now to the strategic framework that we are publishing today, which tries to set our individual efforts and sacrifices in the overall context of how, as a country, we will seek to manage and live with the virus in the next phase of the pandemic.

Let me stress, first of all, that we are publishing this today with an open mind.

In the coming days we will listen to views from stakeholders on any suggested changes they might have, or how they would like to see the plan implemented.

As part of that process, I will be convening another meeting with the leaders of other parties this afternoon.

Now, I appreciate that many businesses - for completely understandable reasons - would rather not see any restrictions that lead to closure or significant reductions in trade.

However, I also know you understand why these decisions are necessary. And we want to give you an opportunity over the next few days to set out any specific proposals you might have.

In particular, I know that hospitality businesses - especially hard hit - will want to argue that different types of premises should be open at different levels of intervention.

Now, I can't promise that we will be able to accommodate every request while still suppressing the virus - but I can promise that we will listen.

None of us want to be imposing restrictions, to businesses or individuals, that are not absolutely necessary.

Following this short period of consultation, Parliament will then debate and vote on the general framework on Tuesday.

Assuming Parliament endorses the framework, we will then take decisions on which levels will apply initially to different parts of the country from 2 November.

We will consult with local authorities and local Directors of Public Health as part of that process and take advice from the National Incident Management Team. And when we set out these initial decisions, we will also set out our rationale for them.

The application of levels will thereafter be reviewed on a weekly basis.

The second point I want to stress is that although the framework we are publishing today is new, the principles behind it will be familiar to all of you.

It is trying to balance different types of harms. It seeks to tackle the direct and very real harm to health and life caused by COVID.

But it also recognises the wider health harms that will result if our NHS is overwhelmed by COVID; the social harms caused by lockdown restrictions, such as increased isolation and inequality; and of course the economic harm suffered by businesses and workers across the country, which in turn causes physical and mental health problems.

None of these issues can be viewed in isolation. We must strike the best balances we can in the interests of minimising the overall harm that the pandemic is causing, not just in Scotland but in countries across the world.

But it is important to stress this fact: if we allow the virus to run out of control, all of the other harms I have talked about will be exacerbated – they will be made worse.

So that's why everything we do must be consistent with suppressing COVID as far as we possibly can.

I will now set out, in summary, the five levels of intervention we are proposing - depending on the rate of infection nationwide or in different parts of the country.

I'll then talk about our wider work to make it possible to live with as few restrictions as possible - for example by continuing to strengthen Test & Protect, improving compliance with the FACTS advice, and working with business to create as safe as possible an environment for staff and customers.

And lastly, I will touch on the financial support we will provide for businesses directly affected by restrictions.

Firstly, the levels. We are proposing today five levels of possible intervention.

This will allow us to take a national approach if required. It is possible that the whole country, at some point, could be placed in the same level.

However, it also means that we don't have to take a one size fits all approach if that is not warranted. It means that a part of the country with low rates of infection won't have to live with the same restrictions as a part of the country with much higher rates.

And this approach also allows us, while retaining some flexibility – which we always need in the face of an infectious virus – to give you a better idea of the restrictions that will apply at different levels.

Now I don't have time to go into all of the detail right now, but you can go to gov.scot – the Scottish Government website – and look at the framework for yourself – the table at the end of the document that we are publishing today sets out the levels in detail.

However, broadly speaking, our proposed baseline level – what we have called level 0 – is the closest to normality that we think we can safely get to without more effective treatments for COVID or a vaccine against COVID.

And remember we are hopeful for both of these developments in the months ahead.

Level 0 is broadly comparable to the position we reached in August when the virus was very suppressed in Scotland, but still a threat.

At this level, we would be able to meet indoors with 8 people from 3 households. And most businesses would be open, albeit with safety measures in place.

Level 1 sees slightly more restrictions - for example, indoor household meetings would reduce to 6 people from 2 households - but there would still be a reasonable degree of normality overall. And I would describe that as broadly similar to the situation we were at in Scotland around mid-September, as cases started to rise again but prevalence was still fairly low.

Now, getting back to level 1 and then to level 0 - and being able to stay there - is what we are aiming for this side of better treatment or a vaccine.

However, Levels 2 and 3 are intended to apply at times such as now, when transmission is higher and rising.

Level 2 entails restrictions broadly similar to those currently in place just now outside the central belt – so limitations on hospitality and no gatherings inside people's homes.

And Level 3 is broadly similar to the tougher restrictions which currently apply across the central belt, with much of hospitality being closed completely.

There are however some key differences – for example we envisage restaurants being able to open, at least partially, in Level 3.

Levels 2 and 3 are intended to apply, if necessary, for relatively short periods of time to bring transmission down and under control.

And finally, level 4 – the highest level, which of course, we would not use unless absolutely necessary – would apply when transmission rates are or are threatening to become very high, with corresponding pressure on the NHS and perhaps the risk of the NHS being overwhelmed.

The restrictions at level 4 are closer to a full lockdown. For example non-essential shops would have to close at level 4.

However even under level 4 restrictions, 6 people from up to 2 households could still meet outdoors; there would be no limit on outdoor exercise for individuals; and we would seek to keep manufacturing and construction businesses open, albeit with safety measures in place.

In other words, we do not envisage returning to a situation as severe as the first lockdown imposed back in late March.

And I hope that that helps to reinforce an important point. We are not back at square one. We have made progress in tackling the virus, and we have more tools now at our disposal to help control it. And today's framework will help us, I hope, to make further progress.

I can also confirm that our objective at all levels is, as far as possible, to keep schools open - though with necessary safety measures in place. That is, in our view, in the best interests of children and young people.

So that is a summary of the proposed levels.

You can read the detail online. And we will consult with stakeholders and make any necessary amendments ahead of Parliament debating it on Tuesday.

Before I move on to my next point though, I want to say something directly to people who were shielding up until the end of July.

Anyone who was shielding should, as a minimum, follow the guidance we provide for the general population. That in itself offers a substantial degree of protection.

But today's publication also provides additional advice for each level of restrictions - for activities like going to work, school, shopping and having contact with others.

You will find this in the framework itself, and the Chief Medical Officer will be sending you a letter today.

You can follow this advice to the letter if you want to. However if you want to understand the evidence, and take more informed decisions, we will shortly be publishing a guide to help you to do that.

And if you need practical assistance, remember that the National Helpline remains open for advice and support – the number is 0800 111 4000.

We know how hard the last few months have been for everybody but particularly for those in the shielding category. So we are determined to give you the advice and support you need to stay safe and well.

Now for all of us, including those in the shielding category, our aim must be to live with this virus under the fewest restrictions possible.

We want to get to, and then stay at, level 0 or level 1 of the framework.

And the good news, which we should all hold on to, is that we know this is possible - because we got there back in the summer.

It depends on all of us following all of the rules and advice and doing all that is asked of us.

But it also depends on government putting all the right supporting systems in place.

So, as well as setting out the levels of intervention, the strategic framework sets out how we will support compliance with FACTS and other rules. This includes support for self-isolation – which is a crucial part of Test & Protect.

We also set out our further planned increases to testing capacity.

Before the end of this year, we will have capacity in Scotland to do at least 65,000 tests every day.

Some of the increase in capacity will come from the UK-wide Lighthouse laboratory system, but most of it will be in the NHS Scotland laboratory system.

We have also published a paper today with recommendations from our clinical advisers on the best use of this extra capacity.

Our top priority must always be ensuring that we can quickly test people with COVID-like symptoms – and we know that demand for that will increase over the winter period.

Beyond that, our clinical advice is telling us to focus on protecting those most at risk from COVID.

We already do regular testing of care home workers. But I can confirm that we will move now to introduce regular testing of designated visitors to care homes; to NHS staff who visit care homes; to care-at-home workers; and to anyone who is admitted to hospital in an emergency.

This is an approach designed to reduce the risk of COVID spreading in the settings where we know it can do most harm.

However, we will also extend testing of asymptomatic people for surveillance purposes and to help manage outbreaks.

In addition to strengthening Test & Protect, the strategic framework sets out how we will support vulnerable people through the pandemic.

And it details our ongoing work with different sectors of the economy – such as retail and hospitality – to ensure that shops, bars and restaurants are as safe as they possibly can be.

As part of that, we are considering giving more powers to Environmental Health Officers and Trading Standards Officers.

The vast majority of businesses have gone to great lengths to comply with regulations, and ensure the safety of their staff and customers and I am hugely grateful to them for that.

But it is only fair to them – and to the public more generally – that we take effective action against the small number who don't take the rules seriously.

The final issue I want to cover today is support for business.

Our objective is to get the virus to low levels again so that we can live with as few restrictions as possible and allow businesses to operate as close to normal as possible.

But we have to be realistic - in a global pandemic, some restrictions on business are likely to be necessary for a while to come. And at times, like now, these restrictions might require some businesses to close or to limit trade significantly.

We hope such periods will be short. But it is essential that we support businesses through them.

And the Scottish Government will do that to the maximum possible extent within the resources we have available to us.

I can confirm therefore that, no matter what level we are at, the following support will be available. And let me stress that this is over and above support available through the UK-wide job support scheme which, of course, we think should go further.

Businesses which are required by law to close will be eligible for grants of either £2,000 or £3,000 depending on rateable value, for every four weeks that they have to remain closed.

And businesses which can remain open, but can't trade normally due to restrictions, will be eligible, again depending on rateable value, for grants of £1,400 or £2,100 for every four weeks that restrictions limiting their trade are in place.

This support package matches that that was announced by the Chancellor yesterday for businesses in England. Businesses in Scotland deserve nothing less.

But there is one point that I am duty bound to make today.

The Chancellors' commitment for England was open ended - he will pay whatever the demand from business is, for as long as necessary. I think that is right and proper.

He is able to do that because he can borrow the money to pay for it. The Scottish Government can't do that - so we have to rely on the Chancellor to provide the same funding guarantees to Scottish businesses as he already has for those in England.

So far that hasn't been done. Not a single penny of extra funding - beyond that already allocated - has been guaranteed for Scotland as a result of yesterday's announcement.

So while I am not prepared to offer businesses here less funding than their counterparts in England will get, I have to be clear on this point.

Without a resolution to the problem I have just highlighted, the money the Scottish Government has to pay for these grants will eventually run out. When exactly that will happen will of course depend on demand - but it will happen. It is not possible to fund indefinitely demand-led commitments out of a finite budget, with no powers to borrow.

That is why we need a resolution, and the Scottish Government will be pressing for that resolution as quickly as possible.

Now I have encouraged everyone to look at today's draft framework because it is a document that, for the period ahead, will affect all of us at some times and in some ways.

However the success of the framework will also be affected by all of us. By what we do and how we behave.

Government must and will take a lead in tackling COVID. But all of us have a role to play.

I know that after seven months, with the clocks about to go back, and talk of restrictions over Christmas, it can be easy to get discouraged and downhearted. I understand that. I share that.

But I want to end with three reminders that I hope might help all of us.

First, never forget that we are not powerless against this virus. It feels like it, but we are not. All of us retain control and some agency, as individuals.

None of us can guarantee that we won't get COVID or pass it on, but we can choose, all of us, to act in a way that makes us safer as individuals, and which also protects our loved ones and our community.

FACTS sets out the five basic rules that help us to do that.

- So remember to wear face coverings because you doing that protects other people, and other people doing that protects you.
- Remember to avoid crowded places – especially indoors.
- Remember to clean your hands and surfaces.
- Remember to keep two metres distancing from people in other households to reduce the chance of transmission.
- And remember to self-isolate and get tested if you have symptoms.

Secondly, remember that now more than ever, we do – all of us – need to look out for each other. So let's all of us try to do that.

Be kind when people around you are feeling a bit down – or feeling just completely scunnered. We all have days like that.

And we know that some people, because of their particular circumstances, will be finding it much harder than others. So offer help, if you can, to people in need. Sometimes even just a smile or a kind word helps.

Show empathy, solidarity and love for each other. We need those values now more than we have ever done before.

And finally, never forget that we will get through this. Right now, this all feels terrible – and it is terrible – and it feels never-ending.

But humanity has gone through worse. Some of you watching right now - though a diminishing number in our country overall – remember the horrors of World War Two. That wasn't one year or one Christmas without normality - that was six long, brutal years during which many didn't know where their loved ones were - or at times whether they were dead or alive.

What we are going through right now is hard – it's harder than most of us have ever known - but we will get through it. This will pass and before too long we will be looking back on it and talking about it in the past tense not planning for how we will deal with it.

But until then, let's help each other through it as best we can. Let's stick with it because we know the sacrifices we are making – can and are making a difference – and let's stick together. By doing all of that, we will protect each other, we will protect our NHS, and ultimately we will save lives and that is what this is all about. Thank you again to all of you for everything you are doing, thank you for listening today, please stick with it.

Was this helpful?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, but

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