



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE **Review of the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions)
(No.5) (Wales) Regulations 2020**

DATE **17 December 2021**

BY **First Minister, Mark Drakeford MS**

At the last review of the coronavirus regulations on 9 December, I set out that we would move from a three-week to a one-week review to ensure we have the right measures in place to keep Wales safe in response to the emerging omicron variant.

This fast-moving, more transmissible variant is here in Wales and is spreading quickly.

However, at the moment, we are continuing to respond to the delta wave – the majority of coronavirus infections in Wales are caused by the delta variant. The rate remains high but stable, at around 500 cases per 100,000 people.

The number of confirmed cases of omicron infections is rising every day in Wales – and across the UK. By the end of the month omicron will likely become the dominant form of the virus. We are still learning about this new form of coronavirus. But all the information we have tells us we are facing a very serious situation.

We should be prepared for the number of cases of the omicron variant in Wales to increase sharply. We need a plan to keep us safe this Christmas while delta is still dominant and we need stronger measures to protect us afterwards, as we prepare for a large wave of omicron infections.

This is a virus which thrives on human contact. Every contact we have is an opportunity for us to spread or catch the virus. To help us all celebrate Christmas with our families and loved ones, we are setting out new guidance and strong advice to help keep us all safe as we prepare for the festive period.

We are recommending that everyone reduces the number of people they meet, especially if they are seeing older or more vulnerable people over Christmas. The safest Christmas this year is a smaller Christmas – with your immediate family or household.

To stay safe in the run-up to Christmas, we strongly advise everyone follows these simple measures:

- Get vaccinated – and if you have had your booster appointment, please make this your priority.
- If you are going out, going Christmas shopping or visiting people – flow before you go. Take a lateral flow test. If it's positive – do not go out.
- Meeting outdoors is better than indoors. If you are meeting indoors make sure it is well ventilated.
- Space out any socialising –please leave at least a day between events.
- Do not forget about social distancing, wearing a face covering and washing your hands.

To reduce the number of contacts between people, the coronavirus regulations will be amended to place a legal duty on employers to allow their employees to work from home if possible, and on employees to do so where practicable. This is particularly important when cases rates in the community are high as contacts in the workplace can be a significant driver of transmission.

In response to the expected increase in cases caused by omicron immediately after Christmas, we will introduce new restrictions on 27 December to help control its rapid spread and to prevent large numbers of people needing hospital care.

We will draw on elements from the alert level two regime – many of these will be familiar to the public and were used to keep businesses open in a safe way during earlier waves of the pandemic.

For businesses and services, there will be a new set of reasonable measures, which will include a new rule on 2m social distancing. This means that when shops, businesses and workplaces re-open after Christmas, they will need to make some changes to the way they operate, including putting extra measures in place to protect customers and staff, such as one-way systems and physical barriers.

Nightclubs must close from 27 December.

We will have further discussions with sector representatives, our public health advisers and sporting bodies about events over the coming days.

Financial support of up to £60m will be available to businesses materially affected by these new restrictions. Further details about this support will be available on the Business Wales website.

Our ability to provide and sustain longer-term economic support during this new wave of this ongoing public health emergency is severely constrained by the current position of the UK Treasury and its failure to open vital support schemes, such as furlough.

These schemes should be available for all nations and not just at the point at when restrictions are introduced in England.

We have been able to manage coronavirus with the lowest level of restrictions in place across Wales for the last six months. Omicron however poses a new threat to our health and safety. It is the most serious development in the pandemic to date.

It is one we must all take seriously and put in place proportionate measures to protect people's lives and livelihoods.

I will continue to keep Members updated as this fast-moving situation develops.