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Publication - Speech/statement

# Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's statement – 30 November 2021

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Statement given by the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon to the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh on Tuesday 30 November 2021.

**This document is part of a collection**

Thanks Presiding Officer,

As well as giving an update on the general COVID situation today, I'll also share the latest information we have on the recently detected Omicron variant, and I will outline the steps we are taking to slow the spread of it, and also to curb transmission of the virus more generally.

First, though, today's statistics.

2,569 positive cases were reported yesterday – 11.5% of all tests.

706 people are currently in hospital with COVID– nine fewer than yesterday.

And 54 people are in intensive care, which is two more than yesterday.

Sadly, a further 10 deaths have been reported over the past 24 hours. That takes the total number of deaths under the daily definition to 9,572.

And once again I want to convey my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.

More positively, the progress and the pace of the vaccination programme continues to be very good.

4,346,736 people have had a first dose, 3,949,736 have now had two doses.

And, in total, 88% of all those over the age of 18 are double-dose vaccinated.

In addition, 77% of 16 and 17 year olds, and 59% of 12 to 15 year olds, have had a first dose.

And from today, 16 and 17 year olds can book their second dose of the vaccine online, and I would encourage them to do so.

On first, second, third and booster doses, we remain the most vaccinated part of the UK.

And that matters. Because, as we know, vaccines do save lives.

According to a study published last week by the World Health Organisation, there may be more than 27,000 people in Scotland who are alive today only because of vaccines.

So I want to again record my thanks to everyone involved in organising and delivering the programme.

In my statement last week, I expressed the view that our overall situation was much stronger than I had dared hope.

Case numbers – although still too high – had stabilised, and indeed they had started to decline.

Since then the data has become, if anything, even more encouraging.

However, while case numbers here have continued to fall, the world has of course received the deeply worrying news of the new Omicron variant.

I will say more shortly about our current understanding of the new variant, but before that I will give just a bit more detail on the current overall trends in infection levels.

In the past week, the average number of new cases being recorded each day has fallen from just under 3,000 to just over 2,500, which is a reduction of 15%.

As in the past few weeks, the biggest decline has been in older age groups – cases in the over 60 age group have fallen by 27%.

And, of course, that is very likely to reflect the ongoing success of the booster programme.

Encouragingly, though, cases in the under 60 age cohorts, which account for the significant majority of cases in Scotland just now, have also fallen in the past week - by 13%.

In fact, over the past week, cases have fallen in all age groups.

The number of people in hospital has also fallen from 743 to 706.

As has the number in intensive care from 60 to 54.

So all of this is really positive news.

It does indicate that vaccination – together with continued compliance with the protections that are still in place – is applying a firm downward pressure on transmission, and therefore helping to reduce the overall health harms that the virus causes,

All of that said, the NHS is still under significant and very severe pressure.

Case numbers though they are now falling, do remain very high, and higher than we would want them to be going into the winter period.

And of course we know that a combination of factors pose a real risk that transmission will increase again through December and into the new year – as colder weather forces us indoors more and festive socialising gets underway.

This risk remains very real – and if it materialises, would put significant additional pressure on the NHS.

And, of course, the risk has now been significantly increased – at least potentially - by the emergence of Omicron.

Let me turn, therefore, to what we currently know about the new variant.

And perhaps the most important point to make at this stage is that most of the key questions about the impact and implications of it have not yet been answered.

However the number of mutations that it has - and the nature of these – together with some of the very early indications from southern Africa, have raised the concern that it might be more transmissible than the Delta variant, which of course is the currently dominant variant in here Scotland and in many other parts of the world.#

Further data and analysis is needed to confirm this, and also to assess what impact - if any - the new variant might have on the effectiveness of vaccines and on the risk of re-infection.

It's worth stressing that there is no evidence at this stage to suggest that the disease caused by Omicron is more severe than that caused by other variants – again, however, further analysis is required before we can be certain of this.#

Thanks to the work of the global scientific community, we will find out much more about Omicron in the days and weeks ahead - and as our knowledge and understanding expands, we will of course be able to assess with much more certainty the implications for our response to the pandemic.

I very much hope that as we do learn more, our level of concern will diminish rather than increase.

However, while hoping very much for the best, I think it is prudent at this stage to contemplate and prepare for something less positive than that.

The fact is that any variant which might be more transmissible than Delta, which of course in turn was more transmissible than any variant that came before it - and which could, even to a limited extent, evade vaccine or natural immunity - must be taken seriously.

That is why we have - and will continue for now - to respond in a way that is proportionate but also highly precautionary.

Let me turn now to our current understanding of the presence of the Omicron variant here, in Scotland.

I can confirm that, as of 5pm yesterday, there are nine confirmed cases in Scotland.

Five of these are in Lanarkshire and four are in Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

We have preliminary information on all nine of these cases - which is the basis of the information I am about to share with Parliament - however, I want to stress that health protection teams are continuing their investigations.

Let me say, firstly, that none of the people who have tested positive for this new variant have so far required hospital care.

All nine were tested on or around 23 November and because they had tested positive they have all been self-isolating.

A surveillance look back exercise had identified that the PCR test results in these cases showed what is called the S-gene dropout - this is not conclusive evidence of the Omicron variant, but it is indicative of it.

However, whole genome sequencing of these positive samples has now confirmed that they are indeed the Omicron variant.

None of these individuals - as far as we know - has any recent travel history to or known links with others who have travelled to the countries in Southern Africa where the variant was originally detected.

However, while the contact tracing exercise is still ongoing, health protection teams have established that all nine cases are linked.

They all trace back to a single private event on 20 November.

Indeed, we fully expect that there will be more cases identified over the coming days that are also linked to this event.

In summary, the lack of any known travel or overseas connection to these cases does suggest that there is some community transmission of Omicron already happening in Scotland.

However, the fact that all known cases are so far linked to this single event suggests that community transmission may still be limited.

Indeed, there is so far nothing in the wider look back exercise that Public Health Scotland has undertaken to suggest that community transmission of the new variant is either sustained or widespread.

This look back exercise has examined PCR test samples dating back to 1 November to identify any with this S-gene drop out.

A number have been identified and, where the sample makes that possible, subjected to whole genome sequencing - and so far this exercise has resulted in the nine cases that we have reported.

Given the nature and scale of COP26, the surveillance work that Public Health Scotland is doing is also looking at any potential links to it.

At this stage, however, there is no evidence whatsoever of any such link - and, while it is not impossible that one will emerge, I think the timelines involved make it improbable.

In short, Public Health Scotland is working hard to identify any and all cases of Omicron in Scotland as quickly as possible. And I am very grateful to them for these efforts.

However given the nature of transmission, I consider it highly likely - indeed almost certain - that more cases, perhaps many more cases, will emerge.

However, the enhanced surveillance does give us the best possible chance of identifying cases quickly and, through isolation of index cases and close contacts and targeted testing, of then breaking transmission chains and containing spread while we learn more about this variant.

And that is key. Because, while so much about the new variant is so far unknown, it is important that we act on a highly precautionary basis.

That is certainly true in terms of the steps that government must take.

But it is equally true for all of us as citizens. We all have a part to play – and this has been true throughout the pandemic - in stemming transmission of the virus in. And let's not forget that while we're talking about nine cases of a new variant right now, 2,500 cases of Delta are still being recorded each day, so suppressing transmission of it remains important – but it is also now, of course, important to suppress and contain transmission of the new variant in particular.

Some of the protections that the UK Government announced at the weekend in relation to England - for example a requirement to wear face coverings in some settings – are already in place, and in fact more extensive, here in Scotland.

So at this stage, rather than introducing new protections, we are asking people to significantly step up and increase compliance with existing protections – such as face coverings, hygiene, home working, ventilation, vaccination and regular testing.

This enhanced compliance domestically will complement the UK-wide travel restrictions confirmed over the weekend, which aim to reduce the risk of additional cases of the new variant entering the country.

10 countries from southern Africa have been added to the travel red list so far.

Anyone travelling back to Scotland from any of those 10 countries must enter managed quarantine for 10 days on their arrival.

In addition, anyone arriving in Scotland from anywhere outside the common travel area, is now required to take a PCR COVID test on or before the second day of their arrival - though we are advising that this should be on the second day - and to self-isolate until they get the result of that test back.

The Scottish Government's judgement is that it would be sensible given the incubation period of the virus - and on a precautionary basis - for these travel rules to be tightened further on a four nations basis.

Yesterday the First Minister of Wales and I suggested to the Prime Minister that until we know more about Omicron, people arriving in the UK from overseas should be asked to self-isolate for eight days and take a PCR test on day eight after their arrival, as well as on day two, and we look forward to discussing that more in future.

We also suggested to the Prime Minister that the convening of a COBR meeting to discuss this and other issues in early course would be appropriate.

Presiding Officer,

While certainty is not possible at this stage and won't be possible until we know much more about this new variant, my strong hope is that – beyond temporary travel measures – no additional restrictions will be required.

However, that will of course depend partly on what information emerges about Omicron in the days to come, but also and significantly on all of us complying rigorously with all the protections currently in place to stem transmission.

Of course it remains the case that our first and most important line of defence against the virus is vaccination.

We received updated advice yesterday from the JCVI. Its updated recommendations are as follows:

All adults over the age of 18 should be eligible for a booster.

The gap between second doses and boosters should now be reduced from six months to three months.

People who are immunosuppressed - and who have already had three doses - should also now be eligible for a booster.

Those who are immunosuppressed and have not yet had a third jab, should get that now, regardless of when their second dose was administered.

And, finally, 12 to 15 year olds should now be offered a second dose.

The JCVI had, of course, already recommended second doses for 16 and 17 year olds and, as I said earlier - from today, anyone in that age group can book an appointment for their second dose online.

Presiding Officer,

The Scottish Government has accepted the JCVI's updated recommendations and we will now put the its advice into operation as soon as possible.

Urgent modelling work is being done to inform that operational response - for example, assessing the additional capacity that will be needed in terms of workforce and facilities.

And as the JCVI has advised, we will continue to prioritise booster jabs on an age and clinical risk basis.

However, the bottom line is that many more people than was the case last week – at least one million more people - are now eligible for a booster, and that is good news in our fight against this virus.

Information will be provided as soon as possible for those who have become newly eligible.

However, to those who are already eligible - if you haven't had your booster yet, please book to get it as soon as possible.

Uptake in the over 60s is now 84% - that's high, but we want to get it higher still so if you have yet to get the booster, please do so now.

Similarly, if you are aged between 40 and 59, please book online at NHS Inform.

Now, I know there is a concern that the vaccines will be less effective against this new variant.

And, I want to stress that we don't yet know if that is the case.

But even if it is, vaccination will still matter.

Less effective does not mean ineffective.

And of course the vaccines will remain just as effective as they are now against the Delta variant, which is still the dominant one circulating in Scotland.

So, a booster will significantly improve our protection against all variants.

It really is the most important thing any of us can do to protect ourselves and loved ones.

Similarly, if you still haven't had your first or your second dose, please arrange to do that too – it is now more important than ever to get an appointment and to get the protection vaccination will offer you.

In addition to getting vaccinated - and as I said earlier - all of us should now step up and significantly increase our compliance with existing protections like face coverings, ventilation and hand hygiene.

We are also strongly encouraging everyone who can work from home to do so. And we are asking everyone, from now through the festive season, to do LFD tests on any and all occasions before mixing with people from other households - whether that is in a pub, a restaurant, a house or a shopping centre.

And, of course, from Monday, subject to parliament's approval this week, proof of a recent negative lateral flow test or vaccination will be accepted by venues and events covered by the COVID certification scheme.

It is already very easy, and it is free, to get lateral flow tests – they can be ordered online or collected from pharmacies and test centres.

If you are a secondary pupil - or a member of staff at a school or early learning centre - test kits are also available free of charge from schools and early years centres. However I can confirm today that, in the run up to the festive period, lateral flow tests will also be made available by local authorities in many more locations.

These locations will obviously vary in different parts of the country, but they will include shopping centres and supermarkets, garden centres, sports grounds and Christmas markets.

We are also working with transport partners to provide access to tests in transport hubs.

So while it's already easy to get lateral flow tests, we are taking steps to make it easier still.

So please make sure you get a supply, keep it topped up and use that supply.

It's also worth mentioning that the newer devices are much easier to use than the older ones – they require nasal swabs only rather than nasal and throat swabs.

So if you have previously tried lateral flow tests and given up because you found them too difficult or uncomfortable to use, please do try again now.

Remember also to report the result of tests online.



And if a test shows up positive, isolate at home until you have had and got the result of a confirmatory PCR test.

If we all do this over the next few weeks, it will make a really big difference because we will all massively reduce the risk of infecting others, particularly if we have the virus but wouldn't otherwise know about it because we don't have symptoms

So, please - test yourself before mixing with others, and on every occasion that you intend mixing with others.

Presiding Officer, to draw my remarks to a close, there is no doubt that the emergence of the new variant is a blow – certainly a potential blow - it is the most concerning - potentially the most concerning - development in the pandemic in recent months.

But even if our developing knowledge about the variant confirms some of our worries - and let's hope it doesn't - we are still in a much better position than we were this time last year, thanks to vaccines.

And we know what we need to do stem transmission. Because we've done it before and we know it works.

So it's down to all of us to make sure that we do it.

So if in recent weeks we've been sticking a bit less strictly to public health advice, now is the time to follow it rigorously again.

Get vaccinated - the single most important thing we can do.

Secondly, test regularly, on any occasion before socialising, or mixing with other households.

And finally, comply with all existing protections.

Please wear face coverings on public transport, in shops, and when moving about in hospitality settings.

Keep windows open to improve ventilation.

Follow all advice on hygiene – wash hands and surfaces.

And work from home if you can.

The discovery of this new variant really does make these measures even more important than ever before.

If we treat the news of this new variant as an opportunity to raise our guard again, I hope we can protect the progress made in recent weeks.

And we can give ourselves the best possible chance of enjoying not just a more normal Christmas, which we all want, but a safer Christmas too - and also of avoiding any tighter

restrictions in the weeks ahead.

So please, get vaccinated, get tested, and comply with all of the protections in place.

If we all do this, we will play our part in slowing the spread of the virus generally and this new variant in particular.

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- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, but

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