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Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's speech – 17 December 2021

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Statement given by the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon at a media briefing in St Andrew's House, Edinburgh.

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Coronavirus update from the First Minister: 17 December 2021



Good afternoon.

I'm joined by the Chief Medical Officer, and we will give you an update today on the spread of Omicron in Scotland.

We will also take the opportunity to reinforce the important request we are making of everyone just now - to limit the number of contacts you are having in the run-up to Christmas, and indeed to stay at home as much as is feasible.

Firstly though, I will run through today's statistics.

4,336 positive cases were reported yesterday, which is a positivity rate of 10.1%.

Public Health Scotland have made us aware that due to the larger volume of tests being processed, the turnaround time for results was slightly affected yesterday. This means that the number of tests being reported on today - and therefore possibly the number of positive cases - might be slightly lower than expected.

I also want to repeat my plea to everyone - if you have symptoms of Covid or a positive LFD test, please do make sure you get a PCR test.

522 people are in hospital with Covid – 10 fewer than yesterday.

33 people have been in intensive care, that is 1 fewer than yesterday.

Remember, though, that there is always a lag between rising cases and rising numbers in hospital.

Sadly, a further 7 deaths were reported in the past 24 hours, and that takes the total number of deaths under this daily definition to 9,771.

And again, I want to send my condolences to everyone who has been bereaved.

In relation to this Omicron variant specifically, as of 5pm yesterday, there were 696 confirmed cases in Scotland.

However these are cases confirmed through genomic sequencing and this measure therefore, very significantly underestimates the true volume of Omicron cases.

As I have set out before, an earlier indicator of whether or not a case is Omicron - and a better measure of the overall volume of cases - is the absence in PCR results of a specific genetic characteristic known as the S gene.

Around 95% of all tests that are done in Scotland are analysed in a way that allows us to see if the S Gene is present or not.

And this has revealed over the past couple of weeks that Omicron cases have been rising exponentially –indeed faster than anything experienced previously in the pandemic, and as you have heard me say in recent days, cases have been doubling every 2 to 3 days.

Now last Friday when I stood here I reported that the S Gene indicator was telling us then that 15.5% of all cases were likely to be the Omicron variant.

Today, it is 51.4%

So that does mean Omicron has now replaced Delta as the dominant Covid strain circulating in Scotland.

And that presents a challenge because we know omicron is significantly more transmissible than delta. It has an R number that is possibly above 4 and therefore it is driving – and the bigger the proportion of cases that are Omicron- the more it will drive or the more it risks driving, a much steeper increase in cases overall.

Indeed, cases have already increased in the past week by more than 40%, and we should expect to see that continue and indeed accelerate in the period ahead.

The tsunami I warned about a week ago is now starting to hit us.

However - and this is a key point, a really key point actually - we shouldn't be fatalistic about this. We are not powerless in the face of it - and I will return later to what we can all do now, individually and collectively, to slow down the spread of Omicron, and try to avoid these worst fears that we have right now coming to pass.

And slow it down we must – because there is no doubt that as of now the scale and the immediacy of the challenge it presents is of profound concern.

Even if it did turn out to be generally a little bit less severe for most people – and I want to stress again we still don't know that to be true - for some people, even if that was true, it will still cause serious illness and hospitalization. And tragically, more people will die.

And even if the number of people falling seriously ill is a smaller percentage of cases than with Delta, the basic fact of arithmetic is inescapable - a smaller percentage of a much bigger number of infections will result in a massive number of cases needing hospital care.

Indeed total hospital admissions in Scotland in the week up to 13 December were slightly higher than in the week previous - so we are already starting to see an increase as a result of the relatively moderate rise in cases seen in previous weeks.

Perhaps more significantly in London right now, where the number of Omicron cases is currently the highest in the UK, hospital admissions are now rising quite sharply.

If we don't act now, what we have feared since the very start of this pandemic, but so far managed to avoid- the overwhelming of the NHS - could happen. And that is one, it not the only, but it is one very important reason why slowing this down matters so much.

But it is also important to understand that this is not simply an issue for the health service.

The numbers of people becoming infected even mildly - and having to isolate - is already putting a significant strain on the economy and on other critical services.

As people become infected, we lose drivers for trains, we lose teachers for classrooms, we lose nurses for hospital wards, and workers for businesses the length and breadth of the country.

So there really isn't a choice to be made, there never has been, but right now there certainly not a choice to be made between slowing the spread of Omicron and protecting our economy.

We will only actually protect the economy if we slow the spread of the virus and reduce the number of people getting infected with it.

That said, I realise, I am acutely aware, that the steps we are asking people to take just now - particularly that advice to limit social contacts – is having a severe economic impact.

This is particularly hard on sectors like hospitality and culture, these have been badly affected by previous waves of Covid and the restrictions we have all been living with, and of course these sectors were hoping, until recently with some justified optimism for a much better Christmas period ahead. So what has happened in the past three weeks has been a cruel blow to everybody but it has really hit these sectors very hard all over again.

This is why we, in the Scottish Government have found £100 million to help businesses in those sectors.

I can confirm today that £66 million of this will go to the hospitality sector, £8 million will go to the food and drink supply chain affected by hospitality cancellations – and that includes wholesalers.

£20 million will go to the culture sector, £3 million to the wedding sector, and £3 million to the worst affected parts of tourism, including international inbound operators.

We are working with councils, enterprise agencies and others to ensure businesses get this money as soon as possible. Those who have received support previously will be contacted directly. And further details of the funding – and how it will be paid – are available on the Find Business Support website.

The support we're providing is significant – but I know it won't fully compensate these sectors for the impact they are suffering right now.

That is why I wrote to the Prime Minister yesterday, asking the UK Government to provide the support that is needed.

In my view, business now needs the type and scale of financial support available earlier in the pandemic. And the reality is, whether anybody likes it or not, that can only come from the UK Government – because it has borrowing powers that the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments simply do not have.

I will press this point with the Prime Minister when I speak to him later today.

I had hoped that I would already have spoken to him by now, because we must all realise that with a virus doubling every couple of days, businesses already bleeding, every 24 hours counts. There is no time to waste.

So I hope the conversation later will be a positive one- and that it will give businesses the assurance of support that they so badly need.

However, to return to the point I was making earlier, the best way in the longer term to support business sustainably, is to get the virus back under control.

In that, our first and most important line of defence is vaccination.

It seems very likely that Omicron is better than previous variants at evading, to a certain extent, the immunity conferred by one or two doses of vaccine.

But, more positively, it seems that boosters are still very effective in reducing the risk of falling seriously ill from Omicron. So getting a booster is an essential way of protecting yourself and others, and of course of helping relieve and reduce the burden on the NHS.

The booster programme has picked up speed in the past week.

Yesterday saw the highest number of vaccinations we have ever delivered in a single day.

67,016 first, second and third jags were delivered and of these, 63,327 were booster and third jags.

Now let me just illustrate a bit more for you, just how much faster the booster programme is now running - on 25 November, which is the day we first learned about Omicron, thirty-two and a half thousand boosters were delivered.

Yesterday, as I have just noted, it was 63,327 – that's an almost doubling of the daily rate.

And most of that acceleration has happened just in the past week - in the past 4 days alone, more than 220,000 booster and third jags have been administered across the country.

I am so deeply grateful to everyone working so hard, and they are working exceptionally hard, in vaccination teams across the country and of course to everyone coming forward to get their jags.

More than half of the over 18 population has now had a booster.

But we want as many people as possible to get boosted by the time the bells strike on Hogmanay.

Online booking is open to everyone over 18s, and there is also additional walk-in capacity in many centres.

So please, if you haven't had your booster yet, make arrangements to get it.

If you already have an appointment, but it might not be until January, you can go online reschedule to bring it forward.

And if you haven't had a first or second jag yet, please get that. It is never too late to get your vaccinated.

That's important point for anyone who hasn't been vaccinated – but I want to emphasise that point today for pregnant women.

The JCVI, yesterday added pregnant women to the list of priority groups for vaccination. Underlining that it is the most important protection for any woman who is pregnant and of course their baby.

The continued roll-out of boosters is essential.

But there is a key point I need to emphasise again to everyone today, no matter how fast we do it right now, in the immediate term it won't be fast enough on its own to outrun Omicron - not least because the immune protection from a booster jag doesn't kick in straight away. It takes around a week.

So, given that Omicron is doubling every two to three days, that means - potentially – we have seven more doubling cycles between now and the end of the year.

And given that case numbers are already high, that could take them much higher than anything we have seen before - and that would pose the most severe challenges yet for the NHS and the economy.

So the serious message for all of us is this.

Yes, we must speed up vaccination - and as I've illustrated we are doing that.

But at the same time, we must also act to slow down the virus.

That is why we have put a new duty on businesses taking effect today - backed by guidance - to take reasonable steps to reduce transmission in their premises.

That includes, for example, physical distancing and measures to control the flow of customers in supermarkets, and also support for home working.

And it is also why we are asking all of us to now reduce as much as possible the number of social contacts we have with people outside our own household.

If we do meet up with people, we should make sure that there are no more than three households in the group. And we should absolutely make sure we are taking lateral flow tests before we go.

But that's a safety net. My fundamental ask right now of everyone is this.

In the run up to Christmas, stay at home much more than you normally would, and stay at home as much as you can.

If what matters most to you is spending time with your loved ones on Christmas Day, and I think that's what matters to most, to many of us, don't risk that by going out before then and possibly catching Covid.

Because the reality is if you are mixing with others right now catching this virus is a real and increasing risk.

Covid - in this new Omicron form - is circulating really widely just now. And it is very, very infectious - much more than previous strains.

So if someone in your group - or even someone just in the same venue as you - has it, your chances of catching it are much higher than with the Delta variant.

So please, try to stay at home as much as is feasible, and prioritise the events and occasions that matter most to you over Christmas.

And then after Christmas, if we all go back to limiting our contacts for a period further, we can hopefully then minimize any January surge in cases.

I know all of this is really awful, it's awful for all of us, it's particularly awful for businesses that are affected right now.

I think many of us are finding it even harder this Christmas than last year. I know that's the way I am feeling right now.

Just 3 weeks ago, I really thought we had turned a corner and had a genuine prospect of a much more normal run up to Christmas.

The emergence of Omicron really has been the cruellest of blows.

So it's quite understandable that we are all feeling sad, upset, frustrated and even angry about this.

Believe me, I'm not immune from these feelings.

But we should also - however difficult it is - try to hold on to hope as well.

It might not feel like it, but we are in a so much better a position now than we were this time last year because of vaccination.

Every booster put into someone's arm right now is another brick in this wall of protection that I do believe will increasingly defend us against Omicron as we go into the new year.

And second, although learning this has been a long, hard and very wearying lesson - we do know what to do to slow this virus down.

And what we need to do is as follows.

Firstly, get vaccinated. That really is the most important thing any of us can do right now.

Second, test regularly.

I'm asking everyone to stay at home as much as possible, but if you are mixing with other people, please test yourself before you go- just before you go- if you are going out at night, don't rely on a test from the morning make sure you test yourself just before you go.

If we do that, we significantly reduce the risk that we are inadvertently passing the virus on to others..

Lateral flow tests are easy to take, they are easy to get hold of. Order them online and they will be mailed to you, collect them from local pharmacies or testing centres. You can go onto the website, put in your postcode and it will tell you where the closest collection point is. So please, make sure you do that if you are going out anywhere.

But finally, do stay at home as much as possible, and when we do mix, as well as testing, comply with all existing protections. Face coverings on public transport, in shops, moving about in hospitality.

Keep windows open if meeting indoors- not easy at this time of year but really important.

And follow all of the advice on hygiene.

And of course work from home as far as possible.

We really do, and there is no point in me sugar coating this, we face a really difficult period again ahead. But if we do all these thing, limit our social contacts, get vaccinated, look out for each other, we will get through it.

I'm really grateful - again - for the way in which the country is responding. And it is obvious that the country is responding well.

We can already see that people are listening to and following this advice.

And given how hard it is - so much harder now than before - it underlines I think the sense of responsibility and solidarity that we feel for each other.

I hope very much that we will see the rewards of this in the period ahead if some of our worst fears don't materialise. But we do need to stick at it.

So let's look out for each other and be kind to each other.

This is probably a good time to drop a line to or ring up someone who might be feeling especially down or alone right now. Doing that might also cheer us up as well.

The most important thing, in my view, that we've learned over the past couple of years is how much we need each other.

So this is a time to pull together again and support each other in every way we possibly can.

Was this helpful?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, but

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