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Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's statement – 7 December 2021

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Statement given by the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon to the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh on Tuesday 7 December 2021.

**This document is part of a collection**

Presiding Officer,

I will give an update on the general COVID situation.

I will also share the most up to date information we have on the Omicron variant - both its transmission in Scotland and the world's developing understanding of it - and set out the steps we must take to slow its spread, and to stem transmission of the virus more generally.

First, though, today's statistics.

3,060 positive cases were reported yesterday – 9.2% of all tests carried out.

576 people are in hospital with COVID – which is 15 fewer than yesterday.

And 38 people are in intensive care, which is five fewer than yesterday.

Sadly, a further 12 deaths have been reported in the past 24 hours, which takes the total number of deaths registered under the daily definition to 9,661.

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

I am pleased to report, however, that the vaccination programme continues apace.

4,355,063 people have now had a first dose, 3,962,203 have had two doses, and 1,922,604 have had a booster or third dose.

On first, second, third and booster doses, Scotland is still the most vaccinated part of the UK.

Indeed, at this stage on booster doses we are comfortably ahead of the other UK nations, with around 40% of the over 12 population having had a booster jab.

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

Today's weekly update coincides with the latest three-week review point for all of the remaining COVID regulations.

I can therefore confirm that at our meeting this morning, the Cabinet agreed to keep all of the current protections in place, with no immediate changes.

Given the very significant risks posed by Omicron, and the continuing high and indeed once again rising number of cases in Scotland overall, our judgment is that it would be inappropriate to lift any of the protections currently in place at this time.

On the contrary, we agreed that it is vital at this stage to strengthen compliance with all of these existing protections.

We also agreed that, in light of the rapidly developing Omicron situation, it was important to keep the need for any additional protections under daily review at this stage.

The importance of doing that will be clear from the latest data, particularly the data I will share shortly on Omicron.

Firstly, though, let me quickly summarise the overall situation.

After two weeks of falling case numbers, the last seven days have seen a rise in the overall number of cases.

Last week, I reported that the number of new cases being recorded each day had fallen by 14% over the preceding seven days.

However in this past week, cases have increased by 11%. We are currently recording just over 2,800 new cases a day on average.

Encouragingly though cases in the over 60 age groups have continued to fall – in the past week by a further 8%. There is little doubt, if any doubt, that this reflects the effectiveness of booster vaccines.

However, in all age cohorts under 60, cases are rising again.

In total, cases amongst under 60s increased by 13% in the past week - and since people under 60 currently account for more than 90% of all cases, that has inevitably driven an increase in the total number of cases recorded.

More positively, the number of people in hospital with Covid has fallen further in the last week – from 706 to 576.

And so has the number in intensive care - from 54 to 38.

That is of course welcome news.

But we should not be in any way complacent about it.

Firstly, because we know that there will always be a time lag between rising cases and rising admissions to hospital.

And, secondly, because the NHS continues to be under very severe pressure, from direct COVID pressures, but also from the backlog of work created during the pandemic.

On top of all that, the NHS may soon face additional pressures – for example from flu – as we head further into winter.

And there has always been the potential for COVID cases to rise during December – as may now be happening - as a result of more people mixing indoors more often.

So in any circumstances, we would be concerned about the current high level of cases, and the impact this might have on the NHS.

But the emergence of the Omicron variant is now an additional - and indeed very significant - cause for concern.

Public Health Scotland's weekly COVID report will, from tomorrow, provide more detail on both confirmed and probable Omicron cases in Scotland.

It will include data, not just on confirmed cases, but also on the number of PCR tests showing what is called the S-gene drop-out - this is not conclusive evidence that a case is of the Omicron variant, but it is highly indicative of it.

The report will also contain data on the age, sex and health board area of Omicron cases.

In weeks to come - and as soon as the quality of data allows - these reports will also provide details on the vaccination status of, and hospital admissions and deaths associated with, Omicron cases.

For now, though, let me summarise what we currently know about the presence and spread of this new variant in Scotland.

I can confirm that, as of 5pm yesterday, there were 99 confirmed cases here.

This is an increase of 28 since yesterday.

And to give a sense of the speed of increase - albeit at this stage from a low level - the figure I reported this time last week was nine.

So we have seen more than a tenfold increase in the space of a week.

A still low - at around 4% - but nevertheless steadily rising proportion of cases also now show the S gene drop out that, that as I said a moment ago, is highly indicative of Omicron.

Our estimate at this stage is that the doubling time for Omicron cases may be as short as two to three days, and that the R number associated with the new variant may be well over 2.

I can also report that there are now confirmed cases in nine of our 14 health board areas - suggesting that community transmission is becoming more widespread, and possibly more sustained, across the country.

Now our health protection teams are working hard through contact tracing, testing and isolation to slow the spread of Omicron cases. That work will obviously continue and I want to thank them for the excellent work they are doing.

However, given the nature of transmission, I would expect to see a continued and potentially rapid rise in cases in the days ahead and for Omicron to account for a rising share of overall cases.

And all of this explains, I hope, the requirement for government to review the situation on a daily rather than a weekly basis at this stage.

Let me turn now briefly to the developing global understanding of Omicron.

The first point to make is that there still a great deal we do not yet know.

However data on cases worldwide, including here at home, gives a reasonable degree of certainty at this stage that Omicron is more transmissible than the Delta variant, and perhaps significantly so.

Early - though again unconfirmed - data also suggests that Omicron is more capable of re-infecting people who have had the virus previously. In other words, it has some ability to evade natural immunity.

And, of course, there is also a concern that it may evade to some extent the immunity conferred by vaccinations.

Let me stress again, though, at this point that even if this does prove to be the case, getting vaccinated will still be vitally important.

Vaccines being slightly less effective is not the same, nowhere near it in fact, as vaccines being ineffective.

Being vaccinated will still give us much more protection against Omicron, especially from severe illness, than we will have if we are not vaccinated.

Now further data and analysis is needed to confirm all of the hypotheses about the transmissibility, immunity evasion and severity of Omicron.

We will learn more about its characteristics and implications- in the days and weeks ahead, and this developing understanding will inform and shape our response.

However, we can assume already that the emergence of Omicron is a significant challenge for all of us.

A variant that is more transmissible than Delta, and which has even a limited ability to evade natural or vaccine immunity, has the potential to put very intense additional pressure on the National Health Service.

And a key point we must understand is this, and I want to underline this point. The sheer weight of numbers of people who could be infected as a result of increased transmissibility and some immune evasion will create this pressure even if the disease the new variant causes in individuals is no more severe than Delta.

So there is no doubt, unfortunately, that this is another serious moment in the course of the pandemic.

And I will talk shortly about what that means for all of us.

But firstly, let me outline the principles that will guide any decisions government may have to take in the days and weeks ahead.

It is worth noting that the period ahead - as we learn more about the new variant - may involve very difficult judgments for governments everywhere. Indeed, many governments around the world are already taking decisions that we all hoped were behind us for good.

For the Scottish Government, our first principle will be to seek to do what is necessary to keep the country as safe as possible, even if that is sometimes at the expense of being popular.

And second, we will strive to get the right balance between acting proportionately and acting preventatively.

We know from experience, sometimes bitter experience, that with an infectious virus acting quickly can be vital - if we wait too long for data to confirm we have a problem, it might already be too late to prevent the problem.

In fact, acting preventatively is often the best way of ensuring that action can remain limited and proportionate.

However, after two years of restrictions - with the accumulation of social and economic harms that previous restrictions have caused – we also know that it is ever more important to minimise further restrictions as far as is possible.

So while recognising that it is never a perfect science, we will seek to get that balance right.

Let me turn to the action we have taken so far and what we are asking everyone to do now.

Firstly, in line with the other UK nations, we have tightened travel rules.

In the past week, Nigeria has been added to the travel red list. That means anyone arriving in the UK from Nigeria - or the 10 countries already on the list - must enter managed quarantine for 10 days.

In addition, since this morning, anyone aged 12 or over, who is travelling to the UK from outside the Common Travel Area, will be required to take a COVID test shortly before they leave for the UK. And this is in addition to the requirement to take a test on day two after arrival in the UK and to self-isolate pending the result.

My advice to anyone planning travel between Scotland and countries outside the common travel area, is to check on the Scottish Government website for detailed guidance; and to also check the requirements of the country you are travelling to. Because the requirements there may well be different to those in force here.

Presiding Officer

At this stage, travel restrictions have an important part to play in responding to Omicron.

However, given that we already have some community transmission in Scotland, what we do domestically is also important.

That is why Cabinet decided this morning to keep in force all existing protections.

However, we also agreed that it is vital not just to maintain, but to strengthen compliance with these protections.

It is time for all of us to go back to basics and ensure that we are taking all of the steps required to minimise the risk of getting or spreading this virus.

Indeed, it is through heightened compliance with current protections that we will give ourselves the best chance of avoiding any additional protections.

So I am asking everyone to make an extra effort to do so from now through the festive period and into January.

Obviously, that means wearing face coverings in indoor public places; ventilating rooms by opening windows; and ensuring good hand hygiene.

However, there are two important protections that I want to emphasise particularly strongly today.

Firstly, working from home. We already advise people to work from home wherever practical.

Today, I am asking employers to ensure this is happening.

To be blunt, if you had staff working from home at this start of the pandemic, please now enable them to do so again.

We are asking you to do this from now until the middle of January when we will review this advice again.

I know how difficult this is, but I cannot stress enough how much difference we think this could make in helping stem transmission and avoid the need for even more onerous measures.

Secondly, testing and isolation.

Test & Protect is deploying enhanced contact tracing for all cases with the S-gene drop-out that is indicative of Omicron - for these cases, household contacts of close contacts, rather than just the close contacts themselves, are being asked to test and isolate. If you are asked to do this, please comply.

More generally, for non-Omicron cases, if you have symptoms of COVID, please get a PCR test and self-isolate until you get the result.

If your result is negative you can end isolation at that point if you are double vaccinated. If positive, you must isolate for the full 10 days.

And crucially, please remember that you can have this virus even if you have no symptoms.

So testing regularly and repeatedly with lateral flow devices is essential.

We are asking everyone to do a lateral flow test before mixing with people from other households - and on every occasion you intend doing so.

That means before going to a pub, to a restaurant, visiting someone's house, or even going shopping.

Let me be clear Presiding Officer, I am not excluding myself from this. I am currently doing a test every morning before coming to work and I will do a test on any occasion I mix with others over the festive period. And I will ask anyone visiting my home over Christmas to do likewise. And I'm asking every member of this Parliament to lead by example, and do that too.

LFD kits are easy to get through NHS Inform or from local pharmacies or test centres. And they are very easy to use.

So please, please do this. It will significantly help us break the chains of transition.

If we all do all of these things, difficult though I appreciate they are, then even with a more transmissible variant, I do really hope we can avoid any further measures.

I cannot guarantee this however. I don't think any responsible person in my position could guarantee this at this stage. And given the situation we face it is important to remain open to any proportionate measures, for example the extension of COVID certification, that might help us reduce the risks should the situation deteriorate.

The government will carefully analyse the data in the days ahead. I hope this doesn't require us to take any decisions ahead of my next scheduled statement a week today, but if it does I will obviously return to Parliament.

I want to end Presiding Officer, by again reiterating the vital importance of vaccination.

We are currently the most vaccinated part of the UK - and we have more quickly than other nations implemented the JvCI advice to reduce the gap between second doses and boosters - but we are not complacent.

We are identifying and training additional vaccinators. So far we have added the equivalent of more than 300 additional full-time staff to the vaccination workforce.

We are also working to further increase vaccination capacity. A number of health boards – Fife and Tayside for example - are now using drop-in centres to make vaccination even easier.

And we are in the process of increasing the use of mobile vaccination units provided by the Scottish Ambulance Service.

In addition to these efforts – which are intended to improve the supply and availability of vaccination – we are also working to increase demand by encouraging even more people to take up the offer of vaccine.

In the past week, therefore, text or e-mail messages have been sent to those aged between 40 and 60, encouraging them to book their booster jab.

For those now able to get a booster jab – that is anyone over 40 who had the second jab 12 or more weeks ago – please arrange an appointment as quickly as possible.

You can book through the NHS Inform website, or by calling the vaccination helpline.

And if you're 16 or 17 you can of course, and should, also book your second dose in the same way.

Last week, we also sent blue envelope letters to all 50 to 59 year olds who have not yet been vaccinated at all. A similar letter is being issued over the course of this week to everyone between 40 and 49 who hasn't yet been vaccinated.

Take-up of the vaccine has been exceptional, but there are still a significant number of people in those age groups who have not been vaccinated.

To anyone in that position, let me be clear about this - it is not too late to get vaccinated. In fact it is now more important than ever to get your first jab and start to get that essential protection.

To conclude Presiding Officer, Omicron is a really concerning development and one of the most unwelcome developments at this stage in the pandemic. But, this is the positive aspect, the actions that have helped us against other variants, will also help against Omicron.

That means we all know what we need to do to in the days and weeks ahead.

And so my request to everyone is to follow those steps. Please go back to basics and make sure that we are all doing everything that we are asked to.

That's the best way we have of making Christmas and the New Year as safe as possible – and of maximising our ability to navigate this next unwelcome but unavoidable challenge without any additional protections.

It will also help us protect the NHS and those who are working so hard in the NHS and social care to keep us all safe. So please do get vaccinated.

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

And finally, make sure you comply with all of the existing protections.

Wear your face coverings on public transport, in shops, and when moving about in hospitality.

Keep windows open. Not easy, I know, in the weather we are currently experiencing but try to keep windows open if you're meeting people indoors. And follow all of the hygiene advice.

And if you were working from home at the start of the pandemic, please do so again for the next few weeks.

None of this is what any of us want two years into this ordeal. I know that.

But it is the best way of slowing the spread of the virus in general and Omicron in particular.

And by doing that, we do give ourselves the best possible chance of enjoying a Christmas that is more normal, but also safe - and of avoiding a new year hangover of spiraling cases.

Please - and I really hope this will be for one last time in this pandemic - let's all pull together, do what is necessary, and get each other and the country through this winter and into what we all hope will be a better and brighter spring.

Was this helpful?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, but

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