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Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's speech 24 March 2020

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Thanks, Presiding Officer

And thank you for the opportunity to give an update on our response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

First of all, I can confirm that, as at 9 o'clock this morning, there have been 584 confirmed cases - that is an increase of 85 from yesterday. As always, let me be clear that these numbers will be an underestimate.

It is also with sadness that I can report that there have been a further 2 deaths of patients who had tested positive for Covid 19 – taking the total number of deaths in Scotland to 16.

I want to extend my condolences to all of those who have lost loved ones. And again thank our NHS staff who continue to care for people suffering from the virus.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health will provide more detailed briefing in a few minutes.

But I want to begin with an update on some key points.

As everyone knows, last night we announced significant new measures to slow the spread of Covid-19.

Let me quickly reiterate what these are – because I want people across Scotland to be very clear what is now expected of all of us.

Effectively, Scotland is now in lockdown.

People had already been told that they must stay at home. We've now set more stringent limits to that. So the only permissible reasons for leaving your homes are as follows:

• to shop for basic necessities – but only once a day, at the most.
• to take exercise – again, no more than once a day – and this should be done alone, or with your household, not in groups.
• for medical reasons for yourself - or if providing care or to support a vulnerable person; and
• to travel to essential work if that work absolutely cannot be done from home.
All social events are now banned. And public gatherings of two or more people – excluding households or for essential work related purposes – are also prohibited.

Communal places such as libraries and playgrounds must close. Places of worship should also close – other than for funerals, which – I'm deeply sorry to say – must now be restricted to immediate family.

I know that there have been some questions about families who live apart. Children under 18 can continue to move between households – but they should in doing so take hygiene and social distancing precautions.

And I also want to confirm that those who have caring responsibilities or who work in care should continue to carry out those responsibilities, but again should follow social distancing measures as much as possible and hand hygiene at all times.

But the overall message is very clear – people must stay at home. I know how hard this is for everybody but people should not be meeting friends. They should not be meeting family members who live outside of their home and as I have said previously, for all of us right now life should not be feeling normal.

If it is, then you are almost certainly not sticking to the rules that we are asking people to abide by.

I'm confident that the vast majority of people will comply with these rules. And I want to thank everyone in advance for doing that.

However, later this week, the emergency legislation that parliament will discuss shortly will give us powers of enforcement – and I want to be very clear, we will use these powers, if necessary.

I want to say a bit more about the implications of the current situation for businesses.

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Since I addressed Parliament last week the UK Government has taken helpful and very significant steps to support wages. I know that does not come into force until the beginning of April, but I hope that by working with lenders businesses will now be able do the right thing and not lay staff off unnecessarily.

I can also confirm that the application process for the small business grant scheme – which was announced by the Finance Secretary here last week – is now live. Details of how businesses can access and apply for that are available on mygov.scot.

I can also assure self-employed and freelance people that the Scottish Government continues to argue for the UK Government to put in place support for them, and the Cabinet Secretaries for Finance and the Economy wrote to the Treasury on that matter again yesterday and I am very hopeful from the signals given by the UK Government that we will see positive announcements on this soon.

If I can now turn to the issue of work and the closing of business premises. And let me start, Presiding Officer, by acknowledging the very acute challenges that businesses are facing right now and also thank the vast majority for the very responsible approach they are taking to protect the health and wellbeing of their workforces.

However, I know that there remains some concern that businesses and employers don't know what advice to follow so I want to be clear today about what the Scottish Government is expecting.

Firstly, I want to stress that it is employers who should be making these decisions – it should not be up to employees to anguish over whether or not they should be going in to work.

I would also say that, as I'm sure people will appreciate, it is not going to be possible for us to make a decision or offer bespoke guidance for every single different business in Scotland – this is difficult for everyone. But this guidance, when you strip it back, I hope will help businesses navigate these difficult decisions.

It is clear that there are categories of business that have already been told to close. On Friday that included pubs, restaurants, cafes, cinemas and gyms.

Yesterday we published a list of essential and non-essential retail. Non-essential retail premises are now required to close, and of course shopping for basic necessities kept to a minimum.

That list is being updated to include other forms of establishments and those critical for civil contingencies.

In particular, it is important that key strategic sites, vital to economic resilience and which cannot be easily shut down, for example the steel works at Dalziel, can continue to work so long as they can maintain the minimum number of required staff and the social distancing requirements.

However I am aware that there will be many businesses out there that don't fit neatly into any of those categories – manufacturers and food producers for example.

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For these businesses the advice - which is very much based on a precautionary principle given that our priority here is the protection of health - is broadly as follows:

Firstly, if your staff can work from home – that is what you should allow them to do.

Secondly, if your staff cannot work from home – you should be asking yourself if your business is contributing something right now that is essential to the fight against Coronavirus, for example making medical supplies or manufacturing essential items, or is it contributing something essential to the wellbeing of the nation – for example food supplies.

If it is, we want you to keep going if possible – but the question you must ask yourself is can you operate your business in line with safe social distancing practice and of course your normal health and safety requirements?
If you cannot answer yes to those questions, then in our view you should not continue to be open.

We have been asked specifically about construction sites in Scotland - our advice right now on the basis of that precautionary principle, is that we would expect them to be closed, unless the building that is being worked on is essential – such as a hospital.

We know that for some people, such as self-employed gardeners and window cleaners where there is no contact with other people, if they can go about their business safely, then this could be good for the community and we would encourage them to do so.

For the many people who are looking to volunteer and help out in their communities there is advice available on ReadyScotland.org on how to do so safely.

It will of course, continue to be vital that local authorities put in place arrangements for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. The teachers and other education staff who are providing this service are themselves key workers.
I want to thank those who have followed the advice so far and in particular all those parents who are now looking after their children at home and the teachers and early years workers who are caring for vulnerable children and those of key workers.

We will have indicative numbers on attendance later today – but our initial reports are that the vast majority of parents are not seeking to send their children to school.

And finally Presiding Officer - Parliament – rightly, as you've just indicated – is also changing how we operate. Although – and I want to make this point very strongly - all MSPs must continue to perform a very important scrutiny role in a time like this, I understand it has been agreed that until the Easter recess at least, parliament will now only meet for one day per week, rather than three.

Presiding officer, I want to conclude with a basic point. The measures that have been announced in recent days – from the school closures last week to last night's lockdown – are really really difficult for every single individual and business and organization across our country and they are

truly unprecedented. But they are unprecedented for a reason, because the challenge we face is also unprecedented.

As I've said before, this is by far the biggest challenge our country has faced in our lifetimes and so the measures we take to deal with that and to seek to mitigate its impact must reflect its magnitude.

The changes we are asking people to make to their lives, difficult though they are, are absolutely essential.
They are essential to help us slow down as much as we can the spread of this virus.

They are essential to reduce its peak impact.

They are essential to seek to avoid our NHS becoming overwhelmed so that it can instead continue to provide treatment to all those who will need it.

And they are essential to save lives.

The daily reality we face right now is quite a stark one.

If we all comply with these measures, then many fewer of us will die of this virus than would otherwise be the case.
That means many more of us will come out the other side of all of this - and perhaps more quickly than otherwise be able to resume the lifestyles that we have for so long cherished and taken for granted.

So for now, I hope we all show solidarity for each other even as we stay apart – by staying in touch with those we care about, and by helping each other as best we can.

But let's be clear, crystal clear, collectively as a Parliament, that staying at home has become the only way of slowing the spread of this virus; the only way of giving our NHS a chance to cope; and the only way of saving lives and that must right now be the priority of each and every one of us.

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