Twitter Thread by The SNP



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First Minister @NicolaSturgeon: "I want to update Parliament on Cabinet's review of the current lockdown restrictions, which took place earlier today."

NS: "I will report on some cautious grounds for optimism, I'm pleased to say, but also set out why it is vital, in order to protect the NHS and save lives, to stick with these restrictions for a further period."

NS: "I will set out what that means for the timing of getting children back to school, which, of course, remains a priority for all of us."

NS: "And finally, I'll touch on other aspects of our response to Covid, including control of borders, the further expansion of testing, and the progress of the vaccination programme."

NS: "Firstly, I'll give a brief summary of the latest statistics and then seek to put these in some context."

NS: "The total number of positive cases that were reported yesterday was 1,165, which is 11.1% of all tests carried out, and the total number of cases now stands at 164,927."

NS: "I can also confirm that, by 8:30am this morning, 284,582 people had received the first dose of vaccine, and I'll come back to the issue of vaccination and the progress of that programme later on in my statement."

NS: "1,989 people are now in hospital with Covid, which is an increase of 30 from yesterday, and 150 people are in intensive care, an increase of 4 from yesterday."

NS: "I'm also very sorry to report that, in the past 24 hours, a further 71 deaths have been registered of patients who first tested positive over the previous 28 days. The total number of deaths under this daily measurement is now 5,376."

NS: "Once again, I send my deepest condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one in the course of the pandemic so far."

NS: "Presiding Officer, as these figures demonstrate, case numbers are still high. According to the most recent seven-day average, they stand at more than 200 per 100,000 of the population - and the pressure on the National Health Service

continues to be very severe."

NS: "In short, we are still in a very precarious position. However, all of that said, we do see some signs of optimism in recent days."

NS: "We believe that the lockdown restrictions - and the sacrifices everyone continues to make - are now beginning to have an impact."

NS: "Case numbers, which had been rising rapidly, appear to have stabilised and even declined. In the week to 14th January there was an average of around 1,900 confirmed cases per day. That is an 18% reduction on the previous week."

NS: "Test positivity has also declined slightly, as has the number of cases per 100,000 of the population."

NS: "And while the new faster-spreading variant is now the dominant one circulating in Scotland, the proportion of new cases with the S gene drop-out that is indicative of this new variant appears to have stabilised at around two-thirds of all new cases."

NS: "All of this is encouraging, and we think it is a signal that the lockdown restrictions are working - even against the faster-spreading variant."

NS: "However, it is important, first of all, to be cautious.

We do need to see these trends continue to be more certain that this phase of the epidemic is now on a downward trajectory."

NS: "Second, we need to be realistic that any improvement we are now seeing is down, at this stage, to the fact that we are staying at home and reducing our interactions."

NS: "Any relaxation of lockdown, while case numbers, even tho they might be declining, nevertheless remain very high, could quickly send the situation into reverse - especially with the faster spreading variant now being so dominant."

NS: "That, of course, would further accelerate and intensify pressure on the National Health Service."

NS: "As we have learned throughout this pandemic so far, the incubation period - and the infectious path of the virus - means that pressure on the NHS..."

NS: "..in numbers being hospitalised and requiring intensive care continues to increase, even for a period after the cases start to decline."

NS: "That pressure on the NHS is already acute. As of today, there are just under 2,000 Covid patients in our hospitals."

NS: "This is around 30% more than at the peak of the first wave last April, and it means that around 80% of the NHS Covid surge capacity is already at this stage being utilised."

NS: "The number of patients in intensive care remains below the peak of the first wave, however it has increased by more than 90% since the turn of the year."

NS: "In total, taking account of Covid and non-Covid patients, there are around 260 patients in intensive care beds across Scotland right now, and that compares to a normal ICU capacity of around 170."

NS: "So the pressure the NHS is facing right now is real and severe, and it is of course having a significant consequential impact on non-Covid elective care."

NS: "The number of new cases in the past couple of weeks also means that this pressure is set to rise for a further period yet."

NS: "All of that means we cannot afford to see the rate of infections start to rise again which, from such a high baseline, it could all too easily do if we start to interact more with each other than we are doing right now."

NS: "So it is for all these reasons that the cabinet decided this morning to maintain the restrictions that are currently in place."

NS: "That means that the lockdown restrictions, including the strict stay-at-home requirement, will remain in place across mainland Scotland and some island communities until at least the middle of February. Cabinet will review the decision again on 2nd February."

NS: "Now, there are two specific issues I want to cover in a bit more detail. The first is a very specific local change that we decided this morning to make."

NS: "There is currently a significant outbreak of Covid on the island of Barra, part of the Western Isles. As of yesterday, there had been 39 confirmed positive cases, and more than 10% of Barra's population had been required to self-isolate."

NS: "There is a significant concern that, without additional measures, the outbreak could spread more widely across the Western Isles. There is also concern about the potential impact on care home and clinical services."

NS: "For these reasons, the National Incident Management Team has recommended, and the Cabinet, in consultation with the local authority and local health board..."

NS: "..has decided that Barra and Vatersay - which, of course, is connected to Barra by causeway - should move from level 3 to level 4 at midnight tonight."

NS: "This means that the same lockdown restrictions already in place on mainland Scotland - including the stay at home except for essential purposes requirement - will apply there too."

NS: "This change, which we will keep under review, applies only to Barra and Vatersay and not, at this stage, to the Western Isles more generally."

NS: "And, of course, all affected businesses, including hospitality and non-essential retail which will be required to close, will be eligible for business support."

NS: "As the outbreak comes under control, which we hope will happen relatively soon, we will of course consider how quickly Barra and Vatersay can move back to level 3."

NS: "The second aspect of the restrictions that I want to talk about is of course of nationwide and significant interest, and that relates to our schools and nurseries."

NS: "School buildings and nurseries have been closed to most children since the start of the term, and we indicated previously that the earliest date for a full return to school premises was 1st February."

NS: "It is, of course, a priority for all of us to get children back to normal schooling as soon as possible."

NS: "I know how much work teachers, school leaders, and other staff are doing to support home learning, and I'm very grateful to them for that."

NS: "But I also know just how challenging and stressful this situation is for families, and above all, I understand how difficult, distressing, and damaging it is for children and young people to have their education and their normal interaction with friends so disrupted."

NS: "However, our reluctant judgement at this stage is that community transmission of the virus is too high and is likely to remain so for the next period, to allow a safe return to school on February 1st."

NS: "The cabinet therefore decided today that, except for vulnerable and key worker children, school and nursery premises will remain closed until mid-February."

NS: "We will review the situation again on 2nd February, and I hope we can set out then a firmer timetable for getting children back to school."

NS: "I can say this today. If it is at all possible, as I very much hope it will be, to begin even a phased return to in-school learning in February, we will do that."

NS: "But I also have to be straight with families and say that it is simply too early to be sure about whether, and to what extent, this will be possible."

NS: "However, I will update Parliament again as soon as we have completed the review, taking advice from our clinical advisers on 2nd February."

NS: "Presiding Officer, while I don't imagine anything I've said today will have been unexpected, that doesn't make it any less difficult for all of us, individuals and businesses, to be living with these restrictions for a further period."

NS: "I continue to be very grateful to people across the country for their patience and resilience in the face of this extraordinary challenge."

NS: "The fact is that, for now, these restrictions remain necessary. Staying at home is essential to protect the NHS and save lives."

NS: "However, important though the lockdown is at this stage, I know the damage it does. That is why the other aspects of our overall effort to control Covid, and find a path back to greater normality, are also vital."

NS: "I want to touch briefly on three strands of that wider approach. Firstly, border control. Suppressing the virus in our own borders is our most immediate challenge, but as we do this, it's also important to reduce the risk of new cases coming into the country from elsewhere."

NS: "This is all the more essential as the virus mutates and new variants are emerging. The new variant that has emerged, for example, in Brazil, and which is causing concern, has already resulted in the four UK nations imposing a travel ban on a number of countries."

NS: "And as a result of the more general concern about the importation of the virus, other new travel restrictions are also, now, in effect."

NS: "All travel corridors have been suspended. This means that, with some limited exceptions, everyone arriving in Scotland now has to isolate for ten days no matter what country they are coming here from."

NS: "In addition, anyone travelling here must test negative for Covid no more than 72 hours before arrival."

NS: "We will continue to assess what further restrictions might be needed, and how they should be enforced, so that we can manage this risk of importing new Covid cases as well as we possibly can."

NS: "However the strong advice, reinforced in law, is that no-one should be travelling at all just now, either within Scotland or to and from the country, unless it is absolutely essential."

NS: "Restricting travel continues to be a regrettable but vital part of our overall effort to control Covid, and I must be clear that this is likely to remain so for some time yet."

NS: "Secondly, we're continuing to expand the use of testing in Scotland, including a more widespread use of asymptomatic testing."

NS: "The Health Secretary announced on Friday the start of asymptomatic testing for all care-at-home workers. We're also further increasing our fleet of mobile testing units."

NS: "These mobile units will soon be capable of serving up to 84 different communities at any one time, and we will shortly, in partnership with local authorities, set out plans for large-scale community testing of people without symptoms..."

NS: "..and these will build on, and take account of the learning from, the pilots conducted before Christmas."

NS: "All of these measures are important and will continue to be so in the months ahead. However, nothing is more important right now than the continued roll-out of vaccines."

NS: "The vaccination programme is performing well and it is picking up pace. We are now vaccinating approximately, indeed, more than, 100,000 people a week."

NS: "That number will increase progressively from here on and, assuming we receive the supplies we expect to, we are on-track to be vaccinating 400,000 people a week by the end of February."

NS: "Now, the figures I'm about to give, to share a sense of progress so far, I must stress are estimates based on management information. Official detailed statistics will continue to be published on a weekly basis in addition to the overall figure we publish daily."

NS: "However, as of today, I can report that more than 90% of care homes residents - the top priority group - have now received their first dose of vaccine."

NS: "Indeed, a number of health boards have now given the first dose of the vaccine to 100% of their care home residents."

NS: "In addition, more than 70% of care home staff have had their first dose of the vaccine, and more than 70% of all frontline health and care workers have also received the first dose."

NS: "We made a deliberate decision, in line with JCVI advice, to focus firstly on elderly care home residents, because we know they have the greatest vulnerability to becoming ill and dying from this virus."

NS: "We have very painfully seen that in reality over recent months."

NS: "Consequently, making sure this group benefits from the protection of the vaccine as quickly as possible is likely to have the biggest and most immediate impact on saving lives."

NS: "However, vaccinating in care homes, for obvious reasons, is more time-consuming and labour-intensive than doing so in the community."

NS: "This is why overall figures are, at this stage, lower than in England - where more over-80s, generally, but a lower proportion of care home residents, have so far received the vaccine."

NS: "However, our pace of progress in the over-80s group is also now picking up. We estimate between 15 and 20% have already had the first dose and we are on track for all over-80s and everyone in JCVI groups 1 & 2 to have been offered the

first dose by the start of February."

NS: "By the middle of February, we expect to have completed first doses for all over 70s and for all those who are deemed to be clinically extremely vulnerable. People in these groups will start to receive appointments for February in the coming days."

NS: "We then aim to complete first doses for everyone who is over 65 by the start of March, and to give first doses to everyone on the JCVI priority list by early May."

NS: "That means, Presiding Officer, that in around three months' time, approximately 3 million people in total will have received at least the first dose of vaccine."

NS: "This is the majority of our adult population and includes everyone over the age of 50 and many younger people with an underlying health condition."

NS: "The rest of the adult population will follow after that just as quickly as supplies allow."

NS: "I'm well aware of how much interest - understandable and legitimate interest - there is in the vaccination programme. It is the biggest and undoubtedly the most significant logistical operation in Scotland's post-war history."

NS: "The Scottish Government will provide Parliament and, of course, the public, with regular, detailed updates on progress."

NS: "However, while there is no doubt that vaccines give us real hope for the future, and they will help us significantly on the path back to greater normality, it is important at this stage to also add a note of perspective."

NS: "The vaccination programme, right across the UK, is focusing initially and rightly, on the advice of the JCVI, on those who are most vulnerable. That means it is unlikely in the immediate future to have a significant impact on overall population-wide case numbers."

NS: "That, we hope, will come later. However we do expect it to have an earlier impact in reducing the burden of severe illness and death - and I'm sure everyone will agree just how important that will be."

NS: "It is also the case - and this is my second point of perspective - that experts cannot yet tell us whether and to what extent the vaccines stop transmission of the virus."

NS: "So we know it alleviates the burden of serious illness, which is extremely important, but we don't yet know if vaccines stop us getting and passing on the virus."

NS: "That means that, certainly for now, and possibly for some time to come, there will be a continued need for all of us to play our part in suppression transmission in the ways we've been doing for the past few months."

NS: "Obviously I hope this will not entail the strictest form of lockdown for too much longer, but some mitigations - for example physical distancing, face coverings, hygiene, possibly travel limitations, are likely to be necessary for some time yet."

NS: "All of what I've just said is an essential part, I think, of being open and transparent with the public about the challenge we, in common with the rest of the UK and other countries, still face."

NS: "But none of it should detract from the fact that we do now have hope - much more so than at any time since the start of this pandemic - of a path to much greater domestic normality, something that all of us crave."

NS: "For now, progressing along that path requires continued discipline and continued sacrifice from all of us."

NS: "Lockdown, including the stay at home requirement, however tough it is - and it is really tough - continues to be necessary."

NS: "So, please, I am asking everyone again to stick to the letter but also to the spirit of these lockdown rules. We should not be thinking in terms of the maximum interactions we can have without breaking the rules."

NS: "Instead, all of us should be thinking every day right now about how we can reduce our interactions as far as we can to remove as many opportunities as possible for the virus to spread."

NS: "So except for genuinely essential purposes please continue to stay at home. Please, and this is vital, do not have people from other households in your house and do not go to theirs."

NS: "Work from home whenever possible. Remember, if you are an employer, you have a legal duty to support your employees in working from home as far as possible."

NS: "And follow the FACTS advice at all times when you are out and about. This is how we best look after each other, it's how we can best help our health and care workers manage the pressure they're currently facing, and avoid adding to that pressure."

NS: "It's how we continue to slow down the virus while the vaccines get on with doing their work."

NS: "I know it feels hard. I know it is really hard. But I also know it is working. It is already saving lives.

So please stick with it, stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives."