

Minimal restrictions introduced in Scotland as Omicron wave takes hold

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Last Friday, Scotland's national clinical director, Jason Leitch, warned of an oncoming "public health crisis". "We have a fourth new variant, it is accelerating, it is doubling faster than any of its predecessors and it is now more than half of the positive cases in Scotland."

On Monday, Leitch told the BBC that Omicron infections were likely to double or treble in the period ahead and that Scotland was "nowhere near" the peak of the infection wave. The modelling suggested the peak would be in late January or early February.

Mike McKirdy, president of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, underscored Leitch's concerns, warning the health system risked being overwhelmed in a manner comparable to events in northern Italy in 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic. Dr David Shackles, joint chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners in Scotland, said Omicron posed a threat to health services which "cannot be overstated".

Many other medical leaders made similar warnings. Yet on Tuesday, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's latest update on the coronavirus pandemic to the Scottish parliament included the announcement of the most minimal public health measures. These were to be introduced only after this weekend, thereby guaranteeing rapid ongoing infection in the run-up to Christmas.

Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Sturgeon reported that the Omicron variant accounted for 62.9 percent of infections, up from 27.5 percent the previous week. The variant's "R" number was around three, meaning that, on average, every person infected with Omicron is infecting three others. Correspondingly, the number of infections was starting to soar, as across the UK and internationally. Daily case numbers had

increased from around 3,500 to 5,500 in one week. Among 16-24-year-olds, the increase was 161 percent.

Figures published by the Scottish government reported a further 5,242 cases on Tuesday and a positive test ratio of 14.9 percent, meaning there are many more cases not being identified. Another 9 deaths were recorded, bring the total in Scotland to 9,790 who died shortly after a positive COVID-19 test and 12,303 with COVID-19 on the death certificate.

Most significant is the vaccination rate. Currently, of a population of around 5.47 million, only some 2.63 million, around half, have received a necessary booster vaccine, while 4.37 million and 3.93 million have had one or two doses respectively. Given Omicron's capacity to evade one or two vaccinations, this means that half of the population are at serious risk of contracting the disease in the period immediately ahead, while even three doses does not guarantee immunity.

Sturgeon acknowledged that "additional pressure on our already stretched National Health Service will be extremely difficult to manage", she warned of the "crippling" impact of sickness and isolation absences on the economy, rail cancellations and "staffing shortages felt across the supply chain".

Having outlined the alarming and dangerous situation, Sturgeon claimed, "this is not a choice between protecting health and protecting the economy". She then set out measures proving the opposite. Besides accelerated vaccination, these were belated, minimal and directed towards lifting pressure on the police and emergency services, rather than public health, while ensuring the bulk of economic life continued, as normal.

The "bedrock" of Sturgeon's advice was that people should stay at home as much as possible and maintain

social distancing. In addition, indoor standing events will be limited to 100 people, 200 for seated events. Outdoor events, primarily sports events, will be restricted to 500 people. Large Hogmanay celebrations will be cancelled. Table service only requirements were reintroduced for restaurants and pubs.

The measures are due to last for three weeks but will only commence on December 26. By this time tens of thousands of people will have unnecessarily contracted coronavirus, including Christmas shoppers, people attending Christmas parties and dinners, church-goers attending Christmas Eve services, public transport users and workers in countless establishments unable to follow Sturgeon's meaningless and unenforced call to "work from home whenever possible". Three Scottish Premier League football games are scheduled to go ahead this week, with thousands of away fans jammed into coaches, trains and cars for hours on end.

Sturgeon offered no rationale for the delay, instead she apologised for acting now to stem "staff absences".

An indication of the unseriousness of the measures was the call to "Keep windows open if you are meeting indoors – even at this time of year." Outdoor temperatures are currently around 2 degrees centigrade. Energy prices are soaring.

Crucially, schools will neither close early for Christmas nor re-open late in January. Updated Scottish government guidance, including improved ventilation and CO2 monitors, states they should be implemented by local authorities and schools "as soon as they can", an official shrug of the shoulders. Schools are recognised globally as crucial vectors for coronavirus transmission, but they are kept open to free parents to work.

Even the Scottish teaching unions, who have closely followed the Scottish government's drive to keep schools open, felt forced to concede there was a need for remote learning. Facing intense anger and concern from teachers and parents, Seamus Searson, general secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association admitted, "The idea that we need to keep schools open at all costs just doesn't add up. The NHS is a vital life and death service. The education system is crucial, but it's not life and death, and if we can keep people safe, that's surely a good thing."

Last week, the Educational Institute for Scotland leader Larry Flanagan also called for "firebreak"

school closures.

Neither union indicated the slightest intention of taking any steps in defence of their members or school students, however, even as 31,303 pupils stayed away from school due to self-isolation measures, up from 19,402 the previous week. Parents are taking their own steps, with some 3,755 keeping their children out of school for safety, up from 976 the week before.

Underlying Sturgeon's statements are the interests of the largest banks and corporations, institutions dependent on maintaining the flow of surplus value from the working class to bolster vastly inflated global stock prices and debt mountains.

For this reason, there will be no lockdown, no travel restrictions, no designation of key workers—none of the measures that, even belatedly and partially controlled previous waves. The Scottish government's refusal, along with that of its counterparts in London, Cardiff and Belfast, to implement serious measures to prevent the spread of Omicron points to criminal and culpable indifference based on naked class interests.

While the Scottish National Party government aim to maintain business as usual regardless of the cost in lives, the social crisis is intensifying, driven by pandemic related inflation and cuts in welfare payments. A recent poll commissioned by the Citizens Advice Bureau Scotland (CAS) found that 36 percent of respondents were finding their bills unaffordable and 54 percent of those said that spending on groceries was the first to suffer. Extrapolated across Scotland, this would mean 483,255 people cutting food spending.

New rules on local government spending introduced by the Scottish government are set to drastically increase council tax, levied by cash-starved local authorities for the services they provide. Changes introduced by Finance Secretary Kate Forbes, mooted as a candidate to replace Sturgeon, removed a long-standing cap on council tax rates in last month's budget. Predictions for increases varied between 5 and 30 percent.



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