

Leas Phrìomh Mhinistear agus Rùnaire a' Chaibineit
airson Foghlam agus Sgìlean
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for
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COVID-19: WEEKLY REVIEW OF PROTECTION LEVELS

Dear Adam

We spoke yesterday about the Scottish Government's decision at this week's review of COVID-19 protection levels to maintain Edinburgh at Level 3. I promised to follow up in writing to explain our reasoning.

First, let me repeat, as I told you on our call, that we do not approach these decisions lightly, and that the decision about Edinburgh yesterday was extremely finely balanced. Indeed, as the First Minister told Parliament yesterday, Cabinet agonised over it, conscious both of the possible consequences and of expectations among the public.

For this week's review, we felt that it was particularly important for us to take a cautious approach given the imminence of the festive period, and the significant risk that gatherings of family and friends then could lead to a rise in the R number and increased cases of COVID-19 as a result. It is crucial for us to seek to manage this risk carefully, in order to ensure that the hard work and sacrifices of the people and businesses in Edinburgh and across Scotland over recent months are not undermined.

Suppressing the prevalence of the virus to a very low level before Christmas is key to avoiding the need for more restrictive protective measures in the New Year and ensuring that the NHS does not become overwhelmed by COVID-19 in January, which as you will know is traditionally the most challenging time for it.

Tha Ministearan na h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus an Rùnaire Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot

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The risks around increased social activity are particularly acute in large cities like Edinburgh. Frequent transport links and high concentrations of hospitality and retail venues act as a magnet for large numbers of people, creating increased opportunities for transmission. This additional risk was also a factor for consideration in this week's review. A move to Level 2 in Edinburgh would mean opening up significantly more services in our second biggest city in the two weeks before Christmas. So we wanted to have as much confidence as possible that the situation is as stable as possible before we make that move.

In that context, the recent rise in cases, while relatively slight, was a cause for concern when seen against the backdrop of a much slower reduction in cases and test positivity for Edinburgh over the last two weeks than for Scotland as a whole. By the same token, while Scotland as a whole has seen declining test positivity, the test positivity for Edinburgh is rising. So, weighing the data in the wider context, we decided it was prudent to keep Edinburgh in Level 3 this week, monitor the position closely, and to review the level again next week.

And while it is extremely important not to read too much into any single set of figures, today's daily update from Public Health Scotland would seem to indicate that our caution may not have been misplaced. The total number of cases has risen for the second day in a row, and is up 14 per cent on seven days ago; while test positivity has also risen for five of the last seven days.

This was a very difficult decision to make: but we have always been clear, including in the document that we publish every week explaining our decisions, that the data on their own do not determine the decisions on levels, which ultimately have to be a matter of judgement. As we set out in the Strategic Framework published in October, "These decisions require judgement to be applied to all the facts and considerations relevant at the time they are made, and in relation to the area directly affected and for Scotland as a whole."

We fully appreciate that decisions on levels carry consequences for the communities they affect, and for Scotland as a whole; and we know that the maintenance of restrictions involves real and continued difficulties for many businesses, particularly those in the hospitality sector.

That is why, in addition to the substantial package of support already in place, which will be delivering some relief to Edinburgh businesses, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance is this afternoon £185 million in additional support to key sectors in the New Year. And in the shorter term, as the First Minister told Parliament, we will be considering whether any changes to the restrictions within the different levels - particularly as they affect hospitality - can safely be made.

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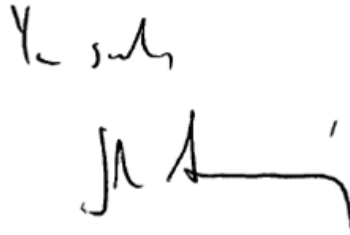
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I understand that our decision this week has disappointed you, and will have disappointed many people in Edinburgh. But I hope you will understand the basis on which it was made and the seriousness with which we take our responsibilities.



JOHN SWINNEY

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