



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Virtual)

Wednesday 29 December 2021

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**Wednesday 29 December 2021**

**CONTENTS**

	<b>Col.</b>
<b>COVID-19</b> .....	1
<i>Statement—[First Minister].</i>	
The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon).....	1

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# Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 29 December 2021

*[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]*

## Covid-19

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

Good afternoon, and welcome to this virtual meeting of the Scottish Parliament. Our first item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will give our latest assessment of the spread of omicron and, in light of that, I confirm that there are no immediate changes to the protections that are currently in force or to the advice that we are giving the public.

I will also talk about the data that we will be monitoring closely in the days ahead, as we assess the likely impact of this wave of infection and the continued necessity and proportionality of our response. I will briefly summarise the protective measures that took effect earlier this week to help to slow the spread, and I will provide some further detail on the support that is available to businesses. Finally, I will report on delivery of booster vaccinations.

First, I will give today's statistics. Yesterday, 15,849 positive cases were reported. That is 28.9 per cent of all tests that were carried out. It is worth noting that the much higher test positivity that has been experienced over recent days might be partially explained by people being more selective about when to go for a test over the Christmas period. However, it is, by some margin, the highest overall daily cases number that has been reported in the pandemic to date.

Six hundred and seventy-nine people are currently in hospital with Covid—that is 80 more than yesterday—and 36 people are in intensive care, which is one fewer than yesterday. Shortly, I will say more about the numbers of people with Covid in hospital, and about why that is an important indicator, as we judge what will be the most proportionate response, going forward.

Sadly, however, a further three deaths have been reported, which takes the total number of deaths under the daily definition to 9,836. Once again, I send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.

It is clear from those figures that the wave of omicron that has been predicted is now rapidly

developing. Omicron now accounts for around 80 per cent of all cases and, over the past week, the number of reported cases of Covid overall has increased by 47 per cent.

We should also bear in mind that any transmission over recent days will not yet be fully evident in the reported figures. It is therefore reasonable to assume that we will continue to see steep increases in cases in the days and, possibly, the weeks ahead.

That said, it is also important to remember that our individual and collective behaviour will influence how fast, or otherwise, the virus spreads. The current surge would almost certainly be even higher but for so many people following the advice to cut down on social interactions in the run-up to Christmas. Given the speed and extent of transmission that we are experiencing, it is vital that we continue to take sensible precautions and limit social interactions for a further period, as we learn more about the likely impact of this wave of infection and as we complete the booster vaccination programme.

Obviously, one of the factors that we are looking at most closely is the proportion of omicron cases that require hospital treatment. That will tell us more about the severity of omicron for individuals and about the overall impact that it is likely to have on the national health service. It will, therefore, inform our on-going response.

Before I say more about that, however, it is worth emphasising that there are other reasons to do all that we can, at this stage, to slow down the spread. First, whatever the overall impact of omicron turns out to be, we know that the virus will cause serious illness and death for some people. We also know that, for others, long Covid will cause on-going suffering.

Secondly, we know that high levels of infection and, therefore, sickness absence will be disruptive to the economy and to delivery of critical services. I will say more later about how we are seeking to mitigate that. However, as things stand, none of us should be complacent about getting Covid. We should take steps to avoid it if we can.

There is no doubt, however, that the data that we are looking at most closely is on conversion of cases into hospital admissions; there are, in that respect, some grounds for optimism. Over the past week, published studies have suggested that the risk of hospitalisation from omicron is lower—possibly significantly lower—than it is for other strains of the virus. What is not yet fully understood is why that might be the case—whether it is because omicron is inherently less severe, or because of its greater ability to infect people who have had prior infection or have been vaccinated, which would mean that more of those

who get it carry a level of immunity that protects them from serious illness.

We do not yet know the answer to that but, either way, if it is the case that a much lower proportion of people with omicron than of those who have other strains of the virus need hospital care, that is really good news—especially as omicron is now the dominant strain—in terms of individual health and overall impact, and it would inform how we will respond in the weeks ahead.

However—this remains key—we need, for at least the next couple of weeks, to show continuing caution as we assess in real time the impact that the higher case numbers will have on the national health service. It is encouraging that the rise in cases that has been experienced over the past few weeks has, at least up to now, not translated into a corresponding rise in hospital admissions or occupancy. On the contrary, the number of people in hospital with Covid has, so far, remained broadly stable.

However, again, we need to exercise caution. The number of people in hospital with Covid in England is now rising quite sharply, which might be a sign of things to come here. Indeed, today's reported increase of 80 in hospital occupancy here is the biggest increase that we have seen for some time.

We also know that there is a time lag between rising cases and rising hospital admissions. Also, of course, in terms of sheer numbers, the benefits of a lower rate of hospitalisation could be quickly cancelled out by the much higher case numbers that result from significantly increased transmissibility.

Therefore, we will monitor all the data very carefully in the days to come. As well as looking at headline numbers, we will interrogate the detail—for example, the breakdown between people who are in hospital because of Covid and those who are in hospital who have Covid but have been admitted for other reasons.

We will also look at whether the average length of stay in hospital for people with omicron is different from the average stay of those with other variants. All in all, I expect that we will have a clearer picture within the next couple of weeks, which will help us to reach informed judgments about the most proportionate response, going forward.

In the meantime, however, while we better understand the impacts, and while more and more of us get the added protection of booster vaccinations—which will help to reduce the impact of omicron—we must try to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of cases. That is why it is prudent—indeed, I say that it is

essential—that we act to slow transmission as much as possible.

That is why additional protections were announced last week and are now in force. I will summarise them shortly. It is also why we are advising everyone, over Hogmanay and new year's day, and for at least the first week in January, to stay at home more than normal, to reduce contacts with people outside our own households, and to limit the size of indoor social gatherings that take place so that they do not include people from more than three households. We also advise that people try to ventilate indoor spaces as much as possible.

It also remains our strong advice that lateral flow tests should be taken just before meeting people from another household. If that test shows a positive result, it is vital that people immediately isolate and book a polymerase chain reaction test. You should also isolate and book a PCR test if you have symptoms that might be Covid.

I know that following that advice is difficult and frustrating at the best of times, and is even harder at this time of year. However, it really does help, and it will be helping already, notwithstanding the very high case numbers, so please stick with it for now.

In addition to that general advice to the public, the new protective measures relating to hospitality, public indoor places and live events that I set out last week are now in force. We will review those on an on-going basis, but at this stage our expectation is that they will be in force until 17 January. That means, for now, that there are limits on the size of live public events, although private life events, such as weddings, are exempt. For indoor standing events the limit is 100, for indoor seated events it is 200, and for outdoor events it is 500, seated or standing.

I know that some people question the rationale for that, so I will set it out again. First, the higher transmissibility of omicron means that large gatherings have far greater potential to become rapid superspreader events. Secondly, there are transmission risks associated with travel to and from such events. Thirdly, they place significant demands on emergency services, including the police and the Scottish Ambulance Service. At a time when emergency services are already dealing with high levels of staff absence due to the virus, not having large-scale public events allows those services to focus on delivering core services to the public.

As well as the limits on large events, further protections are now in force for hospitality and other indoor public places. A requirement for table service has been reintroduced for venues that serve alcohol for consumption on the premises.

Guidance has been issued to the effect that indoor hospitality and leisure venues should ensure 1m distancing between groups of customers. A group—whether it is made up of one, two or three households—should be physically distanced from other such groups in the same venue.

Finally, nightclubs are unfortunately now closed until 17 January, unless they have decided to remain open, without dancing, as hospitality premises, in which case they will be required to follow the same rules and guidance as other hospitality venues.

All those protections are important to help us to deal with and to reduce the impact of the public health challenge that Covid represents. However, they also have a significant impact on businesses. Two weeks ago, I announced £100 million to support businesses that are affected by the advice to minimise contacts over the festive period. We have already detailed the allocation of that funding.

Last week, I announced a further £275 million of support. I can give more detail today on how the first £100 million of that additional support is being allocated. Of it, £16 million will be made available to support public transport providers through existing Covid support schemes, £27 million will go to the culture sector and another £17 million will go to the events sector. A further £32 million will be allocated to hospitality and leisure businesses, with an additional £10 million for the parts of the hospitality industry that are being most severely impacted by the requirement for table service only. Up to £5 million will be allocated to nightclubs that are required to close.

We are also working closely with the sports sector. Sporting events are, obviously, affected by the limit on the number of spectators and by cancellations that are due to Covid absences. However, we know that some of that impact will be alleviated by rescheduling of events. We want to ensure that the support that we provide is effectively targeted; we will confirm further details on that soon.

We have now reached decisions on the allocation of, in total, £207 million of the £375 million that is being made available for business support. Councils are now working to get that money into bank accounts as fast as possible. Decisions on allocation of the remaining funds will be confirmed following consultation of affected sectors on how the money can best be targeted.

I know how difficult all that is for businesses. I wish that it was not necessary and I hope that it will not be necessary for long, but there is, simply, no easy trade-off between protecting health and protecting the economy. If Covid continues to spread rapidly, the economic impact in the form of

staff absences and diminished consumer confidence will be severe. We are already seeing those impacts. Doing nothing will not help business. We must protect public health and the economy together, by slowing the speed at which Covid is spreading while we complete the booster programme.

I will touch on two further issues. I mentioned earlier the need to mitigate the impact of staff absences on the economy and critical services. Obviously, the best way to do that is to stem transmission. However, we must also ensure that the requirements for isolation are proportionate. Last week, I indicated that we were weighing the risks and benefits of shortening the isolation period for index cases and, potentially, using the requirement for all household contacts to isolate following a positive case.

These are finely balanced judgments and we are considering the current trends in infection carefully. However, I can confirm that we hope to reach decisions in the next week. Any changes will take effect from 5 January. We will keep Parliament updated.

In the meantime, we have introduced a sectoral exemption scheme, subject to appropriate protections. Today, I can confirm a further change that will help to ensure that the exemption scheme, which is dependent on the speedy turnaround of PCR tests, is effective. The current surge in cases means that testing capacity—sampling and processing capacity—is under pressure. Therefore, we are now prioritising some slots for essential workers, including NHS and transport staff, and for people who are clinically vulnerable or are eligible for new Covid treatments. That change will ensure that essential workers will promptly get the test results that they need in order to qualify for an exemption.

That is a sensible step to take at this stage. However, notwithstanding that priority being given to essential workers, let me stress that testing remains available for anyone who needs it. If you try to book a test and cannot find a slot in a location that you can get to, try again later. Additional PCR test slots are released throughout the day.

For now, test and protect is also focusing its telephone tracing on high-risk settings, such as care homes. The majority of us—if we test positive—will be contacted by text or email, rather than by phone. Therefore, if you are contacted by test and protect as either a positive case or a close contact, please respond and complete the online form and ensure that you follow all the advice that you are given.

The final and vital point that I want to provide an update on today is the progress of the vaccination

programme. However, before I do so, let me address the following point. I have heard people ask in recent days what the purpose of a booster vaccination is if we still have to restrict our activities for a period. I understand that question, but it is vital that we all understand the answer.

First, getting a booster does not mean that we will not get Covid, although it will reduce the chances of that. However, it does significantly enhance our protection against serious illness. Getting boosted could quite literally save your life. Because vaccination does not completely stop us getting or passing on the virus, those who are not fully vaccinated are still at significant risk. As a country, we will not get the full benefit of the booster programme until the maximum number of us are fully vaccinated. That means that anyone who chooses not to be vaccinated without good reason is acting irresponsibly.

However, the key point is that, until the programme is completed—we are getting closer to that every day—we still need to slow down the spread. In recent weeks, there has been a huge increase in booster appointments. Again, I want to record my thanks to everyone who is involved in the delivery of the programme and to everyone who is coming forward to be boosted. Some 75 per cent of those who are eligible for a booster or a third dose have now received one. That represents excellent progress, but in order to deliver maximum benefits, we need the maximum number of people to get boosted as quickly as possible. We want to get to, or as close as possible to, the target of having 80 per cent of eligible adults boosted by the bells.

Getting there will depend on both capacity and demand. Let me make it very clear that we definitely now have enough capacity to meet that target. What we need between now and the end of the week is high demand—eligible people who are not yet boosted need to come forward now and get the jab.

High numbers of positive cases are making things more difficult, because, if you get the virus, you cannot get the vaccine for a period afterwards. Therefore, cancellation and “Did not attend” rates have been creeping up this week as case numbers have risen. However, I ask everyone out there who is not yet boosted but could be—please book an appointment now or go to a drop-in clinic. If you have an appointment booked for January, please reschedule it for this week; there are plenty of slots available. Please, please do not delay. Every single booster jab that is administered now is a step on the road back to normality. Remember that, if you have not yet had your first or second jab, it is never too late for that, either. Please make sure that you get those now.

It is an understatement to say that the situation that we face is not what any of us want. I have to be clear that the period immediately ahead will not be easy. That said, I hope that the clearer picture that we will have in the next couple of weeks will also prove to be much more positive. We can all help to make it so.

So, please, get fully vaccinated and do it this week. The more of us who are boosted, the less severe the impact of omicron will be and the sooner we will all return to normality.

Secondly, please test regularly. The advice, if you are meeting other people, is to test before you go every single time, and to take the test as close as possible to the time when you will see other people. That is really important if you plan to meet people from other households for Hogmanay, although I encourage you to minimise that.

Finally, take all the other precautions that can help to make a difference. People should work from home whenever possible, stay at home more than normal and reduce their contacts as much as possible, even over Hogmanay. If you visit indoor public places, limit the number of households in your group to three at most. Wear face coverings on public transport, in shops and when moving about in hospitality and make sure that the covering fully covers your mouth and nose. Keep windows open if you meet indoors and follow all advice on hygiene.

Sticking to that is really hard but it keeps us safer and enables us to slow down the spread of the virus as we complete the all-important booster programme.

It has been—this is another understatement—another really difficult year, but despite the renewed challenges that we face now, I firmly believe, largely because of vaccination, that 2022 will be a better year. I conclude by thanking everyone, again, for all the sacrifices that have been made over this year, and I wish everyone a very happy new year, when it comes.

**The Presiding Officer:** The First Minister will now take questions on issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 55 minutes for that; it would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question put R in the chat function now.

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I recognise the hardship that people throughout Scotland face. Because of the restrictions, Christmas and new year celebrations have been scaled back or cancelled. However, there is some good news. The booster programme continues to be rolled out, increasing our protection against the omicron variant—[Inaudible.]—anyone who has not done so yet to go out and get their booster.



Last week, I again asked the First Minister to make changes to self-isolation rules to allow household contacts to end self-isolation if they have a negative PCR result and to reduce the isolation period from 10 days to seven, if someone tests negative twice. However, her message on those essential changes it is yet again that people should tune in next week. We have had the ground-breaking omicron study that shows that, although the variant is more transmissible, it is less severe. What more information does the First Minister need in order to take the steps on self-isolation that we have called for for weeks?

**The First Minister:** That is one of the most important and difficult decisions that we will take in the coming days. England has already reduced the self-isolation period for index cases, but Wales has not and I do not believe that Northern Ireland has done it yet either. That illustrates the finely balanced nature of the judgment. I will say a bit more about that in a moment, but it is also important that we understand the context for making the decision.

Douglas Ross rightly points to the more positive news in the studies that were published just before Christmas but, as the authors of those studies point out, it is important not to overinterpret them or get carried away by the initial data that they provide. Although they suggest that the hospitalisation rate associated with omicron is lower, perhaps significantly lower, than for other variants, that will not give us any benefit if the overall volume of cases cancels it out and leads to a higher number of people overall going into hospital. That is why it is really important that we do not allow the infection numbers to overwhelm us.

That brings me back to why it is important to get right the decision on self-isolation. If we release people from isolation while they might still be infectious, yes, we would relieve some of the pressure that we are seeing on the economy, which is not to be underestimated, but that relief would be short-lived because that would risk accelerating the spread of the virus, which would increase the pressure on the economy in the medium to longer term. We need to get it right.

Why did I say that we will take a few more days before making a decision? We have a rapidly rising number of cases. That is both a reason to take that measure and a reason to be cautious about doing so. Inevitably, because of the Christmas period, there is some fluctuation in case numbers. We need to see that settle a little bit over the next few days. We then need to reach a judgment that is right in terms of weighing up the risks and benefits of the measure. We expect to do that over the next few days, with any changes

coming into effect immediately after the new year holidays.

Although the focus is on reducing self-isolation for index cases from 10 days to seven days, because England has already done that, that is not the only change that we should be considering. We have a situation right now in the wake of omicron in which we ask all household contacts of positive cases to isolate for 10 days. I hope that we can ease that measure as well. However, it makes sense to ensure that we are making changes in a coherent manner.

The judgments are not easy. I do not underestimate the reasons why there are calls for us to take that measure. I hope that we will take the measure, but I do not think that anyone looking at the case numbers that are being reported today, in particular, would fail to see why it is important that we take a very responsible approach and ensure that, as far as it is possible with any aspect of handling the virus, we get it as right as we can. I will keep Parliament updated over the next few days around the detail of any changes that we decide on and propose.

**Douglas Ross:** Businesses across Scotland are struggling with the impact of the restrictions at what should be their busiest time of the year. Many of the same businesses are also affected by the self-isolation rules. Absences and a lack of staff cover will mean premises having to close early or not open at all, despite staff members testing negative.

I have been speaking to businesses throughout the festive period. They are trying to plan for the next few weeks and months, but the First Minister's indecision on the self-isolation rules continues to cause them trouble in planning for the period ahead.

Another aspect that is causing businesses trouble is a lack of financial support. Weeks ago, in the chamber, I asked the First Minister to get the financial package to businesses before Christmas and she promised to do everything possible to deliver that. Given that so many businesses are in dire straits and in need of financial assistance now, why are they still waiting for the money to come through?

**The First Minister:** What Douglas Ross describes as indecision is actually responsibility. The most important burden on my shoulders is to be as responsible and measured as possible in taking such decisions.

I know that businesses are struggling—critical services are struggling, too—with staff absences. If case numbers continue to rise, the situation will become more difficult, which is why we need to try to slow down the increase. It is the virus, not self-isolation that is the cause of the problem.

However, the self-isolation rules need to be proportionate, so that they are not exacerbating the problem.

I do not argue in any way with the central premise of the question, but an element of common sense needs to be applied as well. That is where careful judgment comes into play. If we ease up too quickly on the self-isolation rules and do not take sufficient care, even though we would be doing that for good reasons, all we would do is contribute to the spread of the virus and increase the overall number of infections. Therefore, the problem that businesses are suffering will get not better, but worse.

Those are not easy judgments to arrive at and Governments elsewhere are struggling with that, too. I recognise the importance of speed, but I hope that others will recognise the importance of also being measured and responsible.

In dealing with the virus over the past couple of years, I think that we have all learned that every action has a reaction. Every decision that is made has a potential consequence, which, sometimes, will be an adverse one. That calls for careful decision making, which is what we have tried to do throughout. As I said, we will reach a decision on self-isolation over the next few days and any changes will come into effect after the new year period, from 5 January.

However, we are not doing nothing in the meantime. The sectoral exemption scheme is important and is already helping in many key sectors, and the changes that I have talked about today to ensure prioritisation for essential workers in access to testing will also help further. There is no sense in which we are not taking the issue seriously; we are simply trying to avoid compounding a problem as we try to solve it.

On the second issue that Mr Ross raised, the financial support that is available for businesses in Scotland right now is significantly higher proportionally than it is in England, certainly—I cannot speak so much for Wales and Northern Ireland. That demonstrates the seriousness with which we are taking the issue. Money is flowing and will flow to businesses as quickly as possible. From the money being announced and then being made available through to, just days before Christmas, leaders of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities meeting to agree that they would disburse the funds, right up to the cheques being written right now to get the money out of the door, everything is being done at pace, and money will start flowing to businesses in the days to come. Of course, there will be more of it as we allocate the additional funds that we have made available.

**Douglas Ross:** The First Minister has just confirmed that the money did not get to those

businesses before Christmas, and that is unfortunate, because they are struggling now.

The First Minister also mentioned access to testing. Today, we have seen widespread reports of a lack of availability of testing across Scotland and, over the past few days, we have heard of results taking up to four days to come through. That undermines confidence in our testing system, particularly when people are having to isolate over the festive period. I realise that this is a United Kingdom-wide—indeed, global—issue. However, what is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that people can get tested and can be confident that they can get the results quickly?

**The First Minister:** First, this is a UK-wide system—I do not say that in any way to pass responsibility—and we are working closely with the UK Government to ensure that the flow of testing remains as we need it to be.

Last night, steps were taken to constrain demand in England, which I understand means that there are no bookings available today for physical test sites in England. While that change was being made last night, an administrative error was made that restricted slots in the other three nations. That has now been rectified. I went on to the system just about half an hour before coming to make my statement, and I saw that Scotland and Wales were the only parts of the UK where there was availability of PCR tests at physical sites. We monitor that on an on-going basis. Work is being done to ensure that testing capacity continues to increase, and prioritisation of that testing capacity is also being given due regard—I covered some of that in my statement.

There have been lengthening turnaround times, but we hope that they will return to normal over the course of the next couple of days. There will continue to be pressure on tests, but it is important that the system continues to flex and respond. I have confidence that that will be the case and we will continue to liaise closely with the UK Government on that.

I have one final point to make, and this might be a factor in some of the constraints that have been put on demands in England over the past few hours. The testing system, like other parts of the economy and critical services, will be suffering from absence rates because of Covid, which, of course, comes back to the earlier points about the need to take decisions—albeit careful decisions—around things such as self-isolation. Those are all interlinked matters, and that is why we continue to keep all of them under close review.

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I offer my deepest sympathies to those who have lost a loved one, especially at this time of year.

I also pay tribute to Scotland's vaccinators, who continue to go above and beyond. Over the Christmas period, all our front-line workers have worked tirelessly to keep us all safe and secure, so I thank each and every one of them and, of course, their families.

I also thank all those who have come forward during the holidays to get their boosters, and I repeat the plea to people who have not yet received their first or second dose, or a booster dose, to book an appointment or visit a drop-in centre today.

I note what the First Minister says about isolation periods and announcing a decision on 5 January, but staff absences are spiking now, and that is having a knock-on effect on services and, indeed, on industry. Can the First Minister share the scientific evidence that she is relying on when asking people who have tested negative to remain in isolation for 10 days? I note, for example, that some countries are looking to reduce the period to five days—that was announced just today.

Every restriction has a knock-on effect for workers and businesses, particularly in hospitality and retail, so I repeat calls for the UK Government to work with devolved Governments to support workers at this time of crisis, because many are literally fighting for survival.

Industries associated with hospitality, events and retail appear to have fallen through the cracks. What action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that all those who are eligible for support are receiving it? What plans are in place to widen support for affected businesses, such as the taxi trade, that have seen their income collapse but are not currently eligible for extra help?

**The First Minister:** I recognise the burden that staff absences are placing on not only businesses, but many services across the country. That is why it is important that we make the self-isolation rules more proportionate if we can.

The science that Anas Sarwar asked me to share is to do with the incubation period. We know that people can become infectious and test positive for the virus after a period of seven days. In fact, if we cast our minds back to the earlier part of the pandemic, we will remember that the isolation period was not 10 days, as it is now, but 14 days. It has already been shortened, which has already introduced greater risks. If we shorten it further, for good reason, we have to be aware that we will increase that risk. If we get it wrong and increase the risk too much, any benefit will be outweighed by faster spread of the virus, which will not solve but compound businesses' absence problems. I am not disagreeing with anyone who says that it is an important decision, but I ask

people to understand why it is important to get it right.

It is correct to say that different countries are coming to different conclusions. As I understand it from what I read this morning—although I might not be getting this entirely right—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States has reduced the isolation period to five days for asymptomatic cases only. There is some difference of opinion about the appropriate degree of risk.

That all says that we need to weigh these things carefully because, if we do not, any benefits that we might get in the immediate term will be outweighed by the increased risk in the longer term.

I continue to hope that the UK Government will increase the level of support that it is making available to business, so that we are able to do likewise—although proportionately we are already delivering significantly higher levels of business support. As I said in my statement, we have made decisions and confirmed announcements on the allocation of £207 million of the £375 million that we have made available. We are consulting different sectors on allocating the remainder of that support. That will include looking at the taxi sector. We have previously provided support for the taxi sector and we know that it is one part of the economy that suffers considerably from fewer people going out and socialising, so it is very much in our minds as we reach decisions on the allocation of the remainder of that money. We will set out those decisions as soon as possible.

**Anas Sarwar:** I welcome those comments, particularly in relation to the taxi trade, and I look forward to seeing the details of that additional support.

The First Minister referred to testing, both in her statement and in response to previous questions. We know that testing is the key to breaking and reducing transmission—from lateral flow tests before visiting friends and family to the PCR tests that determine the spread and pace of the virus, testing is core to our response.

I note what the First Minister said about looking at the booking system 30 minutes before the meeting started, but constituents—and, indeed, people across Scotland this morning—have been in touch to say that they have not been able to access tests, including lateral flow tests. There have been issues around online ordering and delivery and people have been asked to travel to different parts of the country or isolate for as long as 72 hours before getting their results.

I ask the First Minister to consider the disruption that that is causing for front-line workers and for services and businesses. It is literally putting

livelihoods on the line. What action is being taken to increase testing capacity, availability and the speed of results? As we approach Hogmanay, testing is the way to get us through this crisis.

**The First Minister:** Testing is one of the ways of getting us through the crisis—it is really important—but I would not want to give the impression that it is the only way. Getting vaccinated is also really important. Following the advice to slow transmission is also vital.

As I said in response to a previous question, as demand was constrained for England last night, an administrative error led to slots also being removed for the other three nations. That has been resolved.

There will be fluctuations in availability. Sometimes, slots will be available in places that are not easily accessible. That is why I say to people to go back and check later, because new PCR test slots are made available throughout the day.

The work goes on of ensuring that there is an adequate supply of testing—from the sampling capacity, which is the local test sites and the mobile testing units where the tests are taken, through to the laboratory processing capacity—and that all of that is fit for purpose.

Because we know that, for some people, getting speedy access to test results is even more important than it is for everybody else—and it is important for everybody—we are making sure that, within the available capacity, priority is given to essential workers, those who are most clinically vulnerable and those who are now eligible for some of the new treatments for Covid. Those are on-going issues of priority work for the Scottish Government. However, it is a UK system, so we require to ensure that that is done in partnership with the UK Government and the other nations.

I say to people that the testing capacity is there. If you have a positive LFT, if you have symptoms or if you are advised to get a PCR test, please make sure that you book one. There is also a supply of lateral flow device tests from test sites or pharmacies or by ordering online, so please make sure that you make full use of that.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Eight days ago, I asked the First Minister to set out our national capacity for PCR testing and how that would be expanded to deal with a surge in demand. As we have heard already today, there have been numerous reports of delays across Scotland. MSPs are still in the dark about the reach of our capacity, so I remind the First Minister of her commitment to me to update the Parliament on the matter through the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Last week, I met representatives of the hospitality sector. They told me that the money that is on offer from the Scottish Government at the moment represents just one eighth of their January pay bill and will last them barely 3 days. Today's 16,000 cases will leave them in serious doubt that they will be allowed to reopen on 17 January. Many businesses are on the verge of making irreversible decisions and people are losing their jobs. If the First Minister's Government chooses to extend restrictions beyond 17 January, what reassurance can she offer that further support will be made available to a hospitality sector that is already on its knees?

**The First Minister:** I will make sure that information on testing capacity and its changing nature and volume is placed in SPICe. However, I remind people that, as I think that I said when the question was posed to me before, capacity right now is not a fixed thing. Efforts are on-going all the time to maximise capacity on a daily basis and to increase it. It is therefore important that it is not seen as something that is fixed and unchanging.

We know that capacity is under pressure. Yesterday or the day before, demand took up about 85 per cent of available capacity. That is getting to a level at which we will start to see lengthening turnaround times. We are doing on-going work on a daily basis to make sure that these issues are being resolved.

We are making business support available to the maximum of our financial wherewithal. I will say two things about the £375 million that we have already confirmed. First, it is proportionately way beyond what the UK has made available for England, even though the businesses there are facing the same or many of the same pressures.

Secondly, I know that it is not enough—I have said that all along. However, in Scotland, we do not hold the borrowing powers to extend financial support any further. The way that the Barnett formula works is that we get a flow of resource only when the UK Government takes decisions for England—which, as is its right, it is not choosing to do at the moment. We therefore need to see a response from the UK Government that will allow us to increase that support further. In the meantime, we are providing support as far as we are able.

At this point, it is not helpful to speculate beyond 17 January. I very much hope—and it is our intention—that the protections that are in place will be so only until 17 January. However, as has been the case since day 1 of the pandemic, we have to keep the situation under review.

What I said in my statement is worth repeating: yes, we have a rapidly rising number of cases, but we know that we need to judge the impact of that

rise through monitoring very carefully its impact on health and the NHS. I think that we will have a much clearer picture over the next week or two that will allow us to make informed judgments about how we deal with the situation in as proportionate a way as possible.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Given the 23 December announcement by the World Health Organization that the virus can spread through short and long-range aerosol, or that it has short and long-range airborne transmission, what on-going assessment is being made regarding the issuing of FFP2 and FFP3 face masks for front-line healthcare workers as a first-line prevention measure against acquiring Covid, which is already causing high sickness and absence among healthcare workers in Scotland? I remind colleagues that I am part of NHS Dumfries and Galloway's vaccination team.

**The First Minister:** We have reviewed the WHO recommendations from last week and noted that it has not changed its position on the route of transmission of Covid. We are therefore satisfied, at this stage, that those areas are covered in the winter respiratory guidance that was published at the end of November. That guidance provides staff with the opportunity to risk assess what level of personal protective equipment is required, so it already allows for healthcare workers to wear FFP3 masks or masks of similar standards in settings where care is provided to patients with suspected or confirmed Covid.

The Health and Safety Executive is frequently consulted and it supports the guidance in place. We will continue to review all the international evidence and to advise on any required changes through the Covid-19 nosocomial review group.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** We know the dangers that are posed by omicron and that a balance needs to be struck, but people struggle with the inconsistencies. Rangers fans were saying that Asda was busier than Ibrox, and Celtic fans were distraught knowing that shopping streets and malls across the country were heaving in comparison with football stadia.

Does the First Minister understand the value of the societal role that Scottish football plays in the mental health of hundreds of thousands of people in our communities? Will the Government provide additional support to protect the mental health of fans?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I understand the importance of sport, including football and other spectator sports. Its benefits are seen in terms of mental health and a whole host of other ways. Nobody, including me, takes the decisions that we have had to take over the pandemic lightly.

I have tried to set out the rationale for limiting large-scale events. It is about the superspreading nature of big events, given the higher transmissibility of omicron, but also about the greater impact that those events have on emergency services that are already stretched and the risks that are associated with travel to and from events. It is not easy, and nobody wants to be in this position, but those are the reasons why the Scottish Government, in common with many other Governments, have taken these decisions. Hopefully they will not last for very long.

There is always the ability to point to inconsistencies. When questions such as that one are posed to me, I am never sure whether the argument is that we should not have restrictions on football or that we should also have restrictions on shopping malls. We want to limit and minimise the protections that are in place, and therefore the restrictions on people's lives.

However, I would ask people to remember that the bedrock of the advice that we are giving now is to stay at home as much as you can—certainly more than would normally be the case at this time of year—to try to limit your contact with people in other households and to keep those contacts, where they are happening, as small as possible. That applies regardless of the setting.

There is no magic wand to wave to get ourselves out of that. The closest that we have got to that is vaccination, which is why it remains so important. However, while we navigate this latest wave of infections, given the greater transmissibility, all of us have to accept that some of these things are just inescapable and that acting in line with the guidance will get us through them more quickly than would otherwise be the case.

I, of course, understand and, as a citizen, I experience the restrictions just like others do. None of us wants them to be in place for any longer than is necessary.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** We know that antiviral medication reduces the risk of people becoming severely ill with Covid. For the 180,000 people in Scotland who are currently shielding and their families, that is welcome. However, I understand that the eligibility criteria for the medication, which were decided by the four chief medical officers, do not cover all those who are currently shielding and miss out key vulnerable groups.

Will the First Minister urgently review the criteria so that no one who is shielding is left out? Will she also ensure that the process is streamlined? Having to access a PCR test and then to wait for test and protect to phone, when case numbers are rising, can waste valuable time. Some people

have been contacted beyond the five-day window—too late to allow them to get the medication. I am sure that the First Minister will agree that we must act more quickly.

**The First Minister:** I do, which is why I will come back to a point that I am sure that Jackie Baillie clearly heard me make in my statement.

I am not sure whether Jackie Baillie is suggesting that I, as a politician with no clinical qualifications, should substitute my judgement about eligibility for that of the four chief medical officers. It is right that questions about eligibility for antiviral treatment, particularly at this stage, should be for clinicians and our clinical advisers.

We want to see the number and range of people who access antiviral treatment expand as the number and availability of those treatments increase, but I genuinely believe that those decisions are best informed by clinical advisers, not politicians. I will continue to listen carefully to what they say.

The point about the speed of access to PCR tests is an important one. I know that there was a lot of information in my statement, and that it might not have been easy to pick up on this, but I spoke about prioritisation in the PCR testing system for essential workers. I also said that we are making priority slots available for those who are clinically vulnerable and those who are eligible for the new antiviral treatments, to ensure that they get their test results timeously and do not lose out on access to treatment. That is one of the important changes that I covered in my statement.

**Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** It has been painfully obvious in recent weeks that Scotland's funding arrangements are not fit for purpose, especially during a public health emergency. Although I recognise that there are limits on the support that the Scottish Government can provide with the fiscal levers that it has at the moment, will the First Minister expand on what more can be done to support business in the face of limited UK Government action? Will she provide an update on any further discussion that she has had with the Treasury about the funding that it announced and whether it will have to be repaid?

**The First Minister:** Since the start of the pandemic, we have provided more than £4.4 billion in support to businesses across the country. That help has been vital, but I recognise that it does not go far enough to compensate every business for every loss that has been suffered.

The Treasury has responded well in the pandemic to date. However, in this phase, we are seeing the limitations of the way in which funding decisions are taken across the UK. Whatever one's view of the Barnett formula, it is not fit for purpose in the face of a public health emergency.

The formula depends on the UK Government taking decisions for England, which is its responsibility. When Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate responsibilities to take public health decisions, but cannot access funding when we do so, there is clearly an asymmetric funding arrangement that constrains our ability to take those decisions.

Notwithstanding that, we have, as I have set out over the past two weeks, made available £375 million to support businesses. That is proportionately significantly in excess of the money that has been made available by the Treasury. On the decisions that the Treasury has taken, not all of that money is new money, as I have covered before, and there are still questions about whether any of it will have to be paid back. We are acting now to maximise the support that we can provide to businesses and to get it to businesses as quickly as possible.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The First Minister said that there were 679 people in hospital today with Covid and that the Scottish Government would break down that figure between those who are in hospital because they have Covid and those who were admitted for other reasons but turned out to test positive. If that figure were to be published, it would be very helpful in telling us how serious the risk from omicron is.

In the meantime, do we know how many of the 36 people in intensive care and the 679 people in hospital are vaccinated? Does the First Minister think that the publication of that figure would be helpful in reinforcing the message to the public that they need to get vaccinated and have a booster in order to best protect themselves?

**The First Minister:** I do not have those figures yet, but we want to publish much more detailed breakdowns across all the different factors as soon as Public Health Scotland can provide that robust breakdown for us. During previous phases of the virus, Public Health Scotland provided some breakdown of figures to distinguish between those who were in hospital because of Covid and those in hospital who had Covid but were there for some other reason. These are broad figures that may or may not bear out with omicron—I will correct myself later if these figures are wrong—but, in previous phases, very roughly, 70 per cent of patients were in hospital because of Covid and between 20 and 30 per cent of patients were in hospital with Covid but did not have Covid as their primary diagnosis.

We want to understand that breakdown much more with omicron and, as we do, we will seek to publish those figures to aid public understanding. However, that said, somebody in hospital is somebody in hospital, which puts pressure on the

national health service—through, of course, no fault of their own.

On the question on vaccination, again, we will look to provide more detail on that as it becomes available. However, we know already that vaccination, with a booster jab, gives all of us significantly enhanced protection against serious illness from Covid. Therefore, if you are not boosted, you are at much greater risk of not just getting the virus but becoming seriously unwell and, potentially, dying from it. Therefore, I appeal to everybody who is eligible to be boosted but has not yet been boosted to do that now. Your failure to do so not only puts you at risk; you are denying the country the maximum benefit of the vaccination programme, because the more of us who are vaccinated, the less risk we are all at and, therefore, the less need there will be for continued restrictions on how we live our lives. I do not think that any of us can overstate the importance of booster vaccination.

**Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** Businesses understand the constraints under which the Scottish Government is operating without its having borrowing powers to fund additional support measures. However, as the First Minister will be aware, the restrictions have, across my Glasgow Kelvin constituency, had an impact on small businesses that can remain open but have experienced a significant reduction in footfall. As we look towards the new year sales, what plans does the Scottish Government have to publicise the Scotland Loves Local campaign further? As we look further ahead, what consideration is being given to bringing forward the next round of funding applications for the Scotland Loves Local fund?

**The First Minister:** It is important to highlight the plight of small businesses—particularly those on our high streets—and how important they are to the economy overall. Back in August, I think, we announced a £10 million Scotland Loves Local multiyear programme. That includes the Scotland Loves Local fund, a national marketing campaign and a loyalty card scheme. All those will be really important as we go into the new year and try to promote the benefits that people bring to our high streets by choosing to shop locally whenever they can.

Scotland Loves Local is about building the wealth of local communities and revitalising town centres. We will keep the effectiveness of that campaign under review and look at how we can ensure that the funding flows as quickly as possible to businesses. Therefore, we will keep the phasing and profiling of that under review over the early part of next year.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** The First Minister just referred to the plight of

small businesses. This is a critical time of year for retail and hospitality businesses in any circumstances, but after the past two years it might well determine whether they survive at all.

The budget that was just published forecast £2.8 billion of revenue from non-domestic rates. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the cost of lost tax revenue from business failures that are precipitated by the current restrictions?

The First Minister talked about getting critical support money into businesses' bank accounts as quickly as possible. What steps are being taken to ensure that that happens?

I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

**The First Minister:** Councils are responsible for administering the money. Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leaders met a few days before Christmas to agree that they would administer that tranche of funding. Therefore, the work to get the money out the door is under way.

Local councils will contact businesses in, for example, hospitality that were funded previously through some of the generic funding, so it is not a case of their having to make further applications. However, as is always the case with public money, basic checks will need to be done to ensure that businesses are still operating and eligible for the support. That is being done at pace because it is important that the money gets to businesses as quickly as possible.

I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy to write to Daniel Johnson with details of up-to-date assessments of the impact that the current restrictions are having on business rates revenue and on businesses. We have recognised the importance of business rates exemptions and relief for certain sectors over the pandemic. In this financial year, we have had the most generous business rates relief in the UK for retail, leisure, hospitality and aviation. In the budget, we announced further support for part of the next financial year. We recognise the importance of that, and also of a healthy revenue stream from business rates to fund other public services.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** Will the First Minister say more about how business support is being given to various sectors? It strikes me that it is incredibly difficult to do even within a sector. We have heard that some taxi firms have done much better than expected but some have done worse. Some restaurants are busy and some are not. Some sports events are cancelled but some are postponed. How are we going about giving support?

**The First Minister:** That is an important question. On the funding on which we have already made decisions about allocation, much is being provided to hospitality, for example, in set-level grants. Hospitality businesses that previously got grants will be contacted in order that they get money from the latest round of funding. Other sectors—I will not go into the details of which ones—have been discussing with us how the way in which financial support is provided can be better tailored to reflect various businesses' actual losses. I referred to some of the issues in the sports sector, which has been badly affected. Some losses will be recouped as events are rescheduled, but that will not be possible for everything.

The money is a mixture of one-size-fits-all grants and much more targeted support that takes account of the variable impacts within different sectors. On that latter point, it is important that we consult properly, which is why we are still consulting on how best to allocate and distribute some of the funding that we have made available.

In general terms, I note that we have already confirmed just over £200 million that will go to hospitality businesses, the wedding sector, supply chain businesses, wholesalers that are affected by hospitality cancellations, parts of tourism, public transport providers and the culture and events sector. Decisions on allocation of the remaining funds might be more targeted, but will also, I hope, enable us to reach sectors that are not covered by the support that has already been announced, including the taxi sector, which I have referred to.

**Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** In some schools, multiple classes are sharing CO<sub>2</sub> monitors. With case numbers still rising and the return from school holidays just over a week away, will the First Minister set out what measures are being considered to ensure that the return to school is safe for pupils and staff and minimises disruption to learning? Has she received an update from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation following the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's approval of the Pfizer vaccine for five to 11-year-olds?

**The First Minister:** On the first part of the question, I note that we previously made funding available to local authorities for acquisition of CO<sub>2</sub> monitors. We look to local authorities to ensure that proper assessments of ventilation are undertaken and that any changes that are required are made. Ventilation is a key part of how we ensure that schools are kept as safe as possible. Updated guidance around safety in schools and other education settings was issued just before the end of term, in order to give local authorities and

schools clarity on the steps that they are required to take in advance of the new term.

I repeat that it remains our priority to keep schools open in order to minimise further disruption to children's education. However, in doing so, it is vital that we ensure that schools are kept as safe as possible.

On the question about the JCVI, some recommendations have already been made on vulnerable young people and access to vaccines. Obviously, there are issues to do with ensuring that we have adequate supplies of vaccine; I point out that there are adequate supplies of vaccine for the programme at the moment. I hope that we will, in the not-too-distant future, be in a position in which we can start, at least, to offer the possibility of vaccination to five to 12-year-olds. However, we will obviously continue to be informed by the recommendations of the JCVI, in that regard.

**The Presiding Officer:** Although I fully appreciate the First Minister's desire to provide comprehensive responses, many members would like to put a question, so I would be grateful if we could pick up the pace.

**The First Minister:** Presiding Officer, I will try to be brief, but I repeat my offer to stay here for as long as is required in order to answer all the questions that members have for me, rather than stint on the answers. However, that is, of course, a matter for you.

**Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** What plans are in place to mitigate the effects on lifeline ferry services of the current increase in the transmission of Covid?

**The First Minister:** Lifeline ferry routes are of critical importance. We are seeing an impact on ferry services, as we are across our other transport providers. Caledonian MacBrayne is engaging with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency on, for example, allowing passengers to remain in vehicles when certain restrictions are imposed. However, other steps are being taken to try to ensure that, as cases rise, we minimise the impact on those services. I will ask the Minister for Transport to keep Jenni Minto and all members who have an interest in ferry services, in particular, up to date over the next few weeks.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you for your comment, First Minister. In light of it, I suggest that, in the first instance, we continue the meeting until around 3.30, then see how we are progressing.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** Mental health nurses went above and beyond during the pandemic. However, many nurses, across all psychiatric services, have found themselves in dangerous situations as they have



had to restrain patients without the support of a psychiatric doctor, security team or police presence, because of the strain on our NHS during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of those nurses have only recently graduated from university. What additional measures can the Scottish Government put in place to help to protect mental health nurses who are on the front line?

**The First Minister:** That is an important question. Mental health nurses in all parts of the NHS do a vital job, but those who are on the front line dealing with particularly vulnerable patients do a job that is not only vital, but often puts them at some personal risk, which means that support services for them are vital. I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to write to Meghan Gallacher with more details of the support services that are in place and what further action we can take to ensure that, regardless of the pressures that are being faced, people who are working in such positions do not feel themselves to be even more exposed than might otherwise be the case.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** As the First Minister knows, the hospitality sector is absolutely terrified of the impact that the recent substantial restrictions will have, especially on smaller venues that cannot apply 1m distancing. Given that she said earlier that support could be tailored to those who need it most, should a business rapid response team be set up to ensure that the £42 million of funding that has been announced today is targeted where it is really needed, in order to ensure the survival of those businesses?

**The First Minister:** We need, and are seeking, to get the balance right between providing funding support that is available to all businesses—the support will never be enough to fully compensate them, but the grant approach, with standard levels of grant, is an important way of providing funding—and, over and above that, looking at businesses across or within sectors that are being disproportionately impacted.

As well as announcing additional funding for the hospitality sector today, I have announced another £10 million for businesses in the hospitality sector that are most impacted by the return to table-only service. Many of those businesses will also be among those that are most impacted by the return to some form of physical distancing. That funding will allow a slightly more targeted approach to augment the general baseline level of grant support that is available. We will seek to be as generous as we can be, but we will also seek to make funding as targeted as we need it to be. The discussions that we have with individual sectors will allow us to tailor the response appropriately.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Tragically, high-profile court cases in the

media recently have emphasised the risks of domestic abuse to children. Will the First Minister use her social media platform this afternoon, as I will, to highlight services that children who are concerned for their safety, or adults who are worried about children, can turn to at this time?

**The First Minister:** I thank Rona Mackay for raising that issue. Clearly, the conditions under which we are all living right now further increase the risk of domestic abuse to children, young people and those who are vulnerable. Children and young people have the right to be protected from all forms of harm and abuse. Domestic abuse always has an impact on any children.

I will share some information for anybody listening who needs help. If you are a child or a young person, and you are worried about anything or you are looking for some advice right now, you can phone Childline on 0800 1111. If you are a child or young person, please do not hesitate to call Childline for any help or advice that you think that you need.

If anyone else is worried that a child whom they know might be in immediate danger, my advice would be to contact the police on 999. If you are worried about a child who is not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns with your local authority social work department. Those agencies will assess the risk and take appropriate action to protect the child.

I will, indeed, share Childline contact details on social media later today, once this meeting of Parliament has concluded.

**Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** During the past few days, there have been worrying reports of a significant increase in the time that it is taking for individuals to receive their PCR test results. In some cases, that has taken as long as four days. People have been forced to isolate from family and close friends during Christmas and boxing day because they are waiting for test results. Given that Christmas and the rise in demand for tests due to omicron were entirely predictable, how was that allowed to happen? What urgent action is the Scottish Government taking to address the situation and ensure that it does not happen again?

**The First Minister:** PCR testing is a UK-wide system that is administered by the UK Government. We work closely with the UK Government to make sure that capacity is sufficient and that any issues are resolved as quickly as possible, and we take joint responsibility for that.

We have seen lengthening turnaround times over the past few days. That will happen when demand is high. Of course, high demand is being compounded by high staff absences in our testing

system right now. I hope that the turnaround times are shortening again, and will continue to be shorter during the next period. As I mentioned earlier, we have also built prioritisation into the testing system to make sure that, although everybody needs test results as quickly as possible, those who need them most quickly are prioritised.

There is on-going daily work with the UK Government to ensure that the turnaround of the testing system is speedy and effective.

**Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** What steps has the Scottish Government taken to assist those suffering from long Covid, particularly our front-line health professionals, to return to work?

**The First Minister:** The NHS already has policies in place that help to facilitate a return to work and encourage attendance for employees whose health issues impact on their ability to be at work. Employees can be facilitated in their return to work through discussions with their manager and with occupational health, and occupational health teams can support managers and workers with a safe return to work.

A number of options are available to support employees back into the workplace, such as flexible working, phased returns or a change to duties or work patterns. Covid sick pay policies continue to apply, including for those with long Covid. I would encourage and advise anyone who is in that position, including health professionals, to have a discussion with their employer—and with occupational health services if they have them at their place of work—about how best they can return to work in a way that suits their health circumstances.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** The First Minister has talked about decisions being reached by 12 January and has said that any change to the isolation period for index cases might be announced as early as 5 January. I know that she will not have underestimated the effect of the new variant on pupils returning to school, particularly on those returning for preliminary exams in January.

Will the First Minister say what discussion there has been about the 2021-22 exam diet? What new advice have schools been given about the collection of exam evidence from pupils who have to isolate?

**The First Minister:** There is at present no change to the arrangements that were set out by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills not long before the Christmas recess—I cannot recall exactly when she set them out. The expectation is that exams will go ahead in this academic year. Contingency arrangements are in place and there

are considerations that would inform that. Anyone can look at the detail of that but I am happy to ask the education secretary to write to the member with a reminder of and an update on those plans.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** The range of Covid challenges experienced by many of my constituents has highlighted Scotland's critically important role in leading and delivering world-class Covid-19 research, particularly as we respond to variants such as omicron. What assurance can the First Minister provide that everything possible will be done to support continued funding opportunities for research activity in the short and long terms?

**The First Minister:** We continue working through the chief scientist office and NHS Research Scotland to invest in the research infrastructure that will support health boards in hosting and participating in a wide range of clinical research. That includes research in all clinical areas and particularly studies associated with Covid, such as those that help us to understand Covid and trials of treatments and vaccines. Support for research in specific clinical areas is provided by clinical research networks and specialty groups.

I recognise the importance of continued support for that and take the opportunity to pay tribute to everyone in our research community whose work in the past couple of years has helped us to get to where we are now, with a far greater, if not full, understanding of Covid and with advances in vaccines and treatment.

**Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** Although our pubs, nightclubs and hotels require support because of the direct effects of the Government's restrictions, many other businesses, such as taxi drivers and those in the hospitality supply chain, are also losing income at what should be their busiest time of year. I have been contacted by local small businesses who feel that they have been put into an unofficial lockdown as people do what is asked by the Government and stay at home. Will the First Minister reassure me that all businesses that have been affected by restrictions will be able to access Government grant funding?

**The First Minister:** I have already covered that a number of times today, so I will recap briefly. The level of funding that is available in Scotland is proportionately far greater than is the case elsewhere in the UK, because we have prioritised support for businesses.

Of the £375 million, just more than £200 million has already been allocated. That covers hospitality, leisure, events and some of the supply chain businesses that are affected by the advice

that we have given and by some of the other protections that are in place. With regard to the remainder of that funding, as I have said, we are in consultation with different sectors—including, for example, the taxi industry—to make sure that those parts of the economy that are only indirectly affected by the protections are included.

As I have said, without further significant funding being made available by the Treasury, we cannot compensate every business. That is why I hope that all members, including Sharon Dowey, will join us in calling on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to make that additional funding available, so that we can go even further than we are going from within the Scottish Government's own resources.

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** The omicron variant has meant that some public health measures have had to be reintroduced to protect the public and our national health service. Those measures ask that social contact be limited. The First Minister will be concerned about the impact that those measures could have on social isolation. What efforts is the Scottish Government making to give advice and support to the people who might be impacted most by social isolation?

**The First Minister:** There is no doubt that the advice that we are giving has an impact on isolation and loneliness. It will be exacerbating that for many people, and that is one of the reasons why I hope that we do not have to give this advice for very long. The more we all stick to it now, the quicker we will get through this.

A range of support is available. I highlight the national assistance helpline, which is available Monday to Friday 9 am to 5 pm. That can assist with practical support, such as that which people need while they are self-isolating, and it can also link individuals to local support services to help reduce social isolation. The number for that is 0800 111 4000.

We have also committed to additional investment to tackle social isolation and loneliness, and have already made an additional £1 million available to support the work of organisations that are involved in that area. Lastly, support is available through a range of different organisations. I highlight Breathing Space, Clear Your Head, the Scottish Association for Mental Health and Samaritans, which, of course, has a 24-hour phone line. This is a tough time for everybody, and I recognise that it is particularly so for those who are living alone and are already isolated. Support is out there if they need it, and I ask people please to make sure that they use it.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** The Scottish omicron study suggests that there is a

two-thirds reduction in the risk of Covid-19 hospitalisation for those with omicron compared with delta, although it looks as though the number of cases will be a far greater with that variant. How have the conclusions of the study informed and shaped the Government's Covid strategy?

**The First Minister:** The study is really encouraging, and just like everybody else, I want it to be borne out with further data. The study is already informing how we will go about assessing judgments over the next phase. In my statement, I went into quite some detail about how we are looking much more not just at the overall case numbers, but at the impact of those cases, particularly on the health of infected individuals and on the overall impact of the wave on the NHS.

I really want to believe that what the early data is telling us turns out to be the case, and, at this stage, there is no reason to believe that that will not be the case. However, given that the authors of the study are saying that it is early data, that more data is needed to be sure, that the much higher transmissibility of omicron could outweigh the benefits of a lower risk of hospitalisation and that we still need to be cautious in the immediate term, I think that that also needs to continue to inform our approach.

We all want the pandemic to be over as quickly as possible, but, as I have said in relation to the fine judgments that have to be made around self-isolation, if we take precipitate action that feeds greater spread of the virus, we would set ourselves back rather than propel ourselves forwards. Difficult though it is for everybody, we must ensure that we get those judgments as right as we possibly can.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** It is concerning that the First Minister has said that hospitality support will be allocated on the same basis as before. Businesses that do not pay business rates, such as floating hotels and restaurants, lost out previously, as did kennels and catteries, which depend on tourism but were categorised as storage and distribution businesses. Will the First Minister ensure that those businesses receive equal assistance, this time?

**The First Minister:** I recognise the issues that have been raised. There is always tension between having as standardised a system as possible, to get the money out the door as quickly as possible, and having more targeted schemes. The more bespoke such schemes become, the longer it takes to establish and check eligibility and get the money to businesses. That is why, for hospitality, we have, at least for the initial funding, operated on the same approach to grant funding as previously.

However, as I have said a few times today, with the portion of funding on which we have not yet taken decisions, we want to look at more targeted support for the sectors that have not previously been supported or that do not get the more generic support.

I cannot give an absolute guarantee that every form of business that Rhoda Grant has mentioned will be covered, but I guarantee that we will look to reach as many businesses as possible and try to target the next tranche of funding as carefully as possible.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** This week, it has been suggested that care home visiting should be stopped. I support—*[Inaudible.]*—for the mental wellbeing of residents; that is common sense. What does the First Minister have to say to anxious families about that? Can she guarantee to them that safe visiting will continue?

**The First Minister:** I apologise to Willie Rennie; his line broke up a little in the middle of his question. I think that I got the gist of it, but, if I appear to be answering a question that he did not ask, that is the reason. I think that he asked me about comments at the weekend, which I think came from the chief executive of Scottish Care, about the need to perhaps stop care home visiting. If I am misquoting anybody, I apologise for that.

I do not want us to go back to a position in which we do not have visiting in care homes. The safety of residents in care homes is, for reasons that we all understand, vitally important, but we want to continue to support safe visiting.

As we have faced omicron, we have issued guidance about what safe visiting means when it comes to numbers and suchlike. For the mental health of residents in care homes—and for the mental health and wellbeing of their families and loved ones—it is important that we continue to support safe visiting. I give an assurance that that is a priority for us.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** The First Minister has told us that she does not know how many people are in hospital because of Covid, how many people are in intensive care because of Covid, and, of those, how many are unvaccinated. Public Health Scotland should have those figures—if it does not, questions need to be asked. Will the First Minister ensure that those figures are published today and every week from now on?

**The First Minister:** No, I will not, because we need to publish figures when they are robust. Public Health Scotland is working to break down the figures as much as possible. We publish data at a level of granularity that is probably among the best anywhere, but we always want to understand

it carefully. It takes work, effort and a lot of expertise to do that in a way that is robust and therefore reliable.

I absolutely refute the suggestion that, somehow, Public Health Scotland has been dragging its feet on that. The organisation is full of people who are literally working around the clock to help with the response to Covid. The wealth of information that it already publishes has helped to inform our response, as will that data when it becomes more robust. I thank everybody in Public Health Scotland for the work that they are doing, literally as we speak.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Many people will be deeply concerned by the answer that the First Minister just gave to my colleague Graham Simpson. She has not been very clear about the statistics, and that is something that the public deserves to know about very clearly.

However, the First Minister has been clear that the Government has put in place restrictions and guidance to slow transmission while we increase vaccination. Given that she has said that we remain on track to meet our vaccination target by the end of the year, when will the Government set out its conditions for reducing restrictions in the new year?

**The First Minister:** As has been the case, we will take account of transmission rates, vaccination rates and the overall health impact. I think that anybody who listened to my statement would see that one of the key conditions is that we must be as assured as we can be that the volume of cases will not overwhelm the economy and the NHS and cause serious health harm.

I wish—possibly more than anybody in the Parliament—that the decisions were really straightforward and binary, and that there was a manual that told us exactly what to do. That is not the case for any Government anywhere. Making decisions involves good advice and good clinical expertise, which the Scottish Government is blessed with and lucky to have; it also involves careful judgment, which I accept that we will not get absolutely right on every occasion. However, we try our best to get that as right as possible.

I come back to the point that the public should not be disappointed by the answer that I gave to the previous question. The public should be reassured by that, because when they read data that is published by Public Health Scotland, they will know that they can have confidence in its robustness.

Just before I came into the chamber, I read that the Prime Minister said this morning that the majority of people in intensive care units in England are unvaccinated and that a clarification then had to be issued to say that that was just

anecdotal evidence. I do not think that we want to be in a position in which we are making decisions on the basis of anecdotal evidence. We want the information to be robust, and we are very lucky in Scotland to have the expertise and skills of Public Health Scotland in getting us into that position.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. That concludes the First Minister's update on Covid-19.

*Meeting closed at 15:31.*



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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