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Strict Covid curbs 'less effective', admits Nicola Sturgeon as Scotland's isolation rules relaxed

First Minister's approach now more in line with England, as data show her tough measures failed to curb omicron spread

By Simon Johnson, SCOTTISH POLITICAL EDITOR

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Nicola Sturgeon finally relaxed [Scotland's self-isolation rules](#) and promised to rethink her Covid strategy on Wednesday after admitting her [hardline restrictions](#) were not as effective anymore.

In a major about-turn that brought her approach more in line [with Boris Johnson's](#), Ms Sturgeon disclosed that her government will shortly unveil a blueprint for Scotland to live with the virus in the long term that would be “more proportionate and sustainable and less restrictive.”

Although her government will not “let it rip” by lifting all measures, she admitted that using restrictions was becoming “less tolerable”, inflicting “more harm” and was “perhaps less effective” thanks to omicron's increased transmissibility.

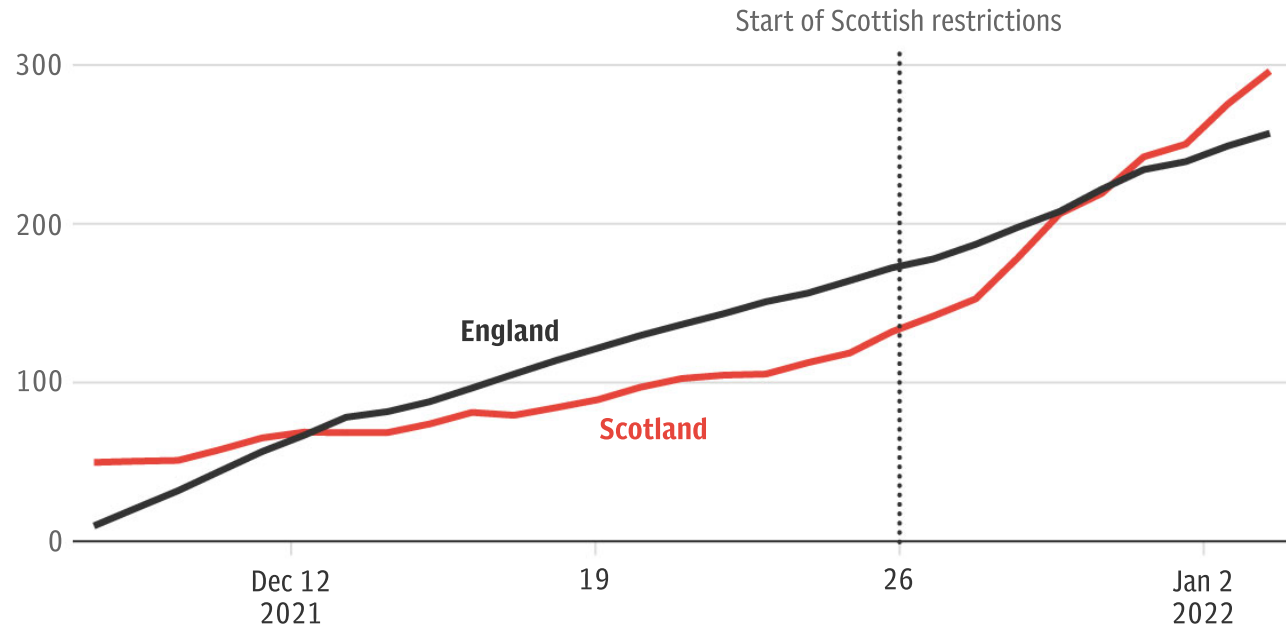
In what she described as an “early indication” of her new approach, the First Minister finally abandoned her tougher self-isolation rules and followed the regime in the rest of the UK by cutting the quarantine period for positive cases from 10 days to seven.

Fully vaccinated close contacts, including people living in the same household, will no longer have to automatically self-isolate for 10 days even if they test negative. Instead, they will be required to take a daily lateral flow test for a week.

Ms Sturgeon unveiled plans for a radical shift in strategy as the Office for National Statistics disclosed the proportion of Scots with Covid doubled from one in 40 to one in 20 in the final week of 2021, despite a flurry of new restrictions.

Confirmed cases in England and Scotland

Seven-day average cases by publish date per 100,000 population



This compared to one in 15 in England, where Mr Johnson has refused to introduce similar measures and the figure has been skewed by the much higher case rate in London. Up to one in 10 people in the UK capital are thought to have had Covid.

Holyrood's opposition parties and business leaders welcomed the relaxation of quarantine rules, which have worsened severe staff shortages caused by people having to self-isolate.

However, firms and sporting bodies challenged Ms Sturgeon to make clear what criteria would have to be met for her restrictions to be eased, including a "clear end date for the current working from home requirements".

The First Minister said existing restrictions would remain in place until at least January 17, but said she could not provide any clarity on whether rugby fans would be allowed into Murrayfield for the Calcutta Cup match between Scotland and England on February 5.

[All hospitality and indoor leisure premises](#) in Scotland have been forced to reintroduce one-metre social distancing. Licensed premises have also had to bring back table service and nightclubs have closed unless they can operate with these restrictions.



The streets of Edinburgh were deserted on New Year's Eve, as Scotland's nightclubs were forced to close last month | CREDIT: Peter Summers /Getty Images Europe

Strict limits on attendance at large events in Scotland, including football matches, were imposed on Boxing Day. Theatres across the country have also had to close their doors.

However, Ms Sturgeon told MSPs that the virus was “more widespread now than at any point in the pandemic so far”, which she argued had “extremely serious implications” for the NHS and other key services.

In a virtual statement to a recalled Scottish Parliament, she said that her continuing to use lockdown-style restrictions “won’t control transmission to the same extent as they would have with other variants.”


Ms Sturgeon said this did not mean “giving up on trying to control it at all”, but added: “The Scottish Government is currently working on and will publish within the next few weeks a revised strategic framework, which will set out more fully how that process of adaptation can be managed.”

Asked before Christmas about cutting the 10-day quarantine period, Ms Sturgeon sarcastically said: "Yeah, that would help, because that would be spreading the infection even further, and that would be not doing any favours to businesses."

Douglas Ross, the Scottish Tory leader, welcomed her "U-turn" on her "unsustainable" rules but questioned why she had taken ["so long to make this change"](#).

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