

The “stay at home” message, the Scottish Government and outdoor recreation

Description

We appear back where we were earlier in the year ([see here](#)) with the “stay at home” message assuming a central role in the Scottish Government’s attempts to slow the spread of the Omicron variant. This post takes a look at the messaging and its implications.

The evolution of the latest “stay at home” messaging

In her statement to the Scottish Parliament on 14th December ([see here](#)), in which she warned of a tsunami of Covid cases and introduced new measures for businesses, Nicola Sturgeon asked people to reduce household contact but did not mention “stay at home”:

“So my key request today [to the public] is this – before and immediately after Christmas, please minimise your social mixing with other households as much as you can.

However, if you do plan on socialising – either at home or in indoor public places – we are asking that you limit the number of households represented in your group to a maximum of three.”

Three days later, on the 17th December ([see here](#)), the message to the public to minimise social mixing was upfront – nothing wrong with that – but had an important addition:

Good afternoon.

I’m joined by the Chief Medical Officer, and we will give you an update today on the spread of Omicron in Scotland.

We will also take the opportunity to reinforce the important request we are making of everyone just now - to limit the number of contacts you are having in the run-up to Christmas, and indeed to stay at home as much as is feasible.

In her speech to the Scottish Parliament yesterday ([see here](#)) Nicola Sturgeon repeated the “stay at home” message several times and extended the time period:

“I will again appeal to everyone across the country to reduce contacts and stay at home as much as possible in the run up to Christmas Day, and then again after this Christmas weekend”

Nicola Sturgeon also tried to make the message sound like a given, when it's not:

"Our advice of course is to stay at home as much as possible".

Where is the evidence to substantiate the "stay at home" message?

Having left my home to go running on Sunday, I heard the Hampden roar two miles away in Pollok Park. Knowing that singing and shouting spreads Covid-19 like nothing else, I could not but feel fearful for the football fans inside. John Swinney, the Covid Minister, has now admitted that letting the cup final go ahead was probably a mistake. The policy position, as others have remarked, of allowing mass events to go ahead while asking people to stay at home was totally incoherent. At least the Scottish Government started to address that contradiction yesterday, but placing limits on large events doesn't make the the stay at home message right.

We know now that Covid-19 is mainly transmitted through the air and omicron is more transmissible than previous variants. It is likely therefore that there are greater risks of catching omicron both indoors and outdoors than there were for previous variants, although outdoors is still likely to be significantly safer. Until we know more, however, it seems sensible to restrict the size of both indoor gatherings and large outdoor events like football matches and Hogmanay street parties. But that doesn't mean people should stay at home.

The stay at home message totally ignores the fact that if you leave your home to go for a walk or undertake other forms of outdoor recreation alone or with your own household, the risks of spreading the omicron or any other variant of Covid are negligible. A much better message would have been *"consider getting out for a walk, it's safe and it might make you feel better"*. But that's longer than the three word soundbites so beloved of our politicians and the media. "All power to the soviets" wouldn't have a chance these days!

Besides outdoor recreation being a safe thing to do in these Covid times, we know that confining people to their homes, earlier this year and last, had serious adverse consequences for mental and physical health. Nicola Sturgeon half recognised that in her speech on the 14th:

"We are not banning or restricting household mixing in law as before. We understand the negative impact this has on mental health and wellbeing."

And, she could have added, physical health. But three days later message was stay at home. A missed opportunity to promote outdoor recreation in a predominantly dry week in the middle of winter.

Omicron of course may increase the risks of meeting up with others outdoors but how far is unknown. But rather than telling people to stay at home, which we know is harmful, would it not have been more helpful to issue some precautionary advice about meeting people outdoors based on current scientific understanding applied to the Omicron variant? Many people are already doing this: taking tests; keeping further apart; or putting on a mask if talking to someone for an extended period.

What are the risks to outdoor recreation of the “stay at home” message?

A reasonable explanation for why the Scottish Government adopted the “stay at home” message again is it didn’t have an immediate price tag. Without the funds to compensate business for tighter restrictions, the best way they could think of deterring people from mixing in hospitality venues, retail outlets and at sports events was to urge us to “Stay at home”. Unfortunately, if you are a passionate football fan, however worried you are, you are unlikely to voluntarily miss out on seeing your team in the cup final.

As soon as the money appeared, restrictions were introduced on the types of mixing most likely to spread Covid. That should be taken as an opportunity to review the stay at home messaging and emphasise the importance of people still getting outdoors for recreation.

There are real risks that if the Scottish Government continues to promote the stay at home message this could kick start a new round of naming, shaming and vigilantes taking it upon themselves to police visitors. It was very interesting to hear Mark Drakeford, First Minister for Wales, on the radio yesterday putting a very different take on the new restrictions there. Far from asking people to stay at home he made it clear visitors were absolutely welcome to come to Wales over the holiday period, as long as they had done a lateral flow test and kept the same rules as everyone else. He also positively encouraged locals and visitors alike to meet up outdoors. We could do with similar messages in Scotland.

But if Nicola Sturgeon doesn’t change the messaging, Rishi Sunak’s reluctance to create new money to furlough folk offers some safeguard against further legal restrictions aimed at forcing people to stay home. The Scottish Government is unlikely to have the funds to compensate all the businesses that would be affected, from the ski centres to accommodation providers, from cafe and retail outlets to mountain guides. I would sleep easier, though, if the Scottish Government acknowledged that outdoor recreation is low risk and good for people and that should be incorporated in its messaging.

Category

1. Access rights

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1. Covid-19

Date Created

December 23, 2021

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