

Christmas guidance set out for university students

University students will be able to travel home to spend Christmas with their families once the national restrictions end on 2 December, following steps set out in new Government guidance published today.

In order to travel home safely, students in England will be required to follow the current national restrictions in place until 2 December, completing this four-week period in their term-time accommodation.

From 3 December to 9 December, which will be known as the 'student travel window', students will be allowed to travel home on staggered departure dates set by universities, who will work with other institutions in the region to manage pressure on transport infrastructure.

The student travel window will mean students can travel having just completed the four-week period of national restrictions, reducing the risk of transmission to family and friends at home.

Universities should move learning online by 9 December so students can continue their education while also having the option to return home to study from there.

As announced by the Prime Minister this week, the Government will also work closely with universities to establish mass testing capacity. Tests will be offered to as many students as possible before they travel home for Christmas, with universities in areas of high prevalence prioritised. This will provide further reassurance that where students test negative, they can return home safely and minimise the risk of passing coronavirus on to their loved ones.

If a student tests positive before their departure they will need to remain in self-isolation for the required period of ten days. Moving all learning online by 9 December gives enough time for students to complete the isolation period and return home for Christmas.

The guidance delivers on the Government's pledge to ensure students can be with their families at Christmas while limiting transmission of the virus.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan said:

We know this Christmas will feel different, and following this incredibly difficult year we are delivering on our commitment to get students back to their loved ones as safely as possible for the holidays.

We have worked really hard to find a way to do this for students, while limiting the risk of transmission. Now it is vital they

follow these measures to protect their families and communities, and for universities to make sure students have all the wellbeing support they need, especially those who stay on campus over the break.

Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr Jenny Harries said:

The mass movement of students across the country at the end of term presents a really significant challenge within the COVID-19 response.

The measures announced today will help minimise that risk and help students get home to their families as safely as possible for Christmas. It is crucial that students follow the guidance in order to protect their families and the communities they return to.

Universities are expected to make plans to ensure students can travel home safely at the end of term, working with local public health officials and transport operators.

Students should follow the Government's travel guidance, which includes wearing face coverings unless exempt, avoiding busy routes and times, and limiting car sharing with only their household or bubble where possible.

We are working with the other governments across the UK to ensure that all students, no matter where they live or study are treated fairly and can travel home as safely as possible to keep all our communities safe.

English students at universities in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, should follow the guidance relevant to where they are living before returning home. When they return to England, they should follow their local guidance for their home area. Students returning to their home in England who have not completed the 4 weeks of national restrictions should undertake at least 14 days of restricted contact either before or after return home to minimise their risk of transmission.

Universities have also been asked to provide additional help and practical support to students, particularly for students who remain on campus over Christmas, which can include care leavers, international students and students estranged from their families. Universities should ensure they are properly cared for and can access affordable food, medical and cleaning supplies if needed.

The Government has provided over £9 million to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need, as well as working closely with the Office for Students to provide up to £3 million to fund Student Space, a new mental health support platform.

The department also worked with the Office for Students to clarify that

providers were able to use existing funds, worth around £23 million per month for April to July this year and £256 million for Academic Year 2020/21, towards hardship support.