

'Hospitality absolutely lives on a knife edge' as post Christmas rules in Wales impact sector

North Wales pub, restaurant and hotel owners have spoken about their anger and frustration as Omicron fears and new restrictions create "ghost towns" and confused customers – leaving them struggling to compete.

The new Covid restrictions came into force on Boxing Day in Wales – including the rule of 6 and 2m social distancing where viable. Nightclubs were also shut down from December 27th.

It comes after a cancellation crisis as Covid cases spiked, although early findings last week suggested people infected with the fast-spreading Omicron variant were less likely to be admitted to hospital

With the UK Government not now moving to tighten restrictions until at least the new year there is now a stark contrast in the rules on each side of the border during a critical time for the hospitality sector.

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Welsh Government has come under fire for the move to add rules – and demands are being made to see the advice given that led to the restrictions being implemented in Wales.

The Government said these will be released “shortly” and also pointed towards Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) advice for all four UK governments that stated the “earlier interventions happen the greater the effect they will have”.

Scotland and Northern Ireland have both tightened rules on the sector – although there are differences, with a 1m social distancing rule in Scotland instead of 2m.

David Owen, who owns the The Midland Tapas & Wine Bars in Beaumaris and Conwy and venues in Menai Bridge, said: “It’s hugely disappointing that Welsh Government has not published data that directed their decision making process.

“This is even more important to their credibility now that

England haven't imposed greater restrictions just across the border. December has been lost for Welsh Hospitality, the non domestic rates grant won't come close to make up for what has been lost in consumer confidence. This will echo forwards too, into what are known to be quiet months in 'normal' times."



The Midland Tapas & Wine Bar in Conwy. Image: David Powell
(Image: Daily Post Wales)

He added: "December sees us achieve between 2k-2.5k dining customers, per restaurant in normal times. We as a business are on track to meet just 30% of that normal figure.

"The negative press and hype leading to just the public belief that's restrictions would follow led to a drastic change in bookings and then subsequently, approximately 25% of bookings led to cancellations.

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“We would ordinarily recruit seasonal staff or welcome back returning students to the company. This hasn’t happened, but we are still operating with almost 50 staff members. The business group has had to go one step further and reduce the hours of incumbent staff while redirecting resources to other areas to maximise efficiency.

“Hospitality absolutely lives on a knife edge and is presently like a house of cards.

“The sector has been turned on its head and all bets are off so far as historic evidence is concerned.”

Rich Watkin, director at pub Fat Boar, which has sites in Wrexham and Mold, said on New Year's Eve everyone in Wrexham will jump on a bus to go to Chester while they will be "looking at how we keep everyone in work".

He added: "Boxing Day in Wrexham was like a ghost town.



The Fat Boar pub and restaurant on Yorke Street, Wrexham.
Photo by Ian Cooper

(Image: IAN COOPER/NORTH WALES LIVE)

"What we need is an equal chance of surviving regardless of what side of the boarder we are on. After today's announcement(in England) it's not a level playing field."

Jonathan Greatorex, owner of The Hand at Llanarmon, said: "Once again, the differences in rules between Wales and England has caused confusion for the customers of Welsh hospitality businesses.

“Yesterday(Boxing Day) was, frankly, a nightmare with many customers simply having no idea that the rules had changed.



Hand at Llanarmon owner Jonathan Greatorex

(Image: Hand at Llanarmon owner Jonathan Greatorex)

“We had guests staying overnight who went to bed with one regime in place, waking the following morning to completely different rules.

“Our job is to make people feel welcome and happy, not enforce politically-driven decisions that make us out to be ‘the bad guys’.”

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Seamus O’Keefe, owner of The Chainbridge Hotel, in Llangollen, said: “Without doubt bookings and footfall are lower than we would expect – either people who are fearful of catching the virus or anti restrictions, a bit of both.

“Will be interesting to see what happens now we all know England isn’t having restrictions.



Seamus O'Keeffe, The Chainbridge Hotel in Llangollen
(Image: Seamus O'Keeffe)

"I know that most people would want to go out and celebrate freely, rather than follow quite arbitrary rules."

A Welsh Government spokesperson said: "Throughout the pandemic, we have taken a science-led and evidence-based approach to our response as we protect people's lives and livelihoods."

"Omicron is a fast-moving, high-infectious form of coronavirus. While these preliminary studies provide comfort and hope about the severity of disease, if this omicron wave

infects large numbers of people, it will have knock-on impacts on public services and the economy because of staff absences; it could cause a surge in hospitalisations, at a time when the NHS is already at its busiest, and we could sadly see more deaths.

“We take seriously the advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies when it says the earlier interventions happen the greater the effect they will have. The alert level two measures and strengthened guidance, which will be introduced from Boxing Day, are a proportionate response to the public health threat from omicron.”

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