

COVID-19: Health Secretary's statement to Parliament

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I'd like to update the House on COVID-19 coronavirus.

As of this morning, 7,132 people in the UK have been tested for the virus.

So far 13 people in the UK have tested positive, of whom 8 now have been discharged from hospital.

We expect more cases here.

As planned, 115 people left supported isolation at Kents Hill Park in Milton Keynes on 23 February. All tested negative for COVID-19.

On Saturday, 32 people from the Diamond Princess cruise ship were repatriated and taken to Arrowe Park, where they will remain in supported isolation.

And 4 of those have tested positive and been transferred to specialist centres.

British tourists are currently being quarantined in a hotel in Tenerife and the Foreign Office is in contact with them.

Mr Speaker, we have a clear, 4-part plan to respond to the outbreak of this disease:

Contain. Delay. Research and Mitigate.

We are taking all necessary measures to minimise the risk to the public.

We have put in place enhanced monitoring measures at UK airports, and health information is available at all international airports, ports and international train stations.

We have established a supported isolation facility at Heathrow, to cater for international passengers who are tested, and to maximise infection control and free up NHS resources.

The NHS is testing a very large number of people who travel back from affected countries, the vast majority of whom test negative.

In the past few days we have published guidance for schools, for employers, for first responders, for social care and the travel industry on how to handle suspected cases.

If anyone has been in contact with a suspected case in a childcare or an educational setting, no special measures are required while test results are awaited.

There is no need to close the school or send other students or staff home.

Once the results arrive, those who test negative will be advised individually about returning to education.

In most cases, closure of the childcare or education setting will be unnecessary, but this will be a local decision based on various factors including professional advice.

Schools should be guided by the advice on the GOV.UK website and contact their regional school commissioner in case of queries.

I can tell the House that in the coming days we will roll out a wider public information campaign.

While the government and the NHS have plans in place for all eventualities, everyone can play their part.

To reiterate, our advice is for everyone to take sensible precautions like using tissues and washing hands more.

Yesterday, we updated our advice to returning travellers from northern Italy, defined as anywhere north of, but not including, Pisa and Florence, as well as Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Those returning from Iran, from the lockdown areas in northern Italy, and special care zone in South Korea should self-isolate and call NHS 111, even if they have no symptoms.

We are working closely with the World Health Organization, the G7 and the wider international community to ensure that we are ready for all eventualities. We are co-ordinating research efforts with international partners.

And our approach has at all times been guided by the Chief Medical Officer, working on the basis of the best possible scientific evidence.

The public can be assured that we have a clear plan to contain, delay, research and mitigate, and that we are working methodically through each step to keep the public safe.

I commend this statement to the House.