

Defence Secretary Oral Statement: Defence's COVID-19 support

With permission, I would like to update the House on Defence's support to the national Covid response.

As Honourable Members are aware, I committed to updating Parliament on our efforts and the MOD has been submitting weekly updates on the work to assist our outstanding NHS and colleagues from across government, as we fight back against this awful virus.

We might not be on the frontline of this particular fight but we are with them 'in the trenches' and, since last year, in increasing numbers. In fact, Defence's contribution to the Covid response now represents the most significant domestic resilient operation in peacetime. And more personnel are committed on UK resilience tasks today than at any time since the pandemic.

That's why it is important to now make a statement to the House detailing the breadth and complexity of these activities.

It is worth considering some statistics on what has been provided thus far:

Since last January the Standing Joint Command has received some 485 Military Assistance to Civilian Authority requests (MACA) since the start of last year. Some 400 of which have been related to our domestic Covid response. That is more than three times the average annual number.

We currently have 56 ongoing tasks, in support of 13 other government departments, with 4,670 personnel committed and almost 10,000 more held at high readiness, available to rapidly respond to any increasing demand.

As is well known, the UK Armed Forces have helped build Nightingale hospitals around the country and distributed vital PPE – delivering more than 6 million items to hospitals and clocking-up enough miles to circumnavigate the world 10 times.

Personnel from all three services have backfilled Oxygen tanker drivers, Welsh ambulance drivers and NHS hospital staff, such as those deployed to Essex Trusts this week. They have helped care assistants shoulder the burden in care homes and assisted testing programmes in schools and the wider community.

During Christmas, when the new variant of Covid disrupted the border crossings, the military stepped-up. Whilst most of us were settling down for our festive dinner and break, the military were working with the Department for Transport to test hauliers crossing the English Channel and to clear the backlog. Approximately 40,000 tests have been conducted in that operation.

At all times our people have shown fleet of foot, switching tasks as the occasion demanded, and while relatively small in scale always having a

catalytic effect.

Our involvement in testing is a case in point. We deployed personnel to the city of Liverpool to support the first 'whole town' community mass testing pilot.

The lessons learned along the way are now being applied in testing across the country from Medway in Kent to Merthyr Tydfil, Kirklees, Lancashire and Greater Manchester. And only recently in Greater Manchester I authorised the deployment of 800 personnel and yesterday they began focused community testing.

The country is, of course, eager to see the rollout of the largest vaccination programme in British history. And the NHS is delivering vaccines to those who need it at unprecedented speed.

Defence's contribution has, once again, been primarily through planning support provided by defence logisticians applying their expertise in building supply chains at speed in complex environments. And, as Brigadier Phil Prosser, Commander 101 Logistic Brigade said in the No10 press conference last week, 'this operation is unparalleled in its scale and complexity'.

So, as that operation has shifted from planning to execution and is now focusing on rapidly scaling up, defence has been preparing to adapt its support to the NHS. Not only have we sent additional military planners to assist the expansion, including in the Devolved Administrations.

But, following a request from the Department for Health and Social Care, we have established a Vaccine Quick Reaction Force of medically trained personnel who are assigned to the 7 NHS England regions. They can be deployed at short notice in the event of any disruptions to the established vaccination process and can be scaled-up if required by any of the National Health services across the United Kingdom.

Throughout the pandemic it is understanding the requirement that has been defence's priority in order to tailor make the most appropriate support.

That is why we have sent 10 Military Assessment Teams to each of the 10 NHS regions and Devolved Administrations. They are helping to assess the situation on the ground before formulating and coordinating the most effective response. For example, we currently have experts working at the newly reopened NHS London Nightingale – a hospital and a mass vaccination facility – that will help the capital handle Covid-19's second wave.

Often defence's efforts have been very visible. Such as providing critical support to our overseas territories. Just last weekend the Royal Air Force delivered more than 5,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine to British citizens in Gibraltar.

But we shouldn't neglect our armed forces' less visible because their contribution is no less important. Our planners are now embedded in local authorities working alongside the regional liaison officers providing critical command and control and logistics support. They know how to deal

with deadly diseases like Ebola and how to stay calm under pressure. Those cool heads have been pivotal not just in coordinating efforts but assessing how and where defence can deliver the best response.

I have mentioned the personnel we have deployed or held at readiness, but the real number helping the nation to combat the Coronavirus is far greater. We have in excess of 5,000 armed forces personnel and civilian staff supporting the COVID response from behind the scenes as part of their routine duties.

Today I want to pay tribute to these men and women.

They include the hundreds of personnel in Defence Headquarters responsible for coordinating the Covid Support Force. Among them 100 staff of the MoD's Winter Operations Cell, a similar number working on COVID planning at Standing Joint Command, and 100 more facilitating COVID operations as part of their regular jobs in the Joint Military Commands.

From the Defence Medical Services we must not forget that we have more than 1,600 consultants, clinicians and nurses and trainees fully embedded in the NHS all over the United Kingdom, and as ever they are working alongside their civilian counterparts. And some of those civilian counterparts themselves are also military reservists.

And, at our globally renowned Defence Science and Technology Labs (DSTL), there are 180 scientists and technicians working across 30 different COVID-19 related projects supporting the Government's scientific understanding.

Meanwhile, our expert analysts in Defence Intelligence have studied how Covid-19 spreads. And our procurement specialists have been busily supporting the acquisition of unprecedented quantities of PPE and equipment.

This has been a truly National and Whole Force response, uniting regulars and reservists, soldiers and academics, sailors and civil servants. Some of whom the Prime Minister met yesterday when visiting the Ashton Gate mass vaccination centre in Bristol.

Yet, even as we respond to the pandemic, we must maintain our day job guarding the nation from dangers at home and abroad.

Despite the virus troops continue to manage wider winter tasks such as flood protection, counter terrorism and the EU transition. And we have maintained our momentum in operations critical to security. Whether striking terrorists in Iraq, deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics, supporting UN peacekeeping in Mali, or maintaining our continuous-at sea-deterrent.

It goes without saying that the safety and welfare of our people is paramount. I can reassure the House that we have rigorous and robust measures in place to protect our personnel and reduce risks to themselves and their families whilst carrying out their duties.

So let me assure the House that our armed forces remain resilient and ready to support the NHS and colleagues across all government departments. Now, as ever, come what may, they stand ready to do their duty, however, wherever,

and whenever they are needed.

I know some colleagues are keen to see the armed forces take a more leading role but I should make clear that our constitution quite rightly ensures that our military responds to civilian requests for assistance. They act in support of civilian authorities but are always ready to consider what more they can do to provide that support.

Together we will do our bit to beat this deadly disease and help our nation get back to normality.