

Oral Statement on the COVID-19 pandemic

Mr Speaker, before I begin my statement I'd like to start by welcoming the Honourable Member for Ilford North to his new position and by wishing his predecessor, the Right Honourable Member for Leicester South all the very best in his new role.

Throughout this national effort, I've always been grateful for how we've been able to work together across the floor of the House in a constructive manner and I very much hope that this will continue.

Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on the pandemic.

The Omicron variant is continuing to spread, here and around the world.

According to the latest data, there are now 261 confirmed cases in England 71 in Scotland and 4 in Wales bringing the total number of confirmed cases across the UK to 336.

This includes cases with no links to international travel and it is highly likely that there is now community transmission across multiple regions of England.

Beyond our shores, confirmed Omicron cases have now been reported in 52 countries with eleven countries including Romania, Mexico and Chile all reporting their first cases this weekend.

This is a global battle and we're playing a leading role.

On Friday I spoke with the Director General of the World Health Organisation to share our findings so far and discuss how we can work together to tackle this common threat.

We're learning more about this new variant all the time.

Recent analysis from the UK Health Security Agency suggests that the window between infection and infectiousness may be shorter for the Omicron variant than the Delta variant.

But we don't yet have a complete picture of whether Omicron causes more severe disease or how it interacts with the vaccine and so we can't say for certain whether Omicron has the potential to knock us off our road to recovery.

We're leaving nothing to chance.

Our strategy is to buy ourselves time and strengthen our defences while our world-leading scientists assess this new variant and what it means for our fight against COVID-19 and today, I'd like to update the House on the latest

measures that we're taking.

First, we're taking balanced and proportionate measures at the border to slow the incursion of the new variant from abroad.

We've seen with previous new variants how strong defences at the border combined with the capacity we've built up for genomic sequencing can give us the best possible chance of identifying and responding to new variants.

This includes our travel Red List which allows us to react quickly through targeted measures when the data shows cause for concern.

Analysis from UKHSA shows that at least 21 Omicron cases in England alone are linked to travel from Nigeria and there's a strong indication that Omicron is present there.

Nigeria also has very strong travel links with South Africa and it's the second most popular flight destination from Johannesburg.

Based on this evidence, we made the decision to add Nigeria to the travel Red List, and this came into force at 4am this morning.

This means anyone who's not a UK or Irish citizen, or resident who's been in Nigeria for the previous 10 days will be refused entry.

Those who are must isolate in a Government-approved facility for 10 days, where they will take two PCR tests.

I know that there's been a spike in demand for these facilities due to the rapid expansion of the Red List and that some people have experienced issues returning home however we're ramping up capacity as quickly as possible.

We've already brought several new hotels on board in the past few days and we expect to double the number of rooms that are available this week.

Mr Speaker, when this new variant is appearing in more and more countries every day we also need to look beyond the Red List and strengthen measures for a wider range of travellers to make sure they give us the protection we need against this potential threat.

UKHSA's findings that Omicron may have a shorter window between infection and infectiousness mean that pre-departure testing could have a greater role to play in identifying positive cases before travel.

As a result of this new data and the greater spread of Omicron across the globe from 4am tomorrow anyone travelling to the UK from a country that's not on the Red List must also show proof of a negative PCR or lateral flow test.

This applies to any vaccinated travellers aged 12 and above.

They should take tests as close as possible to when they depart and no earlier than 48 hours before.

I know that these measures will bring disruption and that they will impact people's plans to spend time with their loved ones over the festive period.

But we're taking early action now so we don't have to take tougher action later on and so we can take every opportunity to prevent more cases from arriving in our country.

I'd like to reinforce to Honourable Members that these are temporary measures while we improve our understanding of this new variant.

We'll be reviewing these measures along with the other temporary measures that we've announced and we will update the House next week.

I firmly believe that whenever we put in place curbs on people's freedoms, we must make sure they're absolutely necessary and I can assure the House that we won't keep these measures in place for a day longer than we have to.

Second, as well as acting to slow the incursion of the variant from abroad we're also strengthening our vital defences here at home.

Late last week, we had the brilliant news that another new treatment had been approved by the MHRA after it was found to have reduced hospitalisation and death in high-risk adults with symptomatic COVID-19 by 79%.

Another defence is, of course, our vaccination programme.

On Saturday we recorded almost 450,000 booster jabs in a single day and yesterday, we announced that we'd hit the significant milestone of 20 million booster doses and third doses across the UK.

In the last week, the UK booster programme has reached more people than the adult population of Greater Manchester and we're expanding this life-saving programme even further as part of our target of offering all adults in England a COVID-19 booster jab by the end of January.

To put this plan into action, we'll be recruiting 10,000 more paid vaccinators.

We're also deploying about 350 military personnel in England this week to support the vaccine booster programme and there's already over 100 personnel in deployed in Scotland supporting their vaccination efforts.

We'll have over 1,500 pharmacy sites putting jabs in arms across England along with new hospital hubs and vaccination centres.

We're bolstering our booster programme so we can protect as many people as possible, strengthening our collective defences, as this virus goes on the advance this winter.

Mr Speaker, one of the most dangerous aspects of COVID-19 is how quickly it can adapt.

And when the virus adapts, we must adapt too.

We cannot say for certain what Omicron means for our response but we can say that we're doing everything in our power to strengthen our national defences.

So we'll be as prepared as possible for whatever this virus – and this variant – brings.

I commend this statement to the House.