

Scottish Secretary thanks military for coronavirus support

THIS terrible pandemic has forced people apart but it has also brought us together. People from all corners of the UK have shown a shared determination to beat the virus.

We have changed our way of life completely, even though it has brought difficulty, distress and discomfort. We are staying at home, we are protecting the NHS and we are saving lives.

As we enter our fifth week of these difficult times, I'd like to put on record again my thanks to our NHS and everyone working in it. Our NHS has always embodied the values of compassion and togetherness that we share across the UK. In our country's greatest time of need, it is there for all of us. Care workers across the country are also going the extra mile to keep those they look after safe.

Out of our immense gratitude for these heroic front line staff, a heart-warming new national tradition has begun – our Thursday night Clap for Carers. I feel great pride to see such public support for our health service and the care workers we rely on.

There are countless other critical workers up and down the country, working in difficult circumstances in to keep us fed, to keep the lights on, to keep essential transport running and to keep our streets clean.

These are not the only heroes, of course. There is another group of men and woman I'd like to make a special point of thanking: our Armed Forces.

No-one who watched his presentation in Downing Street on Wednesday could fail to have been impressed by the words of General Sir Nick Carter, Chief of the Defence Staff.

He outlined how up to 3,000 personnel were now actively engaged in the battle against coronavirus across the UK, with 20,000 on standby.

"This is a truly national endeavour," he said. "Our Armed Forces are drawn from every part of the UK and much of the Commonwealth and they take great pride of serving the communities they are part of."

I know we are equally proud of them.

The work they are doing here is quite extraordinary. The General, a man with more than forty years of distinguished service to his country, could not have been clearer – he had never seen the Armed Forces face a bigger logistical challenge.

Nowhere can that incredible effort be seen more clearly than here in Scotland.

The military are distributing medical equipment to hospitals around the country, assisted with the new testing facilities in Glasgow, and transported vital equipment to set up our new testing megalab in Glasgow – the launch of which I was privileged to attend (albeit virtually via by Skype) – on Wednesday.

The Royal Airforce stands ready to airlift critically ill patients from Scotland's most remote communities. Working hand-in-hand with the Scottish Ambulance Service, life-saving RAF missions have been flown to carry patients from Arran, Orkney and Shetland to hospitals on the mainland.

Scotland is now covered by three Puma helicopters deployed to Kinloss in Moray. They will act as air ambulances, taking ambulance service paramedics to patients across Scotland and then carrying them safely to hospital. This has already begun as on Wednesday, a RAF Puma helicopter based at Kinloss has supported the NHS in Scotland with the first transfer of a critically ill patient from the Isle of Arran.

Behind the scenes, officers are working with each of Scotland's 14 health boards. And a team of planning specialists are now embedded in the Scottish Government's emergency co-ordination centre at St Andrew's House in Edinburgh.

Support here it is part of a huge operation across the UK and beyond.

Military experts are at the heart of the UK Government helping to fight the battle against online disinformation and they are assisting the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in their efforts to repatriate UK citizens struggling to return to their loved ones from abroad.

The Armed Forces have become an essential part of our response to the coronavirus outbreak and I know everyone in Scotland will join me in saluting their dedication, skill and courage.

Like many of you, I'll be at my front door again on Thursday to clap for our carers. But I'll also be thinking proudly of the men and women of our Armed Forces – and I'll add an extra round of applause for the great work they are doing for us all.