

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.

[Progressing the transition towards a more peaceful and stable DRC](#)

Mr President, may I begin by welcoming back SRSK Keita to the chamber, it's very good to see you here in person and we're very grateful for your briefing. I'm also grateful to Ms Kalala for her briefing and to you Mr President for your insights in your role as chair of the 1533 Committee and its visit. I want to focus this intervention on three issues: Uganda's intervention in eastern DRC; the state of siege; and then MONUSCO mandate renewal.

Firstly Mr President, the UK is closely following developments in eastern DRC following the launch of joint operations there by the Ugandan People's Defence Force and the DRC armed forces against the Allied Democratic Forces.

Coordination will be essential to maximise operational impact, and minimise the risk posed to civilians, UN personnel, and humanitarian actors, as well as the risk of unintended action between the forces.

We therefore stress the need for effective information sharing and coordination between the UPRF, DRC armed forces and MONUSCO on any military action, including location, nature and objectives, and also with humanitarian actors to enable access to those likely to be displaced or affected. We welcome the steps taken by the parties to begin this information sharing in the role that you SRSK have played in the region in facilitating that.

The UK also underscores the necessity of conducting all operations in full respect of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and where appropriate, in strict compliance with the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) and again it was reassuring SRSK to hear that your report on Human Rights compliance by all actors in your territory.

Whilst UPRF-FARDC operations take place against the backdrop of improved regional relations, we encourage all governments to use existing regional mechanisms to share information about these operations in order to reduce the risk of unintended harm.

Mr President, turning now to the state of siege, the UK acknowledges FARDC

and MONUSCO efforts against armed groups in eastern DRC but remains concerned by persistent armed group activity, and the consequent civilian death, injury and displacement that brings.

We reiterate our call on the Government of the DRC to ensure the state of siege is transparent, that it's time-bound, we note today that we're in the 13th extension of the state and implemented with full respect for international humanitarian and international human rights law and again it was worrying to hear in the briefing today about the rise in human rights abuses across the country.

We would also urge the Government of DRC to ensure the necessary resources reach the responsible actors in the east. And we welcome investigations into allegations of embezzlement of funds for military operations and encourage the DRC authorities to ensure accountability for those responsible. We encourage the Government of the DRC to follow the other recommendations of the Defence and Security Standing Committee, including the development of an exit strategy from the state of siege.

Mr President, as we approach MONUSCO's mandate renewal, let me briefly highlight the UK's priorities.

We want to see the implementation of MONUSCO's Transition Plan make progress. Continued discussions by the Joint MONUSCO – Government of DRC working group will be essential in this regard.

We also wish to see further consolidation of MONUSCO's presence in Ituri, and North and South Kivu, in order to enable MONUSCO to focus on the minimum conditions required for its eventual exit. We expect the full and effective engagement of all Protection of Civilians components, including MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), to achieve this.

Progressing MONUSCO's transition and enabling a focus on the minimum conditions in Ituri, and North and South Kivu, will also be facilitated by preparations for the early transfer of certain tasks: those that are not central to meeting the minimum conditions for withdrawal, and those that the Government of DRC, UN Country Team and other international partners could reasonably assume responsibility for already.

Mr President, in conclusion, the UK supports a gradual, sustainable withdrawal of MONUSCO, guided by an end state, rather than an end date. MONUSCO and the Government of the DRC continue to have our full support in their efforts to achieve this, and to ensure a more peaceful, stable and prosperous DRC and may I Mr President, just at the end, through the SRSg thank her and all of her staff and the peacekeepers in MONUSCO in what we know continue to be very difficult conditions.

Thank you.

UK strengthens policing cooperation with Malta

The UK and Malta have agreed a new partnership to boost police cooperation which will help cut crime and bring more criminals to justice in both countries.

The new agreement will see expertise and training methods shared between the two nations to boost police performance in targeting serious and organised crime gangs.

The UK-Malta Partnership was signed today (Monday 6 December) by Minister for Crime and Policing, Kit Malthouse and his Maltese counterpart, Minister for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement, Byron Camilleri.

Minister for Crime and Policing, Mr Malthouse said:

Serious and organised criminal do not respect our borders and it is vital that we work together with our international partners to tackle ever-changing threats.

This Government is totally committed to driving crime down, and this new agreement Malta will give both our police forces the tools they need to deliver on that promise.

Malta's Minister for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement, Byron Camilleri said:

The Maltese Government through the Ministry for Home Affairs is supporting the Malta Police Force's transformation strategy, providing them with all the assistance necessary. These reforms are ensuring the better use of technology and information, increasing public trust between the police and local communities and overseeing the introduction of a new code of ethics.

In relation to the enhanced cooperation between Malta and the United Kingdom, I look forward to the opportunities for Malta Police to work with their British counterparts which will lead to the exchange of best practices.

Malta and the UK share a long tradition of law enforcement and criminal justice cooperation to tackle international organised crime such as drug trafficking, illegal migration, cyber-crime, and financial crime.

This partnership will enable the UK to share our world-leading expertise in police training, professional development, and community policing with our

Maltese counterparts. It will help officers in both countries develop new skills, build community policing strategies and modernise digital services.

The partnership follows the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding which will:

- facilitate greater cooperation between the UK National Police Chiefs Council and Malta Police Force;
- strengthen collaboration between the UK's police services and Malta Police Force as it implements its 2020-2025 transformation strategy; and
- reinforce links between the College of Policing, recognised globally for its leadership training and professional standards, and Malta Police Force.

Support to Armed Forces community recognised with Gold Award

The MOD's Defence Electronics and Components Agency was one of ten Welsh businesses presented with the prestigious Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award at a ceremony in Cardiff

The joint regional event held on November 17 at HMS CAMBRIA saw 140 employers from Wales, West Midlands and Wessex recognised for the outstanding support they give to the Armed Forces Community nationally.

Representing the highest badge of honour, Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold Awards are presented to businesses that employ and support those who serve, veterans and their families and this year's awardees brings the total number of Gold holders to 493.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Leo Docherty said:

I would like to thank all the organisations who have proven their support for the Defence community during such unprecedented and challenging times.

The vast range of those recognised this year demonstrates how employing the Armed Forces community makes a truly positive and beneficial impact for all employers, regardless of size, sector or location.

Geraint Spearing, Chief Executive Defence Electronics and Components Agency also commented saying:

I am both delighted and immensely proud that DECA has received the Gold Award recognising our support towards the Armed Forces community that contributes significant experience and value to our organisation.

To win an award, organisations must provide 10 extra paid days leave for Reservists and have supportive HR policies in place for veterans, Reserves, and Cadet Force Adult Volunteers, as well as spouses and partners of those serving in the Armed Forces. Organisations must also advocate the benefits of supporting those within the Armed Forces community by encouraging others to sign the Armed Forces Covenant and engage in the Employer Recognition Scheme.

This year, organisations include NHS trusts, educational institutions, financial services, hotels, charities, law firms, police services, football clubs and museums. Nearly 50% are a small or medium-sized enterprise and 72% are private companies, demonstrating the wide range of organisations offering support to the military community regardless of size, sector or location.

The evening began with a performance from the Royal Marines Band in a sunset ceremony. Guests were then welcomed by the Chief Executive of the RFCA for Wales Colonel Dominic Morgan OBE who introduced the Chief of Defence People Lieutenant General James Swift OBE, who gave the opening address. The Welsh awards were presented jointly by Rear Admiral Keith Beckett CBE and Air Officer Wales, Air Commodore Adrian Williams OBE.

Mr Tony Fish, the MOD's Regional Employer Engagement Director for North Wales said:

We're delighted that so many employers in Wales have been recognised with this Gold Award. It is particularly pleasing that these employers have worked so hard to support our Armed Forces Community, during what has been an extremely difficult year.

2021 is the first year that there has not been one national award ceremony. This is due to the high number of winners (140 in total). Instead regional ceremonies have been held in Edinburgh, London and Wales, with Leeds on November 25.

[Education Secretary addresses](#)

Parliament on child safeguarding

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement following the sentencing of the stepmother and father of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes on Friday.

The whole nation is distraught at Arthur's tragic and horrific death. We, across the House and across this country, find it impossible to imagine how any adult could commit such evil acts against a child, in particular parents and carers, to whom children look for love and protection.

And I know that colleagues and people outside of This Place are seriously troubled that Arthur was subjected to a campaign of appalling cruelty and murdered after concerns had been raised with local services.

I want to tell colleagues across the House, and I want to assure the public, I am as determined as everybody is to get to the truth, expose what went wrong and take any action necessary to protect children.

To do so serious questions need to be asked.

I want to make clear that police officers, teachers, social workers, health workers and others go to work each day to try to make things better – to do their best at what are very difficult jobs.

Those already serving our country's most vulnerable children deserve our thanks – and I want to be extremely clear that no safeguarding professional should be the victim of any abuse. The targeting of individuals is wrong and helps nobody.

But that does not mean we should not seek to understand what went wrong and how we can stop it from happening again.

The public deserve to know why, in this rare case, things went horrifyingly wrong, and what more could be done to prevent abuse such as this happening again in future.

Since the horrendous deaths of Peter Connelly, Daniel Pelka and, sadly, others, the government has established stronger multi-agency working – putting a shared and equal duty on police, councils and health in local areas to work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, alongside a role for schools.

I am sure Members across the House will recognise that improvements have been made from previous reviews, but the question now is whether that is enough.

In order to look at issues nationally as well as locally, we established the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel in 2017 for cases like Arthur's.

That is why, given the enormity of this case, the range of agencies involved and the potential for its implications to be felt nationally, over the

weekend I asked Annie Hudson, chair of the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, to work with leaders in Solihull to deliver a single, national, independent review of Arthur's death to identify what we must learn from this terrible case.

This will encompass local government, as well as those working in the police, health and education sectors.

Officials in my department are already in close contact with the Solihull Safeguarding Partnership, which is grateful for the support offered and agree with this approach as the best way to deliver comprehensive national learning and identify whether there are any gaps that need to be addressed.

Annie and her colleagues on the national panel who come from the police, health and children's services, have dedicated their lives and decades-long careers to bettering the lives of the most vulnerable children in our society.

And I have every faith that their review will be robust, vigorous and thorough. I have already assured Annie, as I assure you now, that she will be given all the support she needs to do the job properly.

This review will focus specifically on Arthur's case, and identify where improvements need to be made. But I also want to make certain we have looked at how all the relevant local agencies are working now, including how they are working together.

For that reason, I have also asked Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue services and HM Inspectorate of Probation to lead a Joint Targeted Area Inspection. I have asked that each of these inspectorates be involved because of the range of local services which had been involved in Arthur and his family's life during the preceding months.

These joint inspections are well established, but a new ambitious approach will be used, with a sharp focus on the entry point to the child protection system across all agencies.

This will mean we can truly look at where improvements are needed by all the agencies tasked with protecting children in the Solihull area, so that we can be assured that we are doing everything in our power to protect other children and prevent such evil crimes.

As part of this inspection, all the agencies tasked with protecting children at risk of abuse and neglect in Solihull will have their effectiveness considered, and instructed on where improvements must be made – both in Solihull, as well as where learnings can be applied in other areas around the country.

These inspectorates have met today to plan this work and work will begin next week.

I, as well as officials in my department and across government, could not be

taking this more seriously and have been working this weekend to bring everyone together to make sure this work can start immediately. Over the coming days, we will publish terms of reference and timelines for this national review and local inspection.

Ahead of that, more widely, we are already investing heavily to help the legions of dedicated professionals on the frontline deliver the care that we all know every child deserves.

Since the Spending Review in 2019 there have been year-on-year real terms increases for local government – as well as the unprecedented additional £6 billion funding provided directly to councils to support them with the immediate and longer-term impacts of Covid spending pressures, including children's social care.

Yet we have also known that the care system needed bold and wide-ranging reforms which is why we have the independent review of children's social care happening now.

I know that Josh MacAlister, who leads the review, will make recommendations about what a decisive child protection response needs to look like given it sits at the core of the system he is reviewing.

And importantly, I know that the review will be looking at how social workers – especially those with the most experience – can spend time with families and protecting children, because we all know social workers do their best work with families, not behind a desk.

I look forward to the review's recommendations in due course, because in any complex system it is important – imperative in my view – to investigate thoroughly to learn and improve the system.

My mantra continues to be that sunlight is the best possible disinfectant – because if we are to improve services where they need improving, we must share data and evidence.

Finally, I would like to thank the prosecuting barrister, Jonas Hankin QC, his team, and the jury, for their service in this troubling case.

As the court heard, Arthur's tragic death is a result of the cruelty of his father and his father's partner. No government anywhere in the world can legislate for evil. But we will take action wherever we can to stop this happening again, because we must do more, and to do more I would like to end my statement with a plea to everyone in our country.

Anyone who sees or suspects child abuse can report their concerns to local children's services or by contacting the government-supported NSPCC helpline for adults or practitioners concerned about a child or young person.

So, if you see or suspect child abuse, report it.

If you are worried about a child you know, report it.

If something appears off, or you are seeing something that troubles you, report it.

As we uncover what went wrong and led to Arthur's tragic death, we must also strengthen our resolve to make sure that we prevent these crimes as much as they can be possibly prevented.

We must make sure that those who would do wicked acts to children face justice.

We must do absolutely everything in our power to protect vulnerable young children from harrowing and evil abuse.

And I commend this statement to the House.