

Wuhan coronavirus: Health Secretary's statement to Parliament

Mr Speaker, with your permission, before turning to the Bill I would like to update the House on the ongoing situation with the Wuhan coronavirus.

The Chief Medical Officer continues to advise that the risk to the UK population is "low" and has concluded that while there is an increased likelihood that cases may arise in this country, we are well prepared and well equipped to deal with them.

As of 2pm, there are currently no confirmed cases in the UK. We are working night and day with the World Health Organization and the international community and are monitoring the situation closely. Our approach has been guided by the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty.

As I set out in my statement on Thursday, coronavirus presents with flu-like symptoms including a fever, a cough, or difficulty breathing. The current evidence is that most cases appear to be mild.

However, this is a new disease and the global scientific community is still learning about it. I have therefore directed Public Health England to take a belt and braces approach, including tracing people who have been to Wuhan in the past 14 days.

Coronaviruses do not usually spread if people don't have symptoms – however we cannot be 100 per cent certain.

From today, we are therefore asking anyone in the UK who has returned from Wuhan in the last 14 days to self-isolate. Stay indoors and avoid contact with other people – and to contact NHS 111. If you are in Northern Ireland, you should phone your GP.

If you develop respiratory symptoms within 14 days of travel from the area, and are now in the UK, call your GP or ring 111 informing them of your symptoms and your recent travel to the city.

Do not leave home until you have been given advice by a clinician.

Public Health England officials are continuing to trace people who have arrived in the UK from Wuhan. Having eliminated those who we know have since left the country, there are 1,460 people we are seeking to locate.

The Foreign Office is rapidly advancing measures to bring UK nationals back from Hubei Province.

I have asked my officials to ensure there are appropriate measures in place upon arrival to look after them and protect the public.

If you are in Hubei Province and wish to leave, please get in contact with

the Foreign Office.

The UK is one of the first countries in the world to have developed an accurate test for this coronavirus and PHE is undertaking continuous refinement of this test. PHE has this morning confirmed to me that it can scale up this test so we are in a position to deal with cases in this country if necessary.

Mr Speaker, I want to stress that the NHS remains well prepared. The NHS has expert teams in every ambulance service and a number of specialist hospital units with highly trained staff and equipment ready to receive and care for patients with any highly infectious, disease including this one.

The NHS practices and prepares its response to disease outbreaks and follows tried and tested procedures, following the highest safety standards possible for the protection of NHS staff, patients and the public. Specific guidance on handling the Wuhan coronavirus has been shared with NHS staff.

Madame Speaker this is a timely reminder to have a first-class health care system and this bring me to this Bill.