

# Home Affairs Committee

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From the Committee Chair

Professor John Aston  
Chief Scientific Adviser  
Home Office  
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11 May 2020

Dear Professor Aston

## **Scientific advice on measures affecting international arrivals during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Thank you for your letter of 4 May and further information following the Committee's evidence session with the Home Secretary and Permanent Secretary. We would be grateful if you could provide some further clarification.

### **SAGE advice of 23 March**

You referred to the fact that SAGE had advised on 23 March that "numbers of cases arriving from other countries were estimated to be insignificant in comparison with domestic cases, comprising approximately 0.5% of total domestic cases." You also explained that death data in other countries was used to calculate the incidence in those countries combined with the number of air passengers coming from those hotspot countries. We would be grateful for clarity on the following issues:

- Which hotspot countries were included in the calculation? What were the numerator and denominator used to calculate the 0.5% figure: how many incoming air passengers from those countries were estimated to have Covid-19 and how many domestic cases were there estimated to be at that time? If these figures were not estimated, can you explain why not and what alternative mathematical calculations and assumptions were used to arrive at the 0.5% figure?
- Was the proportion of incoming passengers estimated to have coronavirus at the time that this analysis was done in line with the 1 in 1000 median worldwide figure you refer to in your letter, or was it a different figure, given that the UK has higher numbers of flights from China, New York, Italy and Spain than it does from many lower prevalence areas of the world?

- Do these figures still apply? In particular, do you estimate that the proportion of passengers arriving in the UK with Covid-19 at the moment is in line with global median prevalence of 1 in 1000, or is it higher?

### **Previous policy on self-isolation and quarantine for international arrivals**

Your letter states that “On 23 March, SAGE advised that the effect of closing borders would have a negligible effect on spread of Covid-19”. On the same day, it considered a paper titled “scientific advice on restricting flights from specific countries”.

- Did SAGE consider or advise the Government on the effect of self-isolation and quarantine arrangements for international arrivals or did it only examine the impact of closing borders? Has SAGE also examined the impact of testing or screening at the border?
- Before SAGE considered the paper on 23 March, what scientific evidence informed the decision to withdraw, on 13 March, the guidance on self-isolation for travellers from Wuhan, Hubei, Iran, parts of South Korea and Northern Italy? What was the estimate of the proportion of incoming passengers from those areas with Covid-19 at that time? What was the estimate of the proportion of UK domestic cases comprised by newly-arriving passengers on 12-13 March?
- Your letter states that “of most interest is the percentage of the total UK incidence that imported cases represent as this figure allows us to understand the level or risk to UK epidemic progression posed by imported cases.” Can you explain why this is the most significant figure and why the absolute number of cases was not a concern for the Government?
- The Chief Scientific Advisor told the Health and Social Care Committee on 5 May that “a lot of the cases in the UK didn’t come from China [...] They actually came from European imports and the high level of travel into the UK at the time [...] There was a very rapid escalation of numbers in March.” What assessment has been made of the countries beyond Italy from which the import of Covid-19 to the UK was most significant? At what point in March do you estimate that European imports of the virus reached their highest level? Does the government have an estimate for the number of new cases that came into the UK during this period?

### **Future international arrivals by air**

Since your letter, the Prime Minister has said that “to prevent re-infection from abroad, I am serving notice that it will soon be the time – with transmission significantly lower – to impose quarantine on people coming into this country by air.” The Government has also announced that no quarantine measures will apply to travellers coming from France.

- Has SAGE offered updated scientific advice to inform the decision to impose quarantine on people arriving in the UK by air? If so, when will that advice be published?
- What is the scientific evidence behind delaying the imposition of quarantine measures for several more weeks? At what point does the proportion of domestic cases made up by

international arrivals (the 0.5% figure previously referred to) reach the threshold at which the Government believes measures at the border could have a meaningful impact on the progression of the virus?

- On what scientific basis was the decision made to exempt France?

**Scientific evidence supporting the Government response to COVID-19**

- On 5 May SAGE published the second tranche of scientific evidence supporting the Government response to Covid-19. Neither the paper titled “the effect of travel restrictions on the spread of the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak”, discussed on 13 February, nor the paper titled “scientific advice on restricting flights from specific countries”, discussed on 23 March, were published. Why were these papers not published? Who decides which SAGE papers will be published and when? When will the papers be published?

Thank you for your assistance with these matters. Given the importance of transparency on these issues we would be grateful for a swift reply.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yvette Cooper', written in a cursive style.

**Yvette Cooper MP**