



Department for Transport

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From the Parliamentary
Under Secretary of State
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Dear Huw,

Thank you for your letter dated 19 January regarding the required criteria for the removal of FCDO advice against all cruise travel to allow - at the right time - a phased restart of the cruise industry.

As you will know, the travel advice for cruise is of course a matter for the Foreign Secretary. The FCDO have been clear that travel advice is based on the situation at the current point in time, and that it will be updated based on public health advice from Public Health England (PHE), the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). As confirmed within the Global Travel Taskforce report, from a health perspective, it is proposed that it may be appropriate to resume cruises when the national alert level is at level 3 and when a move to level 2 is being considered by the four Chief Medical Officers.

However, cruise restart policy does fall within my remit as Maritime Minister and I am very familiar with the issues you have raised in your letter. I am pleased to update you on progress and the current position.

Importance of the cruise sector to the UK

As you rightly highlight within your letter, the cruise sector is of huge importance to the UK. It contributes over £10bn a year to the UK economy and supports over 80,000 jobs. It has been enormously affected financially by COVID-19 and it is vital that we support the restart of the sector when it is safe to do so, in a consistent manner to which we restart other travel and tourism sectors under the national tiering system.

Why is there a specific travel advice in place for cruise?

Cruises were significantly impacted globally by the virus during the first few months of the pandemic, with a number of well-documented outbreaks on vessels such as the Diamond Princess.

These mass outbreaks were a result of very exceptional circumstances, due to the fact the virus was largely unknown, insufficient global understanding on how to respond, and the response of foreign governments in closing borders and denying disembarkation. As a consequence, government intervention was required to assist in unlocking diplomatic challenges and supporting the repatriation of British nationals on three vessels. These first outbreaks led to the PHE and FCDO assessment that cruise vessels present their own set of specific risks during the pandemic. These include the enclosed nature of ships and shared ventilation systems, the complex variation of facilities onboard and the challenges of repatriating passengers. Cruises were subsequently categorised as high risk.

The FCDO issued advice on 12 March advising those aged 70 or over and those with pre-existing health conditions against cruise ship travel. This advice was updated as the FCDO began advising against all non-essential international travel on 17 March. The FCDO has continued to advise against cruise ship travel since this time, clarifying its advice on 9 July to exempt river cruises.

The FCDO confirm that government will continue to review its cruise ship travel advice based on the latest public health medical risk assessments.

Action taken to support a safe resumption of cruise operations

The cruise industry has worked hard over the last nine months to learn lessons from earlier in the pandemic, to identify ways to reduce the risks of COVID-19 onboard and prevent ever seeing a repeat of the situation experienced at the start of the pandemic.

As representatives from the cruise sector have highlighted to you, the sector has reviewed and enhanced its procedures to enable it to best protect the health of passengers, crew and the public. Cruise Line International Association (CLIA) and the UK Chamber of Shipping produced [COVID-19 Framework documents](#) for the industry which were published at the start of October. Whilst this is industry guidance, the sector worked closely with officials from across government in developing these. I am pleased to report that the UK Framework document has been recognised as good practice by the UN International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the UN World Tourism Organisation (WTO). On 5 November, they issued a [joint statement](#) to support the safe resumption of cruise ship operations following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this statement, they invite other Governments to use the guidance to facilitate the recovery of the cruise sector.

Unfortunately, following publication of the COVID 19 Framework document and an on-board visit to see the protocols in action, progress was halted by an increase in COVID-19 cases nationally and the subsequent restrictions put in place. It was collectively agreed that it was not the right time to restart.

We remain in a national lockdown, and whilst the vaccine provides some hope, we do not yet know how long this will last. The cruise sector has indicated it is ready to restart operations once the national conditions allow it. However, to enable a meaningful restart of the sector, we must see a change in the FCDO travel advice for cruise.

Managing the risks of restart

My officials have worked very closely with the sector and have facilitated and convened engagement between officials within the FCDO, PHE and DHSC over the last nine months on cruise restart – both in supporting the development of industry COVID-19 guidance, as well as discussing plans for managing a safe, phased approach to restart.

Whilst we have not yet restarted cruises in the UK, we have seen cruise operations resume in a phased manner elsewhere in the world since August 2020 (albeit some countries have paused operations again due to increased case rates and a tightening of national restrictions). The successful and partial resumption of cruises which we have seen – e.g. in Italy, Germany, Greece, Norway, Malta, Cyprus, Croatia, France, Singapore – has provided assurance over the ability of the sector to restart safely and the robustness of their protocols. COVID-19 cases have been reported on board some of these vessels, however we know from our experience that it is not yet possible to prevent COVID-19 completely at this stage in any setting, not just cruise. Where cases have been identified, they have been identified quickly and the protocols managed efficiently and effectively to protect passengers and crew and prevent mass outbreaks.

However, recognising concerns about cruise restart and the need to apply caution, my officials developed a phased restart plan which will introduce the resumption of cruises in a controlled risk-based approach. My officials have also been working across government to seek and provide clarity on when the sector will be able to restart. The phased restart plan was agreed and published within the Global Travel Taskforce Report, which also sets out a pathway to restarting the sector in a phased way.

I have engaged with my counterparts at FCDO, DHSC and Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr Harries since the publication of the report, to discuss the implementation and management of the phased restart plan.

Supporting Phase 1 of cruise restart

Unfortunately, the current national lockdown caused by the high prevalence of the pandemic and significant risk to the health of the population means that now is not the right time for cruise operations to restart.

However, work is underway within DfT to enable phase 1 of cruise restart (UK-UK) under tier 1 and 2 upon reinstatement of the national tier system (subject to any changes in the tiering system). Given the current national lockdown and the fact that the sector needs an 8-12 week lead time and operators need to sell tickets, we do not expect to see any seagoing cruises operate until at least April / May (subject to the progress of the virus) - at which point the majority of the high-risk population will have been vaccinated.

However, the market for UK-UK cruise is limited, and we recognise that it is unlikely to present a long term viable option on its own. It will, however, provide the sector with an opportunity to demonstrate its protocols and attract forward bookings.

Restarting phases 2 and 3

The cruise sector relies predominantly on international sailings. It is therefore keen to transition to phase 2 (European cruises) and phase 3 (international cruises) in quick succession, in line with wider restrictions imposed by the general FCDO travel advice.

The progression to phases 2 and 3 will be dependent on a change in FCDO travel advice. The FCDO is fully aware that winter is traditionally an important time for the cruise industry to secure bookings and that time is needed to make preparations ahead of sailing. However, they have confirmed that they will only remove this travel advice when the conditions allow, following confirmation from PHE that it is safe to do so.

Next steps

The sector feels that the action they have taken to address the risks to the cruise ship environment now removes the need for a sector specific advisory. However, travel advice remains the responsibility of the Foreign Secretary.

Noting the necessity of the removal of the travel advice for cruise operators to plan and prepare for a meaningful restart, I will be seeking collective agreement on the implementation of the phased restart plan.

Let there be no doubt that public health remains a priority both for my department and for industry. However, the sector has taken significant action to develop robust protocols (with proven success of implementing them elsewhere in the world) and it is important we provide the opportunity for them to demonstrate their effectiveness.

I fully recognise the significant benefits the cruise sector brings to the UK, including its role in supporting our economic recovery from COVID-19; our levelling up agenda; and our Global Britain objectives and aspirations.

That is why my officials and I continue to press for a restart of the cruise sector. It is important that action is taken now to support restart if there is to be any chance of recovery for the UK cruise sector in 2021.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robert Courts', is centered on the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Robert' and the last name 'Courts' clearly distinguishable.

ROBERT COURTS MP

MINISTER FOR AVIATION, MARITIME AND SECURITY