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THE PRIME MINISTER

30 July 2021

Dear Huw,

Thank you for your letter of 10 June about the Government's traffic light system for international travel as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. I am sorry for the time it has taken to reply.

I realise this is an extremely difficult time for the travel industry, which needs as much certainty as possible to resume operations. This is why the Global Travel Taskforce set out a travel system that co-exists with an endemic COVID-19. Our first, tentative steps towards resuming international travel have been necessarily cautious. The hard-won progress we have seen in the UK has not yet been replicated across the globe and we must ensure that the countries we reconnect with are safe. In particular, we must ensure other countries' infection rates are low, their vaccination rates are high, and that they are not incubating the most dangerous COVID-19 variants.

As you are aware, the traffic light system is intended to provide travellers with a risk-based framework, allowing a safe and sustainable return to international travel whilst protecting public health and the success of our vaccination programme – measures that remain vital to protect against the risk of COVID-19 and its variants. Our traffic light system is regularly reviewed, taking into account the latest domestic and international health picture, to see whether current measures can be rolled back or need strengthening. The Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) produces risk assessments of countries and territories. Decisions on red, amber or green list assignment and associated border measures are taken by Government Ministers, based on JBC risk assessments together with wider public health factors, such as genomic surveillance capability, COVID-19 transmission risk and variant of concern transmission risk. A summary of the JBC methodology is published on the GOV.UK website, alongside the key data supporting Ministers' decisions.

However, we do want people to be able to travel abroad freely as soon as it is safe which is why international travel restarted on 17 May. Thanks to our successful vaccination programme, since 19 July UK residents fully vaccinated by the NHS for a minimum of 14 days have been able to travel to amber list countries for leisure, business or to see family, with no need to self-isolate on their return home. Since 28 July, fully vaccinated arrivals from EU amber list countries have also not had to quarantine. As per other amber arrivals, they are still required to complete a pre-departure test, and a PCR test on or before Day 2 after arrival. (Separate rules apply to France due to its prevalence of the beta variant.). This is a big boost for our travel and tourism industry, and builds on efforts to enable people to demonstrate their vaccine status through the NHS app and inclusive letter solutions.

Border health measures at destination countries will be set by the receiving country and, where countries have different health measures for vaccinated passengers, this will enable people to prove their vaccine status.

With regard to the green watchlist, our allocation of countries is regularly reviewed and this includes countries potentially suitable for inclusion on the green watchlist. As regards moving green list countries straight to amber, we have been clear that we will act immediately if data shows that a country's risk ratings have changed, as our priority remains to protect public health. Countries may therefore move to different lists at pace, such as the swift action taken with Portugal following an almost doubling of its COVID-19 positivity rate since our first review of traffic light allocations.

Having introduced one of the most comprehensive packages of business support in the world, we are continuing to explore how best to support all sectors across the economy, including the travel and aviation industries. By the end of September 2021, the air transport sector (airlines, airports and related services) will have benefitted from approximately £7 billion of Government support since the start of the pandemic. This includes support through loan guarantees, support for exporters, the Bank of England's Covid Corporate Financing Facility and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), now extended to 30 September 2021. We have also brought forward a substantial package of financial support during the pandemic. The Budget included a £65 billion plan to provide support for jobs and businesses, with extensions to the CJRS, self-employed support, business grants, loans and VAT cuts bringing total fiscal support to over £352 billion.

Thank you, once again for writing, and I hope you and your Transport Committee colleagues find my response useful. Meanwhile, I am sure you all will join me in recognising the enormous effort and progress in tackling COVID-19 across the UK, and the importance of not undermining the hard work of those across the nation now.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huw Merriman', with a stylized 'H' and 'M'.

Mr Huw Merriman MP