



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From Maggie Throup MP
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Health*

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Dear Huw,

Thank you for your correspondence and I am happy to respond to your questions.

Concerning removal of the latest travel measures

In your correspondence you raised the issue of the travel measures. When we introduced additional travel measures as an emergency response to the Omicron variant, we promised that they would be temporary and that the aim of our red list was to delay the incursion and spread of Omicron in the UK. Following review of the latest data by cabinet ministers, we agreed to remove all countries from the red list from 15 December, as community transmission in the UK was rising rapidly and the number of cases being imported from the 11 countries on the red list was very low relative to our number of cases domestically. The red list has served its purpose in delaying the spread and seeding of the Omicron variant, however the time had come to roll back this measure.

Whilst the red list measures may no longer be proportionate, there remains a role for our baseline measures for travellers from all countries as we are now seeing Omicron importation from a wide range of countries, including our major travel partners. We therefore decided to retain the day 2 PCR test and pre-departure test requirements for all travellers. However, we have also committed publicly to review these measures on 5th January to ensure they remain proportionate.

Concerning the rationale for the latest travel measures

I would also like to set out the rationale for each of the measures we introduced and explain how they contribute to protecting the health of our country. Managed quarantine is the most effective public health measure in terms of preventing onward transmission of imported COVID-19 cases – it ensures very high compliance with quarantine and testing measures that are not seen if travellers are allowed to quarantine and test in their own accommodation. Testing requirements are important for red list travellers for variant surveillance purposes and to improve the efficacy of the quarantine period by identifying infected individuals.

We introduced pre-departure tests on 7 December because they can identify a significant proportion of people who are infected before travel, therefore protecting against transmission of infection within the travel corridor. The corridor is considered a high-risk environment for

transmission with significant dispersion effects across the country when travellers arrive and spread all over the country. This measure is also especially important given the emerging evidence that Omicron may have a shorter window between infection and infectiousness.

PCR tests on or before day 2 were brought in for all international arrivals from 30 November (in place of LFDs for those fully vaccinated with isolation until receipt of a negative result. Modelling suggests that Day 2 PCR testing identifies a significant proportion of positive arrivals. Removing the Day 2 PCR tests would significantly reduce sequencing coverage and therefore reduce our monitoring of the evolution and global spread of Omicron and other variants. Moreover, removing now the condition that people must isolate until they receive a negative Day 2 result would risk further omicron cases spreading into the community.

The combination of two tests for travellers within a 5-day window, pre and post arrival, and self-isolation until negative in the UK will help to continue to reduce the number of cases being imported and further seeded in the UK. We are likely to experience very high winter pressure on the NHS over the coming months – it is therefore crucial to do everything we can to flatten the infection peak during this period otherwise we risk overwhelming our health services, and travel testing will help contribute to this goal.

We remain committed to opening up travel in a safe and sustainable way and to provide confidence for travellers in the future. However, we have always made clear that we will not hesitate to act in response to serious threats to public health. We look forward to working closely with colleagues across government and industry to build back better from the pandemic.

Yours sincerely,



Maggie Throup

Minister for Vaccines and Public Health