



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From the Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care*

39 Victoria Street
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Irrelevant & Sensitive

Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP
First Minister, Scottish Government
Rt Hon Mark Drakeford
First Minister of Wales

07 December 2021

Dear Nicola and Mark,

COVID 19 – Omicron Response

Thank you for your letter of 29 November about working collectively and effectively to control the ingress and spread of the Omicron variant to the UK. I am writing to set out some further information explaining the UK Government's position and the steps being taken to ensure we are taking a response that is both measured and proportionate, protecting the UK from Omicron whilst allowing continued safe travel.

Measures to date have rightly focused on slowing the number of new variant cases entering the UK. We can continue to slow incursions to delay a rise in domestic cases. That's why over the weekend, in light of further data on the Omicron variant, a COVID Operations Committee meeting, which Scottish and Welsh Ministers attended, decided to reintroduce pre-departure tests for all arrivals aged 12 and over. A change I was pleased was agreed by all four of the UK's governments.

You have asked that a meeting of the COBR Committee be held as soon as possible. As with the decision on pre-departure testing, I share the principle that the devolved authorities have an important voice in discussion of measures we take in response to COVID.

The devolved administrations were also invited to participate in the COVID Operations Committee, convened on Thursday 25 November as soon as we were alerted to the significant potential risk to the UK from Omicron. While we learn more about Omicron, Ministers and officials will continue to speak regularly to their counterparts in the devolved administrations and will continue to co-ordinate with them regarding the Government's response, as I have done in my department.

I hope your meeting with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations on 1 December reassured you that the Government is committed to an intergovernmental approach to slow down the ingress and the spread of Omicron and to maximise the UK's defences.

We will continue to exchange information both within the UK and internationally on the changing epidemiology and as the variant's characteristics become clearer. The UK Health

Security Agency continues to monitor the situation closely, in partnership with scientific and public health organisations across the world and to monitor the broader public health situation closely.

In the meantime, we are taking temporary and proportionate action as a precaution while we learn more. From 6 December, Nigeria has been temporarily added to the red list bringing the total number of countries on the Red List to 11. Pre-departure testing will be mandatory for all arrivals into England aged 12 years and older regardless of vaccination status from Tuesday 7th December. Early case information suggests that the window between exposure to the virus and infection may be shorter for the Omicron variant, which may increase the efficacy of pre-departure testing as it is more likely to identify positive cases before travel. With this in mind we have also shortened the window so that the requirement is for all travellers to take a test at a maximum of 48 hours before their departure.

All Red List arrivals are required to quarantine in a managed quarantine facility for 10 days and take day 2 and day 8 PCR tests. We have re-instated Day 2 PCR tests for non-Red List arrivals and asked that they self-isolate until they receive a negative test. In addition to this, all unvaccinated arrivals are required to self-isolate for 10 days and take mandatory day 2 and day 8 PCR tests.

COVID has shown how the UK Government can work strategically and collaboratively with the devolved administrations to manage our response to the pandemic across the whole of the UK and I remain committed to continuing to do so. This is evidenced by the collaborative working between UKHSA and Scottish Government on the public health arrangements for COP 26 and the considerable amount of UK Government COVID support still available to businesses in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This includes:

- a reduced rate of VAT for tourism and hospitality - businesses in these sectors pay only 12.5% in VAT from 1 October until 31 March 2022, helping to support around 150,000 businesses and protect 2.4 million jobs UK-wide;
- continued access to Government-guaranteed finance for businesses across the UK, thanks to the extension of the Recovery Loan scheme to 30 June 2022; and
- an extra £12.6 billion in funding to your governments and the Northern Ireland Executive through the Barnett formula this year - including an extra £1.3 billion confirmed at the recent Autumn Budget - taking total block grant funding in 2021-22 to £77.6 billion so that you can provide support to individuals, businesses and public services across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have a strong track record of responding quickly, flexibly and comprehensively to support jobs, businesses, individuals and families across the whole of the UK.

We will continue to work with you as we learn more about the new variant in the coming weeks.

Our most important defence remains vaccines. To date, over twenty million UK citizens have received a third dose or booster vaccine, a pace we are only looking to build on. We will get a better understanding of Omicron in the next few weeks and whether it has a transmission advantage, vaccine escape, or sees and change in severity of infection, as we observe how the variant develops in southern Africa, the UK, and the rest of the world.

I am confident that the measures we are taking are balanced, responsible and proportionate to this threat, and I look forward to further close cooperation between the UK Government and devolved administrations.

Yours ever,

Personal Data

RT HON SAJID JAVID MP