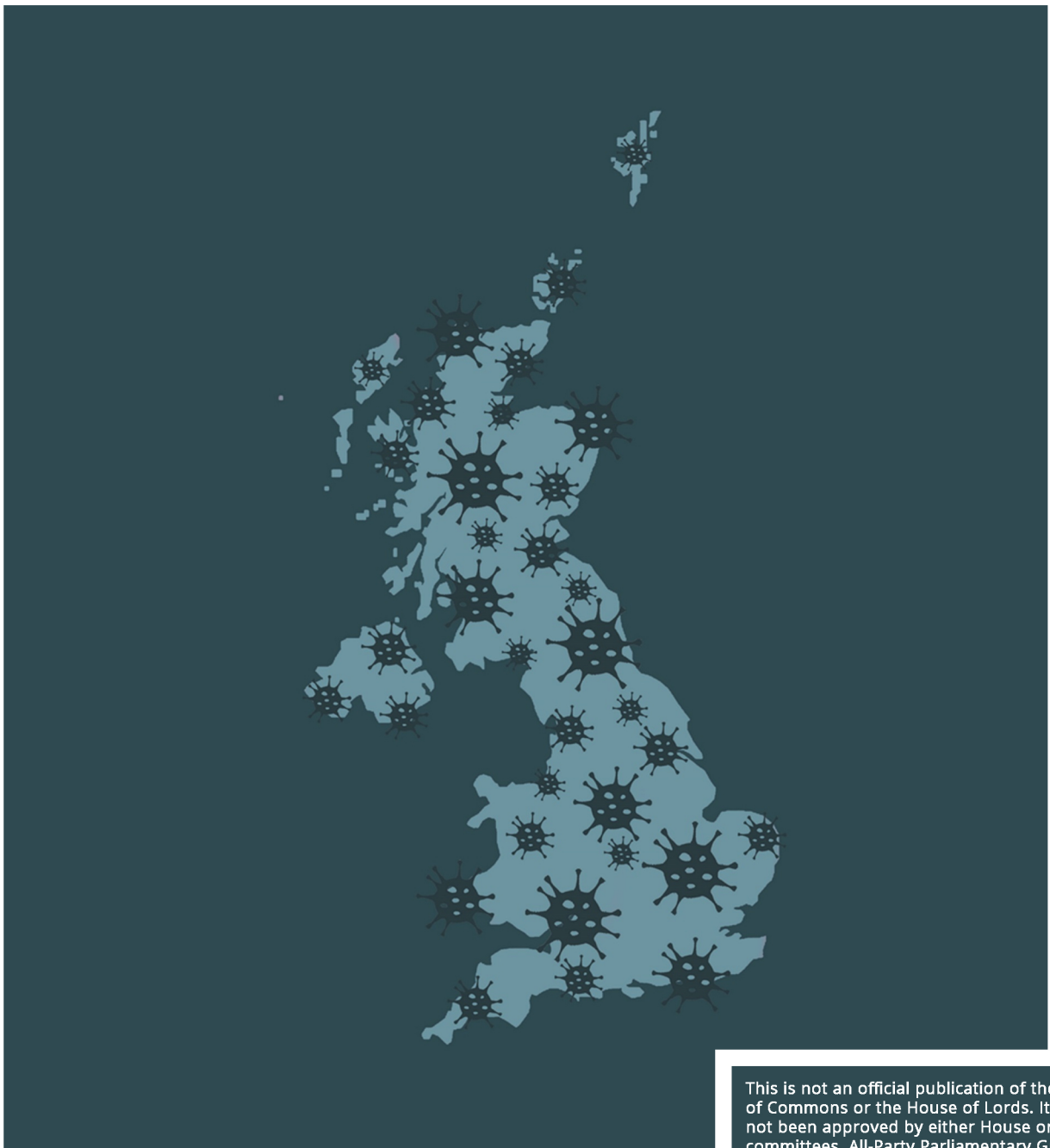




The All Party Parliamentary Group on **Coronavirus**

COVID-19 VARIANTS, INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AND UK BORDER POLICY - MAY 2021



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All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coronavirus

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coronavirus (APPG) was set up in July 2020 to conduct a rapid inquiry into the UK government's handling of the Coronavirus pandemic. Its purpose is to ensure that lessons are learned from the UK Government's handling of the Coronavirus outbreak to date and to issue recommendations to the UK Government so that its preparedness and response may be improved in future.

On 20th April 2021, the APPG heard troubling evidence on the subject of Covid-19 variants and international travel. The expert witnesses to the hearing warned of the significant risk that international travel poses. Notably, of those witnesses questioned in the hearing, none were prepared to travel internationally in the near future.

Above all, the evidence makes clear that international travel poses a significant risk of the importation of new Covid-19 variants, which may in turn lead to further lockdowns, and inevitably, further loss of life. The APPG is calling on the government to urgently implement our recommendations to ensure that the hard-won progress in tackling the virus is not lost and mistakes of the past are not repeated.

Parliamentarians in attendance:

Layla Moran MP (Chair)
Caroline Lucas MP
Dr Philippa Whitford MP
Lord Strasburger
Baroness Masham
Barbara Keeley MP
Lord Russell
Dr Lisa Cameron MP
Baroness Finlay

Evidence provided from:

Professor Deenan Pillay
Professor Jon Deeks
Dr Stephen Griffin
Professor Lawrence Young
Lucy Moreton, Immigration Services
Union
Dr Gabriel Scally

Recommendations

1. The UK government should discourage all international leisure travel to prevent the importation of new variants into the UK, in order to reduce the risk of a third wave and further lockdowns. The UK government must also provide adequate financial support to businesses operating in the travel industry. This recommendation should be implemented immediately and reviewed on a quarterly basis.
2. In the interim and going forward where essential international travel is necessary, the UK government should improve Covid security in arrival halls at all UK entry points, including airports, ports and international train stations.
 - a. Arrival halls should not mix passengers from red, amber or green list countries. Arrival halls must be equipped with ventilation and adequate space to social distance for the duration of time spent in the arrival hall.
 - b. The UK government should not delay the addition of countries to the 'red list'. Both where 'variants under investigation' and 'variants of concern' are identified, countries with such variants should be added to the 'red list' and quarantine rules should come into force with immediate effect.
 - c. As far as possible, documentation should be verified in advance of arriving in arrival halls, allowing travellers to board transport to quarantine facilities rapidly upon arrival.
3. The UK government should lead calls for an international standard for proof of negative Covid-19 test and/or proof of vaccination. Doing so will improve the ability to detect fraudulent Covid-19 test and/or vaccine certifications. It is not acceptable that fraudulent documents are currently identified only through minor errors.
4. The UK government should maintain funding for international research projects assisting the global fight against Covid-19, including those which support the genomic analysis and tracking of new Covid variants in other countries.

Key findings

1. International travel poses a significant risk to the UK in its efforts to control the spread of Covid-19. The current UK government strategy to mitigate the risk of imported variants is insufficient.
 2. Arrival halls at UK entry points risk becoming a 'breeding ground' for infection.
 3. UK Border Force staff identify over 100 fraudulent Covid certificates each day at UK entry points
 4. The number of cases variants, such as the Indian variant, could be 10 to 20 times higher than official data suggests
 5. Funding to international research projects assisting the fight against Covid-19 has been reduced, including those which support the genomic analysis and tracking of variants.
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1. International travel poses a significant risk to the UK in its efforts to control the spread of Covid-19. The current UK government strategy to mitigate the risk of imported variants is insufficient.
 - 1.1 Dr Gabriel Scally: *"I can't see anything that is particularly bio-secure at all about [current travel arrangements]. We don't know necessarily where someone starts their journey, where they may have transmitted the virus, what transport they have used to get to particular places and I think this is a particular problem in a holiday season, as we are heading into, with people going to holiday destinations which will be an international mixing pot by definition. Whether a country is green or red, to me as a public health doctor, I am not interested in that, I am interested in managing the isolation of people arriving from abroad at this time".*
 - 1.2 Professor Deenan Pillay: *"Whilst we are getting a bit fixated on whether we are green, amber or red zones around the world, it seems that by far the biggest risk is just travel full stop. The system is very leaky, but the process of travel is itself a high-risk activity".*

2. Arrival halls at UK entry points risk becoming a 'breeding ground' for infection.

- 2.1 The APPG heard that it is "not possible to segregate people from red, amber and green" list countries in arrival halls.
- 2.2 Lucy Moreton (Immigration Services Union): *"Even if we separate that one risky passenger out at some point in that journey, my understanding is that transmission could have occurred at any point. So, we are not truly isolating that risk. When it is so slow and the queues are so bad, then absolutely it is a significant risk both to our members, the Border Force staff, and to the travellers that are standing in those queues."*
- 2.3 There are significant queues arrival halls at UK entry points, despite current traveller numbers being very low.
- 2.4 There is insufficient space and ventilation within arrival halls in order for arriving passengers to social distance. Though there is air-conditioning, there must be improved ventilation and capacity for social distancing.
- 2.5 The APPG heard evidence that where countries are added to the 'red list', there should not be an extended period of time before government-managed quarantine rules come into force. Doing so encourages travellers to enter the UK before the need to quarantine is enforced. Consequently, *"flights will be as full as they possibly can be, with people who would have come here anyway doing it in advance to try and avoid the hotel quarantine. The more notice that you give of that change, the more people that will flood in"* (Lucy Moreton).
- 2.6 Professor Deenan Pillay: *"People are queuing for hours and hours and then going off to their amber or red quarantine. It makes a nonsense of things".*

3 UK Border Force staff identify over 100 fraudulent Covid certificates each day at UK entry points

- 3.1 Border Force staff identify fraudulent Covid certificates through the manual spotting of minor errors such as spelling mistakes. The biosecurity of the UK should not be left to the identification of errors in documentation.

- 3.2 Lucy Moreton (Immigration Services Union): *"It is predominantly taken on trust. We do get 100 or more a day, of fake Covid certificates that we catch, we catch them if there is a spelling error in it somewhere. They have to be in one of four languages. If it is in English and there is a spelling error, you've got an outside chance of spotting it. If you happen to speak one of the other four languages and you can spot a spelling error, then you might see that as well. Otherwise, they are taken at face value"*

4 The number of cases variants, such as the Indian variant, could be 10 to 20 times higher than official data suggests

- 4.1 Only 5-10% of PCR tests are sent to laboratories for further analysis and detection of variants.
- 4.2 Dr Gabriel Scally: *"[variants] are not detected on the PCR test at first go. There is further analysis needed on those tests, which takes some time. Also, that analysis is only carried out on about 5-10% of those PCR tests. So, for those 77 there could easily be another, that might be the 10% or the 5% that they have actually found, if that is a representative sample of the PCR tests have been taken. You can see the problem there. It is this issue about how we continually try to play catch up with this. That is a losing game. This virus moves so fast and changes so fast"*.

5. Funding to international research projects assisting the fight against Covid-19 has been reduced, including those which support the genomic analysis and tracking of variants.

- 5.1 Professor Lawrence Young testified that removing funding is directly impacting, in real-time, the ability to support genomic sequencing in countries such as India (where fewer than 1% of cases are sequenced).
- 5.2 In addition, the APPG received written evidence that cuts to the Overseas Development Aid budget has impacted a research project funded under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which was helping to track Covid variants in India and Bangladesh. The funding for this project has been cut by 70%.



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www.appgcoronavirus.marchforchange.uk