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THE PRIME MINISTER

23 November 2020

Dear Colleagues

I am writing to provide you with an update on the Government's response to COVID-19.

This afternoon, I set out the Government's COVID-19 Winter Plan to Parliament. For the first time since this wretched virus took hold, we can see a route out of the pandemic. We have seen breakthroughs in treatment, testing and vaccines. By the Spring, these advances should reduce the need for the restrictions we have endured in 2020 and render the whole concept of a COVID lockdown redundant. When that moment comes, it will have been made possible by the sacrifice of millions across the United Kingdom.

First, we must get through Winter without the virus spreading out of control and squandering our hard-won gains, at exactly the time when the burden on our NHS is always greatest. The Government's Winter Plan is designed to carry us safely to Spring.

In recent weeks, families and businesses in England have, once again, steadfastly observed nationwide restrictions and they have managed to slow the growth of new cases and ease the worst pressures on our NHS. I can therefore confirm that national restrictions in England will end on 2 December. From next Wednesday people will be able to leave their home for any purpose; collective worship, weddings and outdoor sports can resume; and shops, personal care, gyms and the wider leisure sector can reopen.

Without sensible precautions we would risk the virus escalating into a Winter or New Year surge. The incidence of the disease is still widespread in many areas, so we will return to a regional tiered approach, applying the toughest measures where COVID-19 is most prevalent. These will be a uniform set of rules, without negotiations on additional measures in each region.

I know colleagues had concerns about the original system. The Government has listened to those concerns and changed the tiers in substantive ways. For example:

- The 10pm closing time for hospitality has been modified to last orders at 10pm and closing time at 11pm. This allows customers to depart in a staggered way and provides greater flexibility.
- Spectator sport can now resume outside with capacity limits and social distancing, providing more consistency with indoor performances in theatres and concert halls.

There are areas of consistency across all three tiers:

- Across all tiers, places of worship will be able to remain open.
- Across all tiers, all personal care (including hairdressers and nail salons) and non-essential retail will be able to remain open and operate in a COVID-19 secure way.
- Gyms will also be able to remain open throughout the tiers.
- Outdoor sports, like tennis and golf, can also now resume subject to social contact limits in each tier (i.e. T1 = 6 people, T2 = 6 people outside, household only inside, T3 = household only). Organised sport such as tennis club tournaments, as well as U18s and disability sport, can continue in larger numbers.

While the previous local tiers cut the R number, they were not quite enough to reduce it to below 1. The scientific advice was therefore to strengthen the tiers, which the Government has done:

- In tier 1 people should work from home wherever possible.
- In tier 2 alcohol may only be served in hospitality settings as part of a substantial meal.
- In tier 3, indoor entertainment, hotels and other accommodation will have to close, along with all forms of hospitality, except for delivery and takeaways.

Later this week we will announce which areas will fall into which tier, based on analysis of five key indicators:

- case detection rates in all age groups;
- case detection rates in the over 60s;
- the rate at which cases are rising or falling;
- positivity rate (the number of positive cases detected as a percentage of tests taken); and
- pressure on the NHS, including current and projected occupancy.

The Government will need to maintain some flexibility to weight these indicators against each other as the context demands. For example, hospital capacity in a given area will need to be considered in the light of the capacity in neighbouring areas. Given sensitivities, it is not possible to set rigid thresholds for these indicators as doing so would result in poorer quality decisions. The Government will, however, be transparent about the decisions it takes and make the evidence informing the decisions available. The movement of areas between tiers will also be informed by broader economic and practical consideration such as the anticipated movement of individuals between areas.

I am sorry to say we expect that more regions will fall – at least temporarily – into higher levels than before. However, together with rapid turnaround tests, it should be possible for areas to move down the scale to lower levels of restrictions.

By maintaining the pressure on the virus, we can also enable people to see more of their family and friends over Christmas. In a period of adversity, time spent with loved ones is even more precious for people of all faiths and none. We are working with the Devolved Administrations on a special, time-limited Christmas dispensation, embracing the whole United Kingdom. However, Christmas will not be normal this year and we must seek to minimise the risk - we do not want the virus to flare up once again, forcing us all back into lockdown in January. Families will need to make a careful judgement about the risk of visiting vulnerable or elderly relatives. We will be publishing guidance for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable on how to manage the risks in each tier, as well as over Christmas.

As we strive to suppress the virus with local tiers, two scientific breakthroughs will ultimately make these restrictions obsolete. The most hopeful advance of all is how vaccines are edging ever closer to liberating us from the virus, demonstrating emphatically that this is not a pandemic without an end. As soon as a vaccine is approved, we will dispense it as quickly as possible. Today we heard that the vaccine developed with astonishing speed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca is now one of three capable of delivering a period of immunity. We cannot yet know when these will be fully ready and licensed, however we have ordered 100 million doses of the Oxford vaccine, and over 350 million in total, more than enough for everyone in the UK, the Crown Dependencies and our Overseas Territories. The NHS is preparing a nationwide immunisation programme, to begin next month.

In the meantime, we will use rapid turnaround testing - giving results within 30 minutes - to identify those without symptoms so they can isolate and avoid transmission. We are beginning to deploy these tests in our NHS and in care homes in England. By the end of the year this will allow every care home resident to have two visitors, who can be tested twice a week. Care workers looking after people in their own homes will be offered weekly tests from today. From next month, weekly tests will also be available to staff in prisons, food manufacturing, and those delivering and administering COVID-19 vaccines. We are already using testing to help schools and universities stay open. Tests will also be offered to as many students as possible before they travel home for Christmas, on a targeted basis. This will provide further reassurance that where students test negative, and self-isolate if they test positive, they can return home safely and minimise the risk of passing COVID-19 on to their loved ones.

Together with NHS Test and Trace and our fantastic Armed Forces, we will also now launch a major community testing programme, offering all local authorities in tier 3 areas in England a six-week surge of testing. This follows the example of Liverpool, where in the last two and a half weeks over 200,000 people have taken part in community testing, contributing to a substantial fall in infections. If this approach works, we should be able to offer those who test negative the prospect of fewer restrictions and those towns and regions which engage in community testing will have a much greater chance of easing the rules they currently endure.

We will also use daily testing to end automatic isolation for close contacts of those found positive. Beginning in Liverpool later this week, contacts who are tested every day for a week will only need to isolate if they themselves test positive. If successful, this approach will be extended across the health system next month, and to the whole of England from January. We are working with the Devolved Administrations to ensure that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also benefit from these advances in rapid testing.

I know many colleagues will have questions on how these measures will impact their constituents, and we are committed to ensuring you have the opportunity to scrutinise the data and ask questions of the experts. Colleagues will also be able to vote on these measures and, if passed, the new regulations on tiers will come into effect at 00.01 on Wednesday 2 December.

2020 has been a tragic year; this will be a hard Winter; Christmas cannot be normal; and there is a long road to the Spring. However, we have turned a corner and the escape route is in sight. We must hold out against the virus until testing and vaccines reduce the need for restrictions. Everyone can help speed up the arrival of that moment by continuing to follow the rules, getting tested and self-isolating when instructed, remembering hands, face and space, and pulling together for one final push to the Spring, when we have every reason to hope and believe that the achievements of our scientists will finally lift the shadow of the virus.

You can find more information at the following links:

- www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-winter-plan
- www.gov.uk/guidance/local-restriction-tiers-what-you-need-to-know

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Boris Johnson', written in a cursive style.

All Peers and MPs