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THE PRIME MINISTER

19 December 2020

Dear Colleagues

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

The latest data shows the virus spreading more rapidly in London, the South East and the East of England than would be expected given the tough restrictions which are already in place. It appears this spread is now being driven by the new variant of the virus.

The Government's advisory group on New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats – NERVTAG – has spent the last few days analysing the new variant. There is no evidence the variant causes more severe illness or higher mortality, but it does appear to be passed on significantly more easily. NERVTAG's early analysis suggests the new variant could increase R by 0.4 or greater. Although there is considerable uncertainty, it may be up to 70% more transmissible than the old variant. I was informed of this early data yesterday afternoon. Whilst this is initial analysis, subject to review, we have to act on information as we have it because this new variant is spreading very fast.

The UK has by far the best genomic sequencing ability in the world, which means we are better able to identify new strains like this than any other country. The Chief Medical Officer last night submitted our findings so far to the World Health Organisation and we will continue to be totally transparent with our global partners. There is no evidence to suggest the vaccine will be any less effective.

Our experts will continue their rapid work to improve our understanding of the variant. The Government has worked swiftly to agree the following actions:

First, we will introduce new restrictions in the most affected areas – specifically those parts of London, the South East and the East of England which are currently in Tier 3. These areas will enter a new Tier 4, which will be broadly equivalent to the national restrictions which were in place in England in November.

That means:

- Residents in those areas must stay at home, apart from limited exemptions set out in law.
- Non-essential retail, indoor gyms and leisure facilities, and personal care services must close.
- People must work from home if they can, but may travel to work if this is not possible, for example in the construction and manufacturing sectors.
- People should not enter or leave tier 4 areas, and tier 4 residents must not stay overnight away from home.
- Individuals can only meet one person from another household in an outdoor public space.

Unlike the November national restrictions, communal worship can continue to take place in Tier 4 areas. These measures will take effect from the morning of Sunday 20 December. All tiers will continue to be regularly reviewed in line with the approach previously set out, with the next formal review point on 30 December.

Secondly, the Government is issuing new advice on travel. Although the new variant is concentrated in Tier 4 areas, it is nonetheless present at lower levels around the country. We are therefore asking everyone, in all Tiers, to stay local. People should carefully consider whether they need to travel abroad and follow the rules in their Tier. Those in Tier 4 areas will not be permitted to travel abroad apart from limited exceptions, such as for work purposes.

Thirdly, we have had to look again at Christmas. Given the early evidence on this new variant of the virus, and the potential risk it poses, we cannot continue with Christmas as planned. In England, those living in Tier 4 areas should not mix with anyone outside their own household at Christmas, though support bubbles will remain in place for those at particular risk of loneliness and isolation. Across the rest of the country, the Christmas rules allowing up to three households to meet will now be limited to Christmas Day only, rather than the five days as previously set out. As before, there will be no relaxation on 31 December, so people must not break the rules at New Year.

I know how much emotion people invest in this time of year, and how important it is for grandparents to see their grandchildren, and for families to be together and therefore how disappointing this will be. Throughout this pandemic we have

been guided by the science and adapted our response accordingly. Without action, the evidence suggests infections would soar, hospitals would become overwhelmed and many thousands more would lose their lives. We are not alone in this fight – many of our European friends and neighbours are being forced to take similar action. We are working closely with the devolved administrations to protect people in every part of the UK.

The prospect of our final victory over the virus is growing with every day that passes and every vaccine dose administered. The UK was the first country in the western world to start using a clinically approved vaccine. So please encourage your constituents, when contacted by the NHS, to get the vaccine – and join the 350,000 people across the UK who have already had their first dose.

Christmas will be very different this year, but we must be realistic. We are sacrificing our chance to see loved ones this Christmas, so we have a better chance of protecting their lives so we can see them at future Christmases.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Boris Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

All Members of Parliament and Peers