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THE PRIME MINISTER

4 January 2021

Dear colleague,

This evening I delivered a national address to update the public on our response to COVID-19.

Since the pandemic first hit last year, the whole country has come together in a great national effort to fight COVID-19. After months of hard work, it seemed that our collective efforts were working, as communities fought to bring the virus under control. It has therefore felt both frustrating and cruel to see the alarming speed with which the new variant is spreading. Our scientific advisors have confirmed that the new variant is between 50 and 70 per cent more transmissible. This means that people are much more likely to catch the virus and spread it.

As a result, our hospitals are now under more pressure from COVID than at any time since the start of the pandemic. In England, the number of COVID patients in hospitals has increased by nearly a third in the past week, to nearly 27,000, 40 per cent higher than the first peak in April. On 29 December 2020, more than 80,000 people tested positive for COVID across the UK - a new record. The number of deaths is up by 20 per cent over the last week and will sadly rise further as the most recent infections feed through. It is clear we need to do more, together, to bring this new variant under control whilst vaccines are rolled out.

As I set out this evening, although most of the country is already under strict measures, further action is needed if we are to bring this new variant under control whilst vaccines are rolled out. We must therefore go into a national lockdown which is tough enough to beat the virus. Parliament will meet on Wednesday to debate and vote on the new measures I have announced for England - but we cannot and should not delay their implementation. The regulations will come into force 00.01 Wednesday, remaining in force subject to MPs approval.

The law will set out that people must stay at home, and only leave home where necessary for specific reasons:

- To shop for basic necessities for themselves or a vulnerable person;
- To go to work, or provide voluntary or charitable services if they cannot reasonably do so from home;
- To exercise with their household (or support bubble) or one other person, (limited to once per day, and should not involve travelling outside the local area)
- To meet their support bubble or childcare bubble where necessary, but only if they are legally permitted to form one;
- To seek medical assistance or avoid injury, illness or risk of harm (including domestic abuse);
- To attend education or childcare - for those eligible.

The full details of what people can and cannot do are available on www.gov.uk.

We are also advising the clinically extremely vulnerable to begin shielding again. They should stay at home as much as possible, and leave only for exercise, health appointments, or if essential to do so.

Furthermore, because we must do everything we possibly can to stop the spread of the disease, primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges across England must move to remote provision from tomorrow, except for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Early years settings may stay open for all children. I recognise that this will mean it is not possible - or indeed fair - for all exams this summer to go ahead as normal. The Education Secretary will work with Ofqual to put in place alternative arrangements. We will provide extra support to ensure that pupils entitled to free school meals will continue to receive them while schools are closed and we will distribute more devices to support remote education.

I recognise that this will cause distress and inconvenience for millions of parents and pupils up and down the country and I am truly sorry for this. We have been doing everything in our power to keep schools open, because we know how important education is to children's life chances. I want to again stress that the problem is not that schools are unsafe for children or teachers - children are still very unlikely to be severely affected by even the new variant of COVID. The problem is that the latest data suggests it is simply not possible to keep the new variant at bay across the whole country while schools remain open in some areas.

There is always a chance that the evidence is wrong; but with the four Chief Medical Officers today advising that the country should move to alert level 5 - indicating NHS capacity may be "overwhelmed" within 21 days - we cannot take that risk.

Of course, there is one huge difference compared to previous lockdowns: we are now rolling out the biggest vaccination programme in our history. So far in the UK we have vaccinated more people than the rest of Europe combined. With the arrival today of the UK's own Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, the pace of vaccination is accelerating.

Today, I set out our realistic expectations for the vaccination programme in the coming weeks. If rollout progresses as we expect, by the middle of February, in England, we expect to have offered the first vaccine dose to everyone in the four top priority groups identified by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which is:

- All care home residents and staff;
- Everyone over the age of 70;
- All frontline NHS staff and care workers; and
- Everyone on the NHS shielding patient list because they are clinically extremely vulnerable.

If we succeed, we will have offered some protection to the most vulnerable and our vaccination programme will eventually remove huge numbers of victims from the virus' path and enable us to remove many of the restrictions we have all endured for so long.

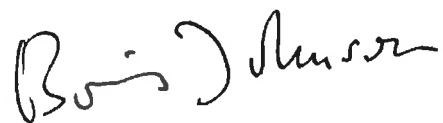
Inevitably, there will be a time lag before the pressure on the NHS is lifted - and we must remain extremely cautious about the timetable ahead. However, if our understanding of the virus does not change dramatically once again; if the rollout of the vaccine continues to be successful; if deaths start to fall as the vaccine takes effect; and, critically, if everyone plays their part by following the rules; then I hope we can steadily move out of lockdown, reopening schools after the February half term and starting, cautiously, to move regions down the tiers.

I truly do understand how tough this is; but now more than ever, we must pull together and follow the rules. I would like to again pay tribute to the wonderful staff in our NHS and in the social care sector, who are working tirelessly to protect the vulnerable and save lives.

I know that the First Minister of Scotland, the First Minister of Wales, and the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland all share my conviction that this is a pivotal moment and their Administrations are taking similar steps.

The weeks ahead will be the hardest yet but I really do believe we are entering the last phase of the struggle. Thanks to the miracle of science, not only is the end in sight but we know exactly how we will get there.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Boris Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.