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THE PRIME MINISTER

9 October 2020

Dear Lord Patel,

Thank you for your letter of 23 July 2020 about your Committee's ongoing inquiry into the science of COVID-19 and for sharing your interim findings and recommendations.

As you set out, winter is a critical time where, like other respiratory viruses, COVID-19 might resurge. The Government is committed to taking whatever action is necessary as swiftly as possible to reduce levels of infection consistent with minimising further costs to the economy and keeping pupils and students in education. The Government is working across all four nations to deliver an effective response to the pandemic as we set out in the recent joint statement.

1. Reducing levels of infection

The Government has been planning and preparing actively for the potential impact of COVID-19 infections during the coming winter. Departments have been given clear scenarios to inform planning for winter and significant planning is underway right across Government. Our planning includes a series of exercises instigated to test preparedness of plans against these scenarios and operational planning for the winter.

To prepare the National Health Service (NHS) for winter, the Government is providing an additional £3 billion, which includes funding to allow the NHS to maintain the Nightingale surge capacity and to continue to use the extra hospital capacity available within the independent sector. NHS winter preparations include delivering a very significantly expanded seasonal flu vaccination programme for priority groups. We have also made significant strides in our Test and Trace service and have established one of the world's largest testing programmes with a testing capacity of over 306,173 tests a day (as of 7 October). By the end of October we will be able to conduct half a million tests a day.

Effective local management of any outbreaks is the first line of protection against a second wave. We have always said that there would be local outbreaks requiring local action and, sadly, that there are likely to be some necessary restrictions on all our freedoms for some time to come, with this a necessary feature of our lives to protect the NHS and our citizens.

In terms of the Government's ambition on reducing the level of infections, the UK Government, together with the Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Government and Welsh Government, last week reaffirmed in a joint statement our shared commitment to suppressing the virus to the lowest possible level and to keeping it there, while we strive to return life to as normal as possible for as many people as possible and that our policy decisions should be consistent with this objective. What this means in practice is taking action to stop an exponential increase that could overwhelm our health services with the aim of bringing 'R' back below 1 while minimising the impact on the economy and society.

2. Testing

Testing capacity has risen to 306,173 per day as of 7 October. The Government recognises the need for regular testing of those in high-risk environments, and we are issuing more than 100,000 tests a day to care homes across the country, prioritising those in outbreak areas. We are also testing hospital patients, including all admissions, and allocating tests to NHS workers and to teachers. We are targeting testing to manage outbreaks in high-risk settings such as closed residential settings or higher-risk workplaces, and where there are areas of high incidence, we make more tests available. We also recognise the need to ensure tests are available to those presenting COVID symptoms and we are continuing to build testing capacity, which we expect to accelerate.

As part of the drive to reach a testing capacity of 500,000 per day by the end of October, which we are on track to deliver, the Government has announced the addition of new Lighthouse laboratories in Newcastle, Bracknell, Newport and Charnwood to the national lab network, and work is ongoing to expand the UK's laboratory capacity even further over the coming months. This rapid expansion of testing capabilities has led to the creation of the largest network of diagnostic testing facilities in British history. In addition, and as I announced on the 10 September, the Government is working to create a mass testing system, which would allow us to identify people who do not have coronavirus and who are not infectious - so that we can allow them to behave in a more normal way, in the knowledge they cannot infect anyone else.

3. National and local public health leadership

The Government is working with local authorities and other community partners to minimise the risk of local outbreaks occurring and, when they do occur, to respond swiftly and effectively to stop the spread of COVID-19. NHS Test and Trace is finalising a comprehensive integrated work plan to prepare for winter and implementing priority actions to ensure testing capacity, greater tracing reach and support for local containment are all in place in time for winter.

Local Authorities are provided with easy-to-use data and information so that they can make critical decisions in their areas. A dashboard of available testing and triage data can be used to monitor their areas for flare-ups of the disease. In order to ensure a concerted and coordinated local and national response to local outbreaks, we have introduced the COVID-19 contain framework to support local decision makers. National decision-making takes place through the Government's Local Action Committee command structure and local leaders are consulted by the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) before decisions are made. The Government has given Local Authorities powers to act quickly in response to local outbreaks by closing specific premises, shutting public outdoor spaces and cancelling events. In addition, we have announced over £400 million for Local Authorities to help local communities develop and action plans to reduce the spread of the virus in their area. Over £317 million of this funding has been allocated already. An additional £60 million has been announced to support extra enforcement activity by local authorities and the police, on top of funding that has already been awarded. We are also working with Local Authorities to deploy testing to meet local needs and respond to outbreaks. They will work closely with the test and trace service, local NHS and other partners to achieve this. To expand our contact tracing reach, we are working with Local Authorities to give them a greater role in contact tracing, particularly for hard-to-reach cases, building on the existing role of local public health teams in managing complex cases (such as in care homes and hospitals).

4. Transparency, openness and responsibility

The Government Office for Science releases SAGE minutes and evidence into the public domain on GOV.UK on a regular basis for transparency purposes, subject to any necessary permissions by authors and or any data owners, when they are no longer under live consideration for policy decision. In addition, a wide range of datasets are published from the JBC and Public Health England (PHE), including the public coronavirus dashboard which contains data on testing, cases, healthcare and deaths available to the public, laboratory reports and guidance. All upper tier local authorities have access to record level test and case data. Directors of public health also receive fully identifiable test, case and contact tracing data

on a daily basis to support their outbreak management responsibilities. To provide a new approach to public health protection and resilience, the Government announced the formation of the National Institute of Health Protection (NIHP) on the 18 August. It brings together the expertise of PHE, the response capabilities of NHS Test and Trace and the analytical capability of the JBC to put us in the best possible position and shape for the next stage of the fight against COVID-19. In England, decisions on the Government's strategic response to COVID-19 are taken by the Cabinet, supported by the COVID-19 Strategy Cabinet sub-committee, which I chair, with the policy and operational response led by the COVID-19 Operations sub-committee, chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

5. Public messaging

The Government recognises that the public require simple, coherent and consistent communications on the key behaviours required to reduce transmission. The "Hands, Face, Space" campaign was launched on the 9 September. This campaign focuses on the simplicity of the three essential behaviours, emphasising the principles of safe social contact and hygiene behaviours across all settings (indoors, outdoors, in education settings and in the workplace) with an enhanced emphasis on social contact where non-compliance is highest. The "Hands, Face, Space" campaign targets specific groups with tailored messages using a mix of channels to ensure we are reaching harder to engage audiences including young people aged 17-25. We are also ensuring all messages are localised and tailored to specific communities through local and alternative channels, including through community influencers. In addition, the 'Rule of 6' was also introduced to simplify the social contact rules, making them easier to understand for the public and for police to enforce. The Government recognises that in the event of a significant resurgence of the virus over the winter months, we will need to deliver messages that will require further changes in behaviour. The campaign allows scope to do this including the amplification of more stringent enforcement and compliance measures as and when these are required.

In addition, the Government has included information and awareness campaigns around the support measures in place, such as the £500 payment available to eligible individuals who are required to self-isolate and are unable to work as a result. We have worked to launch the NHSX Test and Trace App, which will provide information and instructions to those who may have been exposed to COVID-19. A nationwide Test and Trace App marketing campaign is launched to drive downloads and use. As of 8 October we have seen 16.55 million downloads, more than 8.55 million above our ambition of 8 million and we expect strong participation from the public through this medium.

It is crucial that we respond in a timely, agile way to tackle the pandemic and to ensure that scientific advice is factored into our decision making and the steps we take to ensure our swift recovery as a country. I welcome your report and I know Ministers across Government will be engaging with you constructively on this important issue as we continue to fight the pandemic over the coming months.

Yours sincerely
Rishi Sunak