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THE PRIME MINISTER

15 October 2020

Thank you for your letter of 13 October, for attending Monday's COBR(M) meeting, and for your attendance at the UK Winter summit with the First Minister of Scotland and First and deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland convened by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on Monday afternoon.

Across the UK, we share the same goals of giving the public a clear and simple message about what is required to reduce COVID incidence while minimising the impact on our economy and society, as we set out in the Joint Statement of 25 September. Our efforts need to be focused on those areas where incidence is highest. That is why I announced tougher measures in England for those areas now in the 'Very High' alert level. This is a shared challenge, and across the UK measures have been put in place that target those areas where incidence is highest, including the central belt in Scotland, several boroughs in North and South Wales, and yesterday's announcement of tighter measures across the whole of Northern Ireland. I am committed to working across all four parts of the UK as we strive to meet that challenge.

We must limit the spread of the virus across the UK, including by minimising transmission from areas of high incidence to those where it is lower. Our approach to local covid alert levels in England supports this aim. The guidance we have published for the 'Very High' level is absolutely clear - people should avoid travelling into or out of those affected regions so far as possible, other than for work or school. As I said in the House of Commons on Monday, the UK Government's stance is that people from those areas should not be travelling outside their area for holidays in other parts of the UK.

We have not chosen to regulate to give effect to the measures to restrict travel. Effective enforcement would be extremely difficult and resource-intensive. Further, placing the requirements in law across the multiple areas of England, with all of the requisite exemptions, would be complex - as SAGE have noted in their recently published paper on NPIs¹ - and bring with it additional complexities for both of us in terms of cross-jurisdiction enforcement.

In that context, I deeply regret your announcement yesterday that you intend to legislate to prevent people from other parts of the UK travelling into Wales. I understand our officials spoke about this issue on Tuesday. The paper appended to your letter does note the potential impact of imported cases. However it also indicates that at a certain level of incidence importation is less material than community transmission and is principally considering data from July and August since when the situation has moved on considerably. Our officials had suggested that it would be helpful to continue a dialogue to better understand the latest data and the impact on the border region in particular. I would be keen to understand how the situation has changed in response to the measures we have both taken over the past few weeks designed to slow the spread, and what more we may be able to do jointly to protect our population.

We share the same ambitions, yet as you said in your letter to me it would be far better for all four parts of the UK to act in concert. I agree, and will ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster urgently to convene a meeting with all the Devolved Administrations to consider this and what more we can do together to reduce the spread of the virus across the UK. I suggest our officials meet ahead of this meeting. We must avoid a situation where different areas within the UK impose conflicting restrictions on each other.

More broadly, I share your concern for making sure we can continue to support the people of Wales. That is why we have already been working with you to develop our testing capacity and capability, on the launch of the NHS Covid-19 App, and the extension of the UK Government's Job Support Scheme to help protect Welsh jobs and businesses for firms legally required to shut as part of local or national restrictions. Wales has also been guaranteed £4.4 billion in additional funding to your administration to support local health and devolved services this year to help respond to the challenges that Covid-19 presents.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/npis-table-17-september-2020>

I will continue to do whatever it takes to protect the entire UK. As ever, I offer my ongoing commitment to collaboration and alignment in decisions and approach across the UK wherever it is appropriate and possible to do so, and look forward to discussing this further.

Personal Data

The Right Honourable Mark Drakeford AM