



13 December 2020

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP  
The Prime Minister  
By email

Dear Prime Minister

### **Risk of a third wave of COVID-19**

On 16 December, your government will be reviewing the operation of the current three-tier system of restrictions. We write on behalf of the 216 NHS acute, ambulance, community and mental health trusts in England with three key requests ahead of your decision. First, to urge extreme caution in moving any area to a lower tier. Second, to move areas into Tier 3 as soon as this is needed, without any delay. Third, to urge you to personally lead a better public debate about the risks inherent in the guidance for 23-27 December.

We have spoken to a wide range of our members over the last three days. Whilst there are good signs of progress in some parts of the country, overall, the current trajectory is at the bottom end of the hopes and expectations they had a month ago.

### **Larger numbers of COVID-19 patients in hospital**

Evidence over the last fortnight shows that the rate of COVID-19 patients leaving hospital is considerably slower than it was in the first wave. In some areas, the numbers of COVID-19 inpatients is increasing. Taken together, this is placing significant pressure on hospital beds. The NHS had 500 COVID-19 patients in hospital beds at the beginning of September. As of Thursday 10 December, there were 13,000 hospitalised COVID-19 patients.

Over each of the last five winters, demand for NHS beds has significantly outstripped capacity. Yet we are now facing the extremely concerning prospect of the NHS having 10,000 fewer beds (9%) in operation than last year, due to infection control measures, and many thousands of the remaining beds occupied by COVID-19 patients.

### **Infection rates are, worryingly, increasing in some parts of the country**

#### **NHS Providers**

One Birdcage Walk, London SW1H 9JJ  
020 7304 6977

[enquiries@nhsproviders.org](mailto:enquiries@nhsproviders.org)  
[www.nhsproviders.org](http://www.nhsproviders.org)  
[@NHSProviders](https://twitter.com/NHSProviders)

Whilst infection rates have been dropping in many northern parts of the country, we are now seeing a worrying increase in infection rates across a wide range of areas, including Essex, Kent, London, and parts of Lincolnshire. It is particularly concerning that these increases come at the tail end of a second national lockdown.

Trust leaders have two concerns. First, that we may be seeing the spread of the high infection rates that we saw in the north of the country in September and October to the southern half of the country. Second, the evidence of the second wave suggests that unless infection rates fall to a very low level, as they did in London after the first wave, the virus will spread again quickly as soon as restrictions on social contact are relaxed. Trust leaders are worried that if infection rates remain as high as they are the moment, relaxing the restrictions will trigger a third wave.

Taking all of this into account, trust leaders are very worried about the task they face between late December and February as they try to balance:

- Large numbers of COVID-19 patients;
- Large numbers of emergency “winter pressure” patients, particularly if we have an extended period of the cold weather we have already started to see in some areas;
- Planned care, particularly cases delayed from the first phase that cannot wait any longer;
- The new demands of the vitally important COVID-19 vaccination work that trusts have started so successfully this week.

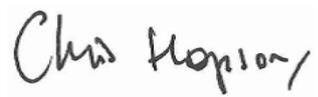
Trust leaders are convinced that the only way they can meet these demands is by controlling the level of COVID-19 infection and, hence, the number of hospitalised COVID-19 patients. Tight restrictions on social contact are the only current means of achieving this.

The evidence of the last fortnight, following Thanksgiving celebrations in the USA, is also very clear. A relaxation of restrictions on social contact, combined with the natural desire to celebrate a traditional festival, inevitably increases the spread of the virus. Whilst we are not, at this point, asking for a change in the proposed Christmas rules, we are concerned that the current public debate on these rules is ignoring the significant extra risk involved in this temporary relaxation.

The prevailing public perception is “thank goodness we can celebrate Christmas”. We believe it is vital for the public to understand that any extra social contact, particularly with those who are vulnerable to the effects of the virus, is risky and that they need to think very carefully before initiating such contact over the Christmas period.

Trust leaders recognise the very difficult trade-offs here, but we wanted to clearly impress upon you how worried trust leaders are on the basis of the evidence they have seen this week, as set out above. We are releasing a copy of this letter to the media.

Yours sincerely



Chris Hopson  
Chief Executive



Saffron Cordery  
Deputy Chief Executive

Tel: 020 7304 6805

Email: [chris.hopson@nhsproviders.org](mailto:chris.hopson@nhsproviders.org)