

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 21 December 2020

Good afternoon,

I want to update everyone on one thing and that's what's happening at our borders and especially at Dover.

Last night at 11pm the French Government imposed restrictions on UK freight crossing to France when accompanied by a driver.

And so today I chaired a meeting of the Government's emergency, COBR committee

in order to co-ordinate a UK-wide response.

And it is vital first to stress that these delays

– which are only occurring at Dover –

only affect human-handled freight,

and that is only 20 per cent of the total arriving from or departing to the European continent,

which means the vast majority of food, medicines and other supplies are coming and going as normal.

You may also be aware – in fact I'd be amazed if you weren't –

that the government has been preparing for a long time for this exactly kind of event.

So working with the Kent Resilience Forum, Kent County Council and Highways England,

we've activated our long-prepared plans,

with the result that we have already been able to reduce the number of lorries waiting on the M20 from 500 to 170.

The site at Manston Airfield is ready to cope with any overflow.

And, of course, we are working with our friends across the Channel to unblock the flow of trade as fast as possible.

The Government at all levels is communicating with our friends in Paris

I have just spoken to President Macron – we had a very good call – we both

understand each other's positions and want to resolve these problems as fast as possible.

I know that Grant is also speaking to his counterpart and we are working to a solution, as I say, as fast as we can

to allow freight traffic to resume between the UK and France,

and ensure that lorries can travel in both directions in a Covid-secure way.

I want to stress that we in the UK fully understand the anxieties of our friends about Covid, their anxieties about the new variant,

but it is also true that we believe the risks of transmission by a solitary driver sitting alone in the cab are really very low.

And so we hope to make progress as fast as we possibly can.

I want to repeat that these delays only apply to a very small percentage of food entering the UK,

and as British supermarkets have said, their supply chains are strong and robust,

so everyone can continue to shop normally.

And to our international friends and partners I want to say very frankly:

We understand your concerns,

And I hope that everybody can see that as soon as we were briefed as a government of the fast transmissibility of this new strain at about 3.15pm on Friday afternoon,

We lodged all the necessary information with the World Health Organisation

And we took prompt and decisive action the very next day to curb the spread of the variant within the UK.

And we want to work with our colleagues, with our friends around the world, as we have from the beginning to develop new treatments and new vaccines.

And today I can announce that half a million people in the UK have now received their first dose.

As we've seen throughout this pandemic, this virus alas can move all too swiftly from one nation to another,

But it is steadily being defeated by an international response

An international response that is bringing the hope of vaccines to the entire world,

And in that the UK will continue to play our full part.

I'll now handover to our Secretary of State, Grant.