Keir Starmer has escalated his criticism of Boris Johnson’s handling of the coronavirus crisis, with the opposition Labour party leader accusing the UK prime minister of ignoring an offer to forge a cross-party consensus on pupils’ return to school.

Sir Keir has until now acted cautiously in attacking the government and avoided personal criticism of Mr Johnson. But following the furore over the lockdown trip to the north of England by Mr Johnson’s chief adviser Dominic Cummings, Sir Keir told the prime minister to “get a grip” and accused him of “winging it”.

In their weekly exchange in the House of Commons on Wednesday at prime minister’s questions, the opposition leader revealed he had sent a private letter to Mr Johnson two weeks ago offering to work together to forge a consensus on schools reopening to more pupils. Sir Keir accused the prime minister of failing to respond.

“I have supported the government openly and I’ve taken criticism for it, but, boy, he has made it difficult to support this government over the last two weeks,” he said.
In response, Mr Johnson accused Sir Keir of “endless attacks” that were “undermining public trust and confidence” in the government’s strategy to defeat Covid-19. He added that they had spoken on the phone, although Labour officials said this had been only a general call with other party leaders.

Sir Keir also focused on Mr Johnson’s handling of the crisis in an interview with the Guardian, in which he claimed that the prime minister had made a difficult situation “10 times worse”.

“I am putting the prime minister on notice that he has got to get a grip and restore public confidence in the government’s handling of the epidemic,” Sir Keir told the newspaper. “At precisely the time when there should have been maximum trust in the government, confidence has collapsed.”

One official in Sir Keir’s inner circle said that Labour’s leader had changed his approach due to a “genuine sense of frustration over the last 72 hours” that the Johnson government was “ignoring its responsibilities”.

“We are putting down a marker that we won’t tolerate this casual attitude. They changed the shielding advice without telling NHS England. They didn’t respond to our schools letter. Numerous councils have been left in the dark on test, track and trace,” said another ally.

A Labour party official added: “We maintain our commitment to work together and there has been some success. We asked for a 24-hour target on testing and the PM accepted that today, for example. The same was true when we demanded an exit strategy from the lockdown.”

Sir Keir’s tougher approach to Mr Johnson adds to the growing unease about the prime minister’s handling of the crisis. The row over Mr Cummings’ actions, which broke the lockdown rules, has led to approval ratings dropping for both the Conservative party and Mr Johnson personally.

According to the pollster YouGov, the Conservative party is on 45 per cent, down from 48 per cent before the Cummings row. Meanwhile, Sir Keir’s personal ratings have surged above those of the prime minister. Pollsters Redfield and Wilton Strategies said last week the opposition leader’s net approval was 20 points, compared with minus 1 for Mr Johnson.
There are also indications that the row over Mr Cummings had dented public trust in the government’s lockdown policies. Health professionals have warned that the public could take a more lax approach to the lockdown following Mr Johnson’s decision to back his adviser, who travelled 264 miles across the country while exhibiting Covid-19 symptoms.

A YouGov survey published on Wednesday reported that one in five Britons said they were following lockdown rules less strictly than a week ago. A third of those who changed their attitude cited Mr Cummings’ behaviour and the prime minister’s backing as their reason.