

University challenge

The pandemic lockdowns have posed a series of difficult questions to universities. Today we live in a world where they have been told to go over to remote learning for all but a few courses like medicine and some other scientific areas that require laboratory and practical work in a specialist location.

There is first the issue of accommodation. Many students with or without help from parents have signed on for a year's rental in student accommodation. The students will not be able to use this and some are asking for rental reductions or cancellations of the agreements. Private landlords say they have to provide the facility whether the student uses it or not, pay any debt interest on the borrowings to own it, and meet service and utility charges to keep the building going. Some of the private landlords depend on the income from the letting to buy the basics and are not rich. Other private landlords are richer individuals or better financed companies or charities.

Some of the landlords are the Universities themselves, providing student accommodation on the main campus or owning properties nearby. They too may have taken on debts to build and own the housing and need revenue to pay the maintenance and utility bills.

The second issue is payments for tuition. Some students think there should be a discount or rebate for remote teaching. They argue that they agreed to tuition fees on the assumption of face to face teaching and lectures which are no longer available. The Universities reply that they still have the same staff on the same salaries and are providing teaching on line so the full tuition fee should still apply.

In a situation like this there is a tussle between the student, the University, the landlord and the state over should pay the bills. Where both students and university unite to say the state should subsidise, they are saying all taxpayers should make a contribution. This will include people who did not have the benefit of going to a university and people earning less than the student hopes to earn following graduation. The same may be true of smaller landlords, if they were expected to take some of the hit.

In many cases students are being told they have to pay for full tuition fees and accommodation even though they are living at home and learning on line. Do you think this is the right answer?

Education and lockdown

The decision to put the country back into lockdown ended the argument about

whether the schools should stay open. It also strengthened the position of all those who wanted to have another year without GCSE and A level exams. The Secretary of State who had been defending keeping schools open and exams in the summer had to announce an abrupt change of plan. Numerous matters now need to be sorted out as arguments continue over how much longer schools will remain closed.

The loss of exams is a blow. Whilst many teachers appraise their pupils professionally and give them realistic grades, the reliance on teacher grades contains at least three problems for the Examining Boards. The first is how do the Exam Boards ensure common standards throughout. Working with a limited number of Examiners and a marking scheme for exam answers makes this easier when using professionally moderated exams comparing with previous years. The second is how do you ensure a few teachers are not affected by the social skills and friendliness of the pupil which may not be the same as the work and talent on display. The third is how do you stop the natural process of wanting to do well and seeing the pressures on the school leading to Grade creep? Will there be surrogate school based tests and exams? What is the role of the mock exam? How much adult support and guidance is allowed for course work?

The loss of social contact and play with peers is a big loss for young children. They learn a lot from each other at school and need the challenge and stimulus of others of their age.

Have now all families in need been equipped with laptops or mobile devices that allow them to participate fully in remote learning? Have teachers been trained in offering good on line courses? What use is going to be made of bought in on line materials as opposed to teacher driven materials?

Roll out of the Covid-19 vaccine in Berkshire

I have received this update on the vaccine programme from the Berkshire West Integrated Partnership:

It's the biggest mass vaccination programme in the history of the NHS – and in Berkshire West the PPG groups have played a key role supporting the roll out of the Covid vaccine.

The PPGs' tireless work has meant this highly complex vaccination programme has been running smoothly since it started in December and that thousands of vulnerable people have received the ground breaking Pfizer vaccine.

The vaccine has undergone rigorous scientific assessments trials to guarantee it is safe, effective and of a high quality and clinical trials have also

been carried out on up to 50,000 people across the world aged between 18 to 84.

At the time of going to press PCNs across Wokingham North and South, Tilehurst, University, West Reading Villages and Reading West have started delivering the vaccine. GPs have identified suitable sites within their PCNs to administer the vaccinations, initially to patients over 80 and frontline health and care workers. The programme will be rolled out to other groups* over the next few months.

People are asked not to contact their GP surgery so that their practice team can focus on arranging the vaccinations and continue providing day-to-day support for all of their registered patients. You will be contacted when it is your turn to receive the vaccine.

Dr James Kennedy, Joint Clinical Director of the Wokingham North PCN, and a GP at Wargrave surgery said: "This is the biggest vaccination programme in NHS history and, thanks to some truly outstanding work done by our clinicians, support staff, PPG members and community volunteers, the roll out in our area has been achieved in a smooth and timely way.

"Many of the first patients we vaccinated hadn't left their homes for months and had extremely limited contact with other people, so for them it was a huge achievement to attend for their appointment. Their spirit and determination to get to our site was really remarkable. And many of them were very grateful for the way all our teams – the clinicians, surgery staff and volunteers – had rallied round to deliver the vaccine," he said.

Tony Lloyd, Chair of the Wokingham Area PPG Forum and Wargrave Surgery PPG member said "our team was led by Judith Stephenson-Hodges who liaised with practice staff, organised volunteer rotas and attended on all three days for the delivery of the first dose of the vaccines. We managed to vaccinate people at a rate of about 60 an hour in a very organised and safe way. This involved guiding them and their carers to be registered prior to assembling them in groups of five. From there a PPG member escorted them to the main surgery entrance for temperature checks prior to vaccination. Once they had received the vaccine, a volunteer and PPG member then escorted them to the observation lounge where they were asked to wait for 15 minutes before being discharged and escorted back to their cars.

"The system worked very well, thanks to the team work of everyone involved, and I think highlights the value PPGs bring to their surgeries," he added.

One of the Wargrave patients said: "We were happy to come for this vaccination. We wanted to show to others that it's safe and well run, so they will feel comfortable to come for the jab as well."

Over in Swallowfield, PPG representatives were out in force, directing traffic, accompanying patients and helping to oversee the booking-in systems.

Speaking on the first day, Finchampstead Dr Jane Spurgeon: "I can honestly say this morning was one of the highlights of my career, such a lovely

experience both team wise and patient wise. Thank you so much to everyone who played their part in delivering this. It was so exciting to think we're all involved in a little bit of 'making history'.

And volunteers were also out in force to guide and advise patients from Pangbourne's Boathouse Surgery and Chapel Row Surgery as they attended for their appointments.

Dr Abid Irfan, Chair of Berkshire West CCG said: "Whilst the vaccine offers our best defence against the virus, it's important to remember that it doesn't mean we can start to relax our attention to the hands, face, space regulations. I'd urge everyone to continue doing everything they can to comply with the Government's rules and play their part in helping to keep themselves and their families safe."

*The full list of groups to be prioritised for the vaccination is:

- Residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
- All those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
- All those 75 years of age and over
- All those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals
- All those 65 years of age and over. All individuals aged 16 years to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality
- All those 60 years of age and over
- All those 55 years of age and over
- All those 50 years of age and over

The vaccination is not recommended for some people:

- Anyone with a history of severe reactions or allergies
- Children (with some exceptions). The vaccine hasn't been tested in younger children yet
- Pregnant women. The vaccines have not yet been tested on pregnant women so this highly precautionary approach is being taken. Women should also not be vaccinated if they are planning a pregnancy within three months of the first dose. If a woman becomes pregnant between her first and second dose of the vaccination, then the second dose will be postponed until completion of the pregnancy.

[My speech during the debate on Public Health, 7 January 2020](#)

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham (Con)): I am very worried about the loss of

liberty. I am very worried about the economic damage. I am very concerned about all those small businesses that have been shut down, and their livelihoods undermined. I want the Government to introduce a more urgent, convincing exit strategy from these measures, and I think that we are owed more debates and more votes long before the end of March. We need to keep this under constant review, and keep up the pressure to take away those measures that are not strictly necessary or which can be superseded by something better.

I hope that the roll-out of the vaccine will go well and will be speeded up. I would like more information from the Government about why they are not currently using pharmacies, why it has taken so long to welcome back to the health service recently retired people who would like to help out, and whether there is going to be a plan to train suitable volunteers so that we can greatly extend the numbers of people administering the vaccine. It would also be helpful to know more about supplies.

We need to get smarter at dealing with the virus because, unfortunately, we will have to live with it for some months to come, however successful vaccination is. Will Ministers provide more information on medical progress with treatments? We had a great breakthrough in Britain with a steroid helping to reduce the death rate. There are many more things in trial—can we know more about that? Are there supplements that people can take to buttress their immune system and make it less likely that they get the virus, or is that a fiction?

Can we get better at isolating patients and protecting staff in isolation units or hospitals? Why do we not use the Nightingales as covid-19 secure specialist units to take away some of the cross-infection dangers from district general hospitals, and so they do not have the intensity of covid-19 treatment? Can we know more about the capacity of the health service, because there are differing views on how many beds could be made available should the covid-19 wave continue to deteriorate? Can we hear more on improving infection control?

What use are we making of intensive UV under suitably controlled conditions? What have we done to try to improve the cleaning of air recycling or air extraction promptly so that we reduce exposure of people in hospitals and other locations that we might wish to use to dirty air that could spread the disease? Above all, we need much more knowledge and information about the energy that is undoubtedly going into alternative treatments and better infection control. I would like to thank all those in Wokingham and the area who have done so much to help us during this difficult period.

US democracy

President Trump has failed to sustain a case of electoral fraud or miscounting. He was wrong to encourage protests on the day Congress met to ratify the result of the Electoral College votes.

The results of the two Senate run offs in Georgia will be highly significant. If both seats have been taken by the Democrats as the media claim the US will likely opt for a high spend higher tax strategy allied to a major decarbonisation drive. Expect plenty of drama from a 50/50 Senate.