

Time for Plan B

The decision of the Welsh devolved government to impose a wider ranging lockdown on an already scarred and weakened Welsh economy has made the contradictions and absurdities of too many controls more obvious. The supermarkets are told to tape up their shelves and fence off their aisles for so called non essentials. The devolved government stumbles over what is an essential. They defend their decision by saying that as they have closed non food specialist shops it would be unfair to let the supermarkets sell items the specialist shops cannot offer. There is no good answer when people point out that the policy will just lead to many more people buying the banned items on line, losing business not only to the specialist High Street shops but to the food shops of the high Street as well. How is that sensible?

The idea is that stopping more shopping will abate the spread of the disease, which then will allow relaxation of controls which on their analysis of course will lead to a further spread of the disease. How does that help? Why should the virus wait until after Christmas before it builds up again, if the plan is to relax a bit for Christmas. What proof is there that shopping spreads the disease anyway? People do not spend much time in the company of another person from outside their household in a supermarket. Air flows through stores of course need to help control the disease, and can do so.

As I argued in Parliament and put to the government, trying to change behaviour to contain the virus requires consent and co-operation from the public. There is no longer enough buy in to the detailed rules nor to Test and trace. The even more complex and wide ranging Welsh rules have met with a hostile response from many Welsh people, showing that the devolved government is losing support for these measures.

The U.K. government needs to learn from the Welsh experience. More needs to be done to encourage a business and jobs revival. There are many things that are being done and can be done to limit deaths. Improving treatments, safeguarding the vulnerable, improving ventilation and air flow in public buildings and improving infection control in health settings, can all help to get the death rate down. There are limits to how many detailed rules and controls government should seek to place on people generally, as government has reached the end of tolerance for the current degree of control let alone for tightening. People now want explanations of why and how a control will help or is necessary, and why it should continue.

It is time to put economic recovery higher up the priority list, and to go out to save many more livelihoods. There needs to be another drive to get more non CV 19 medical problems treated. We have to live with the virus, and do all we can to lower the death rates from CV 19 and from other killer medical problems without shutting down the economy or seeking to control everyone's social life and shopping habits..

Letter to the Business Secretary to get more back to work

Dear Alok,

It is imperative more is done to rescue and help businesses that rely on social contact. Too many companies in events, leisure, travel and tourism are badly damaged by anti CV 19 rules, and some remain completely closed.

One way forward which could provide urgent relief short of repealing the Controls that do the damage is to help businesses adapt their ventilation and heating systems to make them safer. There is plenty of research saying that if a restaurant, hotel, meeting room has a system for extracting stale air promptly and replacing it with clean air it can offer a safer environment. Extraction from the top and supply of new air from the bottom greatly cuts the spread of the virus and other contagions in the circulating air.

I understand your department is responsible for these policies for the public sector and has done work on suitable advice and shared technical research for the private sector. Will you now make this more public? Will you provide advice and where appropriate adaptation grants to business to get this done quickly for all who wish to go this way? Could there be a CV19 standard for air change which those who wished could reach, showing their certification to reassure customers? Will you lead the public sector in adapting government and Council buildings?

We must do more to save all those businesses. Best of all would be a clear exit plan from restrictions generally.

How should we live with and control CV 19?

Today I seek your views on how much economic sacrifice we should make to try to slow or delay the transmission of this disease.

It is clearly lethal for a minority who get the bad version of it, but no worse than flu or bad colds for many others. The Global death rate so far from it is 0.015% of the world population, and it seems to account for under 3% of deaths. Cardiovascular problems remain the prime killer. CV 19 is on track to kill a few more than road traffic accidents but ranks well below cancer and other lung infections.

It is good news that in its second wave in the Americas and Europe the death rate is much reduced. Treatments are better and maybe more younger people are getting it with much less risk of death. Some of the advisers think it is just a lag and deaths will rise as they did in the spring. That would every worrying.

So how much economic pain should we suffer to delay the spread of the disease? Is there a realistic exit through a vaccine to make the cost of delay a price worth paying, or will there just be another flare up as soon as we relax controls again?

I think the government needs to do more to save livelihoods and needs to remove those controls that have limited utility in defeating the virus but do considerable damage to jobs and business. Can we do more to help people most at risk protect themselves from it? Can we have isolation hospitals and high standards of infection control in all care homes and other health settings?

Saving the NHS

One of the main reasons given for the national lockdown earlier this year was to get the NHS ready to handle a wave of CV19 cases. They expanded the Intensive Care capacity substantially, putting in new Nightingale hospitals as part of the answer, increasing intensive care beds in existing hospitals and buying more ventilators.

To increase capacity further they cancelled all non urgent operations in main hospitals, took over the capacity of the private sector hospitals to undertake some non CV 19 work for them and were keen to move patients out of hospital as soon as possible after treatment.

Today some people are still worrying about NHS capacity. Of course we all pay tribute and say thanks to the dedicated staff who bore the brunt of the first wave of CV 19 in hospitals, gave diligent care and pioneered treatments to respond. By now I assume more have been trained to handle CV 19, and we see the good news that there are better treatments with the death rate falling substantially as a result

Today I would like to ask a crucial question.

What is now happening to NHS output for non CV 19 conditions? Ministers tell me the NHS is operating again as before for non pandemic conditions. Is it? What is your experience of access to non urgent treatments, and to treatments for serious conditions like heart attacks and cancer .

The NHS England/DHSS budget for 2020/21 was £148bn at the start of the year, up from £140bn the previous year by £8bn or 5.7%. The NHS had been offered an increase of £33bn by 2023/24 as part of a five year settlement to allow

growth and improvement. Special money to handle CV 19 has now added an additional £31.9bn to this year's total to provide protective clothing, to introduce Test and Trace, to buy in private sector capacity, increase ventilators and provide extra facilities in the Nightingales.

I am seeking information from government about how output in the NHS now compares with this time last year. We know there was a large dip in activity during the intense period of the CV 19 crisis in the spring. It would be good to know we are more than back to normal, given the backlog and the resource now being committed. It would also be good to know when we can stop paying for the private sector capacity as well.

How much rail capacity do we need?

The UK passenger railway had a big business running commuters into and out of cities for their work five days a week. Even after allowing for the discount element of the season ticket, these travellers were made to pay premium prices for their travel, as there was little by way of alternative for most of them. The roads were jammed and there were too few car parks at work to make the car an alternative for many.

The railway always complained that it was very costly having to provide so much rolling stock and so many staff for a couple of peak hours in the morning and another couple of peak hours in the evening. It was that peak volume which the railways said justified the high fares. In an attempt to fill the rolling stock the rest of the time and to pay staff wages for more than four hours a day the railway adopted heavily discounted fares to persuade people to undertake leisure, shopping and entertainment trips by train to use the empty carriages.

Today we still see a pattern of dear tickets at peak times, and cheap tickets at off peak across the network. If we take some longer journeys as examples we see

Standard single ticket London to Manchester off peak £33 peak £157

Standard single ticket London to Birmingham off peak £15.50 peak £74

The peak fare is around five times the off peak.

Today the talk is of a major change of future working even assuming an end to special CV 19 lock downs. Office workers look forward to going to the office two or three times a week instead of five times, and want to be offered flexible hours so they can switch to the old off peak. Many have discovered how much better off they are working from home and saving all that money on rail travel and expensive coffees.

If some of this comes to pass it requires revolution on the railways. It means a substantial reduction in numbers of travellers and a bigger reduction in fares revenue if charging policies are unaltered. The railway managements are talking about how their leisure business has picked up but this is largely heavily discounted tickets that come nowhere near paying the high fixed costs of the amount of rail travel being offered. They say it is very green, but creating more journeys on trains that otherwise would not have happened is not green but the opposite. Trying to run a railway around heavily discounted leisure use will leave a huge hole in railway finances. We cannot carry on for much longer with the current system of running 90% of pre pandemic services for maybe a third of the passenger numbers. It is unaffordable for taxpayers. When will the rail experts tell us what level of demand they think they can recapture and what fares they can charge in this new world.