

The role of Public Health England

Public Health England set out the strategy for handling this pandemic in a document published on 3 March as the "Coronavirus Action Plan". So far Ministers have followed it.

This body conducts important research into disease, is advised by a scientific advisory committee, and spends £4.25 bn a year. It is run by an Executive team with six people paid more than £200,000 last year including pension benefits.

Its last Report and Accounts to June 2019 says on its cover that the organisation is "credible, independent and ambitious". On page 4 it states the aims of the organisation:

"PHE exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. PHE exists to protect..." (sic)

If you read on you discover it also exists to reduce health inequalities, but missed out the crucial last word in the first iteration of aims. Credibility and ambition do not it appears extend to proof reading a formal annual publication before going to press and putting it on the web.

Last year the body wrote off £207 million "in relation to counter measures held for emergency preparedness and vaccines past their shelf life". It had also written off money the year before in the same way. Some of this is inevitable when you are holding supplies for a purpose you hope does not materialise which then deteriorate in store.

On 3 March PHE told us that we "have planned extensively over the years for an event like this, and the UK is well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the population". The Agencies that have to respond are properly resourced with "people, equipment and medicines they need". "The UK maintains strategic stockpiles of the most important medicines and protective equipment for healthcare staff." Do you agree? Tomorrow I will look at the evolving strategy.

An exit strategy

We need to lift the ban on people working. A 3 week firebreak against the virus has bought the NHS time to expand capacity and to handle the resulting case load. As a result there are many more Intensive care beds and oxygen systems available.

Government in the next phase should still have as its main aim limiting the

number of deaths. That is why it should still strongly advise all those at risk groups and the elderly to stay at home out of contact with possible virus spreaders. It should redouble efforts to ensure all at risk get home deliveries of all they need, and plenty of social contact through the phone and social media.

The rest of us should be free to go back to workplaces whilst continuing with strong hygiene measures and whilst keeping a sensible distance from others where possible. We need to rescue the small businesses and save the self employed by letting them earn money again.

We should not go for the return of just those people who pass a test to say they have had the virus. The right to work should not depend on some government test which might not even be accurate. We do not want to create a perverse incentive to put yourself in harms way to try to catch the virus so you can then win your freedom. It is difficult to see how you could enforce a ban on people who had not had the virus from travelling and working.

The economic cost of continuing with these lock downs will be massive. Unemployment will shoot up to record levels, many businesses will go bankrupt or go through major financial reconstructions, state spending and debt will leap up, and there will be a major reduction in the standard of living and disposable incomes of many people previously or still working in the private sector.

Dear Constituent

Over the last few days I have been in regular contact with the government trying to get improvements in a wide range of areas, and seeking better information about where we are in fighting the virus and expanding NHS capacity.

Let me reassure that currently the local NHS has some spare Intensive care beds, following a doubling of its capacity to handle the virus. It also has well advanced plans to expand capacity further, should this prove necessary. It would do so in two phases, leading to possible additional doubling of capacity. This would lead to a 300% increase on the starting position.

The most important thing is to try to bring the death rate down. As there are still no generally recognised and adopted cures the best way to get the death rate down is for all vulnerable people to self isolate for as long as is needed whilst the epidemic is still widespread. The NHS has notified people whose other medical conditions make them more vulnerable to the severe version of the disease. The elderly are also more at risk.

I have held phone calls with Wokingham Borough Council and seen West Berkshire's work to marshall volunteers and help provide delivery services to

those who are self isolated at home. West Berkshire sets it out through info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-communityhub .Wokingham refers those needing help to admin@citizensadvicewokingham.org.uk

I have also lobbied government over the national NHS Volunteers scheme. requesting that it includes help for people self isolating who cannot get out to shop or who need some telephone or social media contact.

I have contributed proposals on food supply to speed switching food from catering contracts to supermarket shelves. It is good to see more full shelves and a better range of products available, There were too many empty shelves during the week or so of maximum purchases when many people decided to stock up at the same time as many others needed to buy more to eat at home instead of having a school or work lunch. I would like to thank all those who have been growing, packing, transporting and selling the food to us in the shops. They have done a great job in difficult circumstances. I hope constituents will remember to thank them and recognise the problems they have encountered through no fault of the businesses and staff concerned. There was plenty of food available overall but demand shot up to include individual stockpiling and it took time to switch some of the catering supplies.

I pressed successfully for schemes to offer state financial support for companies to keep staff on that no longer are allowed to work, and for the self employed who are banned from earning a living. I do not normally favour state subsidies to business , but do think this is an entirely unprecedented situation. The government is preventing people and companies from earning a living for public health reasons and to help the NHS, so the state should offer money to pay the basic bills during the period when work is prohibited.

Unfortunately the wide ranging and seemingly generous schemes outlined by the Chancellor were slow to come into effect and had various restrictions in the small print which requires change. This week saw some welcome alterations to the bank lending schemes, insufficient changes to eligibility for the furlough and self employed schemes, and little progress with speeding it all up. I am pressing ever harder. If companies cannot access cash to keep people on they will make them redundant. If the self employed have no income they may have to abandon their business and seek Universal Credit.

I pressed for the government to publish regular updates of how many people need hospital and intensive care treatment for Covid 19 and how much spare capacity the system has. As one of the main aims of the lock down is to buy time for the NHS to be able to cope with the epidemic it is good to see these numbers now, to see there is spare capacity and to see substantial new capacity being opened in major centres against continuing rises in numbers. What we now all want to see is a falling off in the increase in the seriously ill as the impact of lock down is felt. As fewer people pass the virus on to vulnerable people who could get the serious version that requires hospital support, so we should see benefits from the policy.

I am quite clear that the damage being done to jobs, companies and the self employed is large. We need to get out of lock down as soon as possible. I

hope these severe measures soon bring the relief we want to see. I am making proposals of how we could relax the restrictions later this month to rescue the economy, whilst still continuing to give maximum protection to all those who are particularly vulnerable to this epidemic.

Thank you for all you are doing to help bring this to an end.

John Redwood

Supply chains and interruptions to output

During the prolonged wrangles over Brexit we were beset with false claims that supply chains would be disrupted by moving to a Free Trade or WTO based future arrangement between the UK and the rest of the EU. Some of us pointed out the long and complex supply chains of industries like the car industry already included substantial supplies from non EU sources which worked fine despite coming from outside the single market.

Today we see supply chains badly disrupted in some cases both within the EU single market and from outside it by the impact of government policies followed around the world to deal with the virus. It is curious we do not hear incessantly and regularly from those who used to be worried about these things, now there is something to worry about.

There is first of all the interruptions to supply from abroad in to the UK because the supplier has been instructed by their national government to cease production as part of a plan to impede the spread of the virus. There are then the interruptions to supply that come from a foreign government placing an export ban on essential goods in short supply, as the Germans did on certain supplies needed for virus treatment. This is on top of the US moves to impose tariffs and bans on countries that the President regards as a threat to national security. The USA is seeking to stop allies from buying from some Chinese technology providers, and is imposing strict sanctions on Iran, for example.

Some argue that this means we have now seen peak globalisation. There are various good reasons to encourage more domestic production. It cuts travel miles for products and components. It cuts the risks to supply lines from geopolitical events in various countries. It adds more value in your own country. The economic argument against is that based on the theory of free trade and specialisation. If each place or country specialises in a few things that it becomes very good at and reaps economies of scale in , total world real income should be maximised. That argument works well when most or all governments believe it and promote it, but comes under pressure when countries cheat. Mr Trump's argument with the Chinese is over just that. He

thinks they cheat on technology, currency level, state aids and other matters.

The UK is discovering that it cannot rely on China and Germany for some imports at a time of virus crisis. The UK private sector is showing considerable flexibility, with Distilleries offering hand gel, engineering businesses offering ventilators and textile companies running up personal protection clothing. The main constraint on our flexibility seems to be occasional delays in the public sector testing and approving what the new producers can deliver. We need to get better at this flexibility when we cannot always rely on abroad to supply the things we really need. We also need to cut the food miles and make sure our fishing and farming system encourages a higher proportion of home grown and home caught produce.

Green transport

I have sent in my views on the need for an early return to work along with strict safeguarding for all people at serious risk from the disease, and my views on actions needed to reduce the rise in unemployment and termination of businesses in the meantime. Today I wish to turn to another issue.

The government has just produced a document entitled “Decarbonising transport – Setting the challenge”. It shows how on current policies transport will still be a major source of carbon dioxide in 2050 when the government wishes to be carbon neutral. The Paper recommends six big actions to shift the carbon dioxide curve more decisively downwards.

It says we “need to accelerate the modal shift to public and active transport”, decarbonise deliveries, make the UK a hub for green transport technology, toughen regulations to decarbonise road transport, develop place based strategies that get cars off the roads, and reduce the global carbon dioxide output of ships and aviation.

One of its most amusing charts is the one telling us just how much carbon dioxide journeys by plane or car entail. It tells us that if we journey to Edinburgh from London by plane we will cause the emission of 144kg of carbon dioxide. If we go by petrol car it falls to 120 kg and diesel car to 115 kg. However, if we walk or go by bike it assures us it will mean no carbon dioxide at all.

They cannot seriously think that walking or cycling to Edinburgh is an option for most of us. The Paper is short on specifics, and recognises that there will need to be new technologies and new greener fuels for old technologies if they are to get anywhere near the zero carbon dioxide target by 2050.

They remind us that cars account for 77% of miles travelled, buses 4% and trains 9%. They anticipate a 35% increase in distance travelled by car by

2050, bus distances staying the same and rail going up by 60%. They also assume a 70% increase in van use but only a 7% increase in heavy goods vehicles, which is a strange variation.

I would be interested in your thoughts on how feasible net zero for transport is by 2050, and what changes could deliver it.