

Following up needs for improved government responses

Today I joined the Cabinet Office call where MPs can reinforce the issues they are highlighting for constituents and urge the government to resolve the problems.

I repeated my regular requests for better and speedier treatment for the self employed and small businesses prevented from earning a living by the controls. I was told the Chancellor is making an improved set of proposals today.

I urged the government to respond positively to the Speaker's proposals for a virtual Parliament to meet, offering more opportunity for MPs to cross examine Ministers on progress and policy. I will follow up with the Leader of the Commons.

I asked about the numbers and requested regular publication of how many beds there are available in hospitals and how many net new admissions there are day by day. I asked for an early sample testing of the population to find out how many people have the virus currently and/ or to find out how many people have now gained some immunity to it. We need population wide figures if the government is going to manage the totals.

Helping small business and the self employed

I am going to have another go at getting the government to speed up and widen the eligibility for its schemes of help for small businesses and the self employed. I am receiving numerous very worrying emails from people whose incomes have been stopped who do not qualify for assistance.

1. The government needs to include owner Directors of small companies who rely on the income and maybe dividends of their business to pay their living costs.
2. It needs to raise the earnings ceiling on the self employed scheme
3. It needs to include people who have set up businesses that is their sole means of financial support more recently
4. It needs to aim for an early payout, not sometime in June.
5. It needs to offer downloadable simple forms now that permit people to apply for money on a self certified basis, with adjustments made later in the year. These should be made through the tax system with the payments made as a kind of negative tax against claims based on no

income

The government also needs to speed up the applications and decisions on the furlough scheme for business. Otherwise more companies will conclude they have to make people redundant to save costs.

The commercial banks need to rethink their demands for detailed business plans and cashflow forecasts, and for personal guarantees, for what is bridging finance for enterprises that have been forced in to temporary closure so producing no revenue. The interest rates charged should also be realistic compared to the commercial banks' very low financing costs with official rates around zero.

We Don't Believe You – Why Populists and the Establishment See the World Differently

I was recently interviewed on the Politics and Polemics podcast about my book *'We Don't Believe You: Why Populists and the Establishment See the World Differently'*.

The podcast is available to listen to [here](#).

Flattening the curve

If you can measure it you can manage it. Government policy towards the virus is to manage down the numbers of people with the illness seeking admission to hospital, for the doubly good reason that we do not want many people seriously ill and there are limits on hospital capacity to deal with them.

They are advised by epidemiologists, people who predict the likely numbers of individuals who catch a disease in an epidemic based on past experiences of other epidemics and daily data on the course of the one they are following. In a situation where there is no known or agreed successful treatment for a disease and no vaccination to block its spread, their advice is to stop many people catching it by social segregation. In the meantime medical research may find treatments and a vaccine for future protection. It also allows rapid expansion of the capacity of the medical facilities, and wholesale transfer of trained medical personnel and wards to treating the epidemic victims.

The issue I am seeking more guidance on from the government and their epidemiological advisers is what does winning look like? When will they have flattened the curve enough?

Public Health England on behalf of the wider government publishes daily two sets of figures. One is the daily addition to the case total, and the other is the grim daily addition to the total deaths ascribed to the virus. The problem with these data sets is they are incomplete and prone to error. In default of reliable tests for significant samples of the entire population, repeated regularly, we do not know the current infection rate or the case total. Many people have caught a mild version of it – or something like it – and have self isolated. Their recovery will not be reflected in the total because they were never tested .

The Death rate is also based on a set of judgements. Worldwide practice varies, with some doctors attributing numerous deaths of people with the virus to pre-existing or other serious conditions, whilst others are more likely to regard any patient dying with the virus as dying because of the virus. The UK is currently thinking of adding more deaths to the total by ascribing death to the virus in cases not admitted to hospital. To get a more accurate figure most deaths would need to include a virus test, and protocols would need to be followed over how to judge the virus contribution to mortality.

So I am asking if we have a consistent set of figures based on clear definitions with resilient data collection, which is needed to decide how much to flatten the curve and to determine how successful policy is. We all are willing the government on because we want to cut the death rate. The next few days are crucial as we should be seeing a drop in new cases reflecting the days people are spending in isolation.

Guidance on social distancing and when to self-isolate

I am aware that many are unsure about social distancing, and when to self-isolate, particularly for those who are over 70 and those under 70 with certain underlying conditions. I have just received updated guidance from the Government on social distancing which I thought would be useful.

The guidance is available to view [here](#).