

The role of Parliament in the crisis

I am uneasy that I cannot go to Parliament and raise there the issues and problems that concern my constituents. I appreciate this is the normal time for an Easter recess, but these are not normal times. My case load, email box and website are even more active than usual. There is heightened awareness of government given the large increase in powers and the direct effects it is having on all our lives. I of course take things up by email, phone and letter, as Ministers are working.

I am seeking reassurances today that Parliament will be allowed back after the recess as planned. I understand we will need to continue adapting the work pattern to offer more protection to those involved, assuming the social segregation measures are still in place. The Speaker set out some changes which helped before the recess and more might be possible, to limit the number in the chamber at any time, but to ensure that public questions and arguments can still be put. Maybe there can be a temporary use of remote technology, so Parliament can have its version of the daily Number 10 press conferences with MPs asking the questions and making the points to the Ministers on duty.

This should be a time to demonstrate the importance of single member constituency representation at Westminster. Each of us receive many practical pieces of advice and difficult cases that reveal cracks or imperfections in the rules and government programmes. These need to be put to government Ministers by MPs who are used to speaking truth to power and who know the Ministers well and how they might respond.

I would like strengthened accountability during this recess. The Cabinet office does allow a daily call to put issues, but it would be good to have a recess written question facility to all departments and virtual Ministerial statements with questions from MPs when the government is making important announcements.

I am raising these issues with the Speaker.

The Irish protocol and state aids

Two highly qualified and experienced lawyers told the Conference (held before the virus restrictions but the comment held over here owing to virus news) that the UK needs to get rid of the Irish protocol one way or another. The current protocol seeks to treat Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK, and in default of a comprehensive borders and trade agreement seeks to lock Northern Ireland into the rules and customs of the EU.

The UK government is right to say it will not place a trade border between GB and Northern Ireland. This could be the result of the negotiations achieving a free trade and trade facilitation package that avoids any need for one. Alternatively if there is no trade deal, the UK government could simply refuse to impose one.

Sammy Wilson for the DUP pointed out that most trade flowing between NI and GB stays within the UK so there is absolutely no need for checks and tariffs as it moves across the Irish Sea between the two parts of the UK. He also pointed out we have a complex Northern Ireland/ Republic of Ireland border today, with the need to calculate VAT and Excise payments. This is all done with an invisible border, with the tax calculations and payments being made by computer from the truck manifests. There is no need for a person at a border post with a calculating machine taking fivers. It should similarly be possible to handle international trade crossing the North Sea within the UK by electronic means and by payments at international borders.

The general mood of the conference was the government must keep its word of no new physical customs border between GB and NI, whether by agreement or not. It is difficult to see how the EU could enforce any interpretation they might place on the Withdrawal Agreement to require a GB/NI border in the event of no agreement. This would be an internal matter for a sovereign UK.

[Update from the Citizens Advice Bureau in Wokingham](#)

I have received this information from the Citizens Advice Bureau in Wokingham:

Your communities are strong and resilient. There are simple things you can do to help them continue to thrive!

1. Check-in on vulnerable family, friends and neighbours

Just helping them with their shopping and checking they have everything they need

can make a huge difference. Know someone self-isolating? Call or text them to check that they're ok.

2. Volunteer with a local charity

Wokingham Borough Council is working with local charities to provide community support during this difficult time.

To volunteer, visit the Wokingham Volunteer Centre website at

www.volunteerwokinghamborough.org.uk.

Do you need support?

If you are in need of help or support, reach out to your community. You are not alone!

1. Call on your family, friends, neighbours or those you trust

Our communities are showing solidarity and community spirit during this difficult time. Most of us will have family, friends or trusted neighbours who can help. Just reach out!

2. Call on your local charity

If you are already in contact with a local charity, call them.

3. Call on your community & voluntary sector

Wokingham Borough Council is working with local charities to provide a community response for those who don't have support and need advice or practical help. This is not an alternative to the NHS or social services.

It is local residents looking after each other. Citizen's Advice is working with local charities. Call them on 0300 330 1189 (if prompted enter 0118 978 7258) or contact them via admin@citizensadvicewokingham.org.uk.

West Berkshire Council Update – Services During Covid-19

As we come to the end of a difficult week, both in West Berkshire and across the country, we thought it would be useful to write to you to give you a rundown of the communications activity we have undertaken this week. We hope that this will be useful to you and your communities as we respond to the impact of Covid-19.

Our Community Support Hub is up and running. This is being organised by our excellent Building Communities Together team in partnership with Volunteer Centre West Berkshire and Greenham Trust. The Hub will offer guidance and help coordinate organisations representing their communities. If someone you know needs help or you would like to volunteer, please contact us on: 01635 503579 or:

westberksbct@westberks.gov.uk

Our designated page for residents provides vital updates on our services, of which more below, as well as support that is available, such as assistance for those struggling to pay their council tax. This can be found here: www.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-residents

We are also working hard to support our businesses. We announced this week that on top of the support outlined here by national government: <https://www.businesssupport.gov.uk/coronavirus-business>.

We will also be offering all businesses in West Berkshire a business rates deferral for April 2020. This puts vital cash flow into the pockets of businesses when they need it most, which is key to the economic success of the district. For more, go to:

www.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-business

The Council Offices are now closed to public in accordance with Government advice. We will review this as that advice is updated. However, officers are still working where possible, albeit from home in many cases, and are available to assist residents and communities in need of help. Please get in touch if you need us.

Our Household Waste Recycling Centres, Libraries, Leisure Centres and Family Hubs are now closed and bulky waste collections have been suspended in line with national social distancing guidance. We would encourage anyone who comes across workers from our contractor, Veolia, to respect the important job they are doing.

Car parking charges have been suspended in all of our surface car parks. This is to minimise the burden on key workers at this difficult time and will also assist everyone to comply with social distancing guidance.

There have been changes to some bus routes across the district. Local bus services 5, 5a, 5c, 41, 44, 47 and H1 operated by West Berkshire Council are suspended until further notice. As of next Monday, the JetBlack1 will also be reduced to an hourly service, and the 1a/1c will be withdrawn. Keyworkers who require assistance with essential travel can contact us for help on 01635 551111.

The team has been busy producing an advice leaflet that will be going out to every household in the district. This outlines the support available from West Berkshire Council. In line with national guidance, we are encouraging residents to 'Stay at Home'.

This is vital as we seek to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on our community and we are grateful for the cooperation of people across West Berkshire in this. We appreciate that this is a big ask, particularly in terms of mental health and for those who live alone, so the Public Health Team has put together some tips and advice for coping with self-isolation which will be updated as the situation progresses.

These can be found here: <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/publichealth>

We hope you, your families and your communities are staying safe throughout this time. I would emphasise again that West Berkshire Council is here to help and if you are struggling, we will do all we can.

Yours sincerely,

Lynne Doherty

Leader of the Council

Nick Carter

Chief Executive

Closing borders

During the crisis so far the EU has battled to keep its belief in open borders as law around the EU. The member states have taken a different attitude.

The EU says "A crisis without borders cannot be resolved by putting barriers between us". It has despite this allowed or encouraged tougher border controls around the EU as a whole whilst wanting to avoid all controls at borders between member states.

Instead Germany has imposed border checks against Austria, France, Luxembourg and Denmark for the movement of people. France has imposed checks on Germany, Belgium and Spain.

In the UK there have been criticisms that the government did not impose stricter controls on people entering through our airports and ports. I currently get complaints that there are still lots of planes flying into Heathrow. I have to explain that some are planes bringing UK nationals home from holidays and stays abroad, and many are freight planes. Some are passenger planes that have been adapted to carry more freight. Passenger services have traditionally also carried some freight in holds as part of our complex supply system.

The EU, realising that countries do wish to impose checks on people at their national borders, is now trying to protect the idea of a barrier free single market for goods. They state "All internal borders should stay open for freight". Regardless of this some member states are diverting export goods for home consumption and inserting their own rules. France and Germany for example are keeping various medical supplies for home use.

This crisis is putting the world trading system under new pressures. In a world of lock down there is more attention to the local and national. Countries are seeking to increase their own productive potential in shortage

areas like tests, protective clothing and other medical supplies.