

Commonsense and rules

MPs and the government are flooded with calls wanting detailed answers to how people can live their lives under the new rules laid out in Parliament this week. This is understandable given the magnitude of the changes required.

The rules themselves are fairly general and broad. The aim of cutting back sharply on person to person contact is very clear. People should stay at home unless they need to go out to carry out important work that cannot be done from home, or to collect food and medicines or to undergo health care. There are not always detailed answers to what this means for any individual's life and circumstances. People are allowed to go out, and need to exercise their judgement of whether this should be done. If so they should do it in a way which minimises risks to themselves and others.

The police now have powers to require people to return home where they do not have a good reason, and to fine for non compliance. The police are keen to carry out their duties by consent, and would like us all to seek to implement the spirit of the rules without needing a strict fine and compliance approach by them. When I am asked difficult questions about what individuals should do I advise them to apply commonsense, to think whether the neighbours would agree they have a need to be out and about.

There are issues about what constitutes a family, what living together as a family means, and what to do about family members who have been travelling and staying away from home for a period. Many of these matters are judgements, where in a free society we look to the adults in the community to come to sensible decision for themselves in the light of the threat and the general requirements of society. The government does not have ready made answers to all the detailed questions because it has never drawn up a blueprint to tell everyone where they have to live, whether they may travel and whose work is essential. It sought to get people to make a big reduction in personal contact by advice, and has had to move to legal requirements as a large number of people ignored the advice. Let us hope now people respond well, to avoid the need for a tougher approach to policing and punishing offenders.

Meanwhile I have renewed my proposals to

1. Get income into the hands of the self employed who cannot now work
 2. Get more home deliveries scheduled by food shops
 3. Have more national and local government support for volunteering to help those in need of assistance thanks to their need to self isolate for 12 weeks.
 4. Get faster and more helpful assistance with the employee cost scheme and the loan schemes for busienss.
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The timing of these severe measures

The health policy says close more things down and stop people getting about unless it is essential to the NHS, basic utilities and the food supply that they do so. Keep them closed until the disease is tamed enough. The economic policy says close less down, re-open as quickly as possible, try to limit the economic damage.

Judging when to lift the new restrictions becomes the crucial decision. Do it too soon and the disease presumably leaps up again. Leave it too long and big swathes of the UK private sector will be excessively debt ridden or bankrupt.

So it would be good to have a bit more explanation from the epidemiologists how accurate their models are and when they judge it might be safe to reverse these measures. Learning from overseas countries ahead of us on the upwards curve of this disease is a good idea, but we need to understand the different bases of their figures and the big imperfections in them.

Some countries concentrate on testing after death. This can give a high death rate, as many people who get the disease and recover are never tested and counted, whilst many people who may die of something else can have death attributed to the virus they were carrying. There may also be false positives in the tests.

Some countries concentrate on testing those who declare symptoms, who mainly go on to recover. This may well produce a lower death rate, though the figures may still be way out as many people with symptoms or with the mild version of the disease may never report or seek a test. Some countries test key workers and patients at risk, yet another different set of figures.

It would be good to see test results based on a proper sample of the population to know how many already have it, compared to full testing on all those who have died from symptoms like the virus. It is still a medical judgement if the virus killed them. It will also be better when the new test to find those who have recovered from it and now have antibodies against it is available.

In the meantime government faces a difficult dilemma. Which of the many reports of various death rates and rates of new infection does it believe or does it think we are most likely to follow? At what point would it be safe to reverse these measures? When will we have in place sufficient tests to make the numbers more reliable than many of those from around the world using selective testing? People's lives depend on these numbers. Millions of people's livelihoods also depend on them, so they better be available soon and they better be reasonably accurate. The only justification for the economic misery is that the measures save lives. Giving businesses a better idea of how long it may take would also assist their plans and their financings.

Letter to the Leader of Wokingham Borough Council proposing more volunteering

Whilst the reason for the immediate increase in funding is not one we welcome, the government has made £1.6bn available to Councils to handle the virus and boost social care, and a further £1.3bn to free hospital beds . I have been pressing for more social care funding for sometime, and trust Wokingham's share of this will help.

One thing the Council could assist with, given this extra cash, is the promotion and organisation of Volunteer efforts to help in the current crisis. Volunteers could be recruited to help the elderly and vulnerable with their daily shopping when they are protecting themselves by staying at home. Volunteers can also help combat loneliness for those who are isolated, through telephone and internet communications to keep them in touch. I would be grateful if the Council could assist by co-ordinating volunteer responses.

Please let me know how Council organisation is getting on with these challenges. Freeing hospital beds is particularly important and strengthening social care is a good in itself.

Food supply and home deliveries

There is plenty of food but still some problems getting enough into shops. There is a shortage of home delivery capacity for the elderly and ill needing that.

I have put the issue to Ministers again and asked that they broker further talks between the catering and supermarket companies over diverting food from catering packs to retail packs, and possible use of catering delivery assets and drivers to shift more for supermarkets. The government should suspend competition rules to allow collaboration.

Now most non food shops are closing the government could also ask the logistics companies shifting non foods to shops to see what they could do to boost food deliveries, and to see if some of the home delivery capacity of non foods could be used for foods.

Food supply

Some constituents who need to self isolate or stay home tell me there are still problems getting home deliveries or shopping organised.

I have asked Wokingham Borough to assist with organising volunteers who could help with shopping. Will those offering help and those in need of it please see www.volunteerwokinghamborough.org.uk.

I have also written again to Ministers to ask them to do more to try to mobilise the large logistics industry that supplied caterers and non food shops, to use their resource to help with food movement and home delivery.