

Dear Constituent

Writing this letter is overshadowed by more sadness as we grieve the loss of life in Reading this week-end. We wish the police well with discovering who was involved and why, so prosecution can follow.

There is some good news about the pandemic. In the last week the latest chart I have been sent shows there were no new cases of the disease reported in Wokingham Borough and only one in West Berkshire. The pressures on the Royal Berks have abated, and I had no more complaints about the supplies of protective clothing or the availability of tests. NHS supplies are working well and testing capacity is greatly increased.

The government has given priority in all its decisions to getting the virus under better control and bringing down the death rate. It now is turning to its second important aim, saving livelihoods and allowing some recovery in business to save jobs. I have worked closely with Ministers on safe ways of working to get more people into work and more businesses trading, whilst encouraging more homeworking and remote working through internet technology wherever possible. I also urged the government at the start to provide financial assistance to people and businesses who temporarily were told not to work. The government came up with the furlough and small business schemes, which have helped many during a difficult time.

We are but part of the way through relaxations to allow more people to work and earn money for their businesses. It is good news that shops can now reopen, and many factories have returned to manufacture. We are now in the run up to two crucial dates. The first is July 4th, when it is likely hotels, restaurants and other leisure and hospitality venues will be able to re-open, subject to social distancing rules. The second is the new school year starting in September, when we hope the schools will return for all pupils.

Shortening the social distance from 2 metres to 1 is important to both these areas of life for re opening to have chance of some success. 1 metre is the required minimum recommended by the World Health Organisation. It can be made safer by the use of screens, air flow management, use of masks and other protective clothing, and one way systems for people where corridors and passages are narrow. Business and schools are currently working on getting the right configuration within their premises and thinking through how to operate safely.

I would like to thank all those teachers and school support and management staff who have provided an educational service for a limited number of pupils on the school site and a digital service for pupils at home during the crisis. I wish all well in planning the right approach to a return to full time education for all, which may continue to need more digital input than before and some reorganisation of the physical space.

I and many of you have thanked the NHS staff many times for

coping with the seriously ill during the height of the pandemic, and I do so again. The task now for all the NHS is to get the rest of the service back to normal. As the Health Secretary frequently reminds us, the NHS is open again for all those with serious conditions like cancer who must not be put off going for care in hospitals. The NHS also needs to set out a plan for tackling the backlog of non urgent surgery which has built up during the intense period of the virus.

Much now rests on the consumer. The majority have kept their jobs and have often spent less over the lock down, saving money on travel, leisure and a variety of services they were not allowed to use. We now need the Town Centres to be attractive and easy to reach to give the shops, cafes, restaurants and service providers every chance to rebuild their businesses and to tempt customers. I hope Councils will work with business to create a warm welcome in shopping areas, allowing good access.

In the days ahead we need both to avoid a major upsurge in the disease and to open up much more of our economy to save jobs. The financial support put in was necessary and has helped, but it is not an affordable answer for the future. It can only be a temporary measure, as it is all being borrowed. The future must rest on good co-operation over testing and tracing to keep the virus down, allied to safe rebuilding of as much of our former goods and services trade as possible so people can earn a living again.

I would also like to thank my office staff for helping cope with an unprecedented volume of emails and cases brought on by these extraordinary times and by the enforced temporary extension of government into so much of our lives.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood