

Councils can pay their bills

I asked Wokingham Borough this week if they have sufficient cash to meet their payments. The Leader of the Council said their financial position is strong and they can pay all their bills. I am not therefore pressing for emergency facilities for them which the government has promised for cash strapped Councils. I have not heard of any problems at West Berkshire either.

Finding PPE

We have all got used to the initials PPE, meaning protective clothing for people working in the NHS and social care. The government has told us it wants there to be a plentiful supply, and Ministers have authorised spending to provide one. Despite this there is a persistent issue over whether supplies and stocks are adequate in a range of Health and Social care establishments.

I have spent time each day on this problem for the local organisations that report insufficient supplies and stocks. I have badgered the government through Ministers and the Cabinet Office. I have asked the Local resilience Forum for help, as we were told they had an important role locally. I have worked with Wokingham Borough who want to source more clothing for their social service responsibilities.

As a result of the strong MP and media interest and the demands from various hospitals and care homes the centre and the regions have set up organisations to try to ease the shortage. As an alert reader will have noticed, so far I have only mentioned organisations that are trying to buy or obtain PPE. The problem of course lies mainly with the supply. The world is short of PPE because there has been a big surge in world demand.

I have been able to pass on some leads to public sector bodies who need to buy more PPE. There are various manufacturers and stockists out there who can provide more PPE, and who want the extra orders. Some potential manufacturers say they are experiencing delays in getting their product approved and registered as suitable for purchase and use. Clearly the public sector needs to make rapid decisions, though it should see and test a sample of the goods first.

It should not be a logistics problem. The army is doing great work strengthening public sector delivery systems. There are plenty of laid up trucks and vans in the private sector needing work, and plenty of us would volunteer to drive a load in the backs of our own vehicles to an individual local care home if needed.

Given the will to provide more, the money to pay for it and the flexibility of manufacturers in need of work, it should be possible to crack this problem. Companies wanting to supply need to send in urgent samples, and the buyers in the public sector need to respond quickly with orders.

World government?

The response to the virus crisis has in many ways been an essay in world government. The World Health Organisation has stood at the top of the decision tree on how to handle this crisis, acting as a source of information, a clearing house for the ideas of those seeking to understand and tackle it, and a strong influence and guide on governments on what to do.

Most governments worldwide have followed the main precepts of the WHO advice. There have been attempts by some in the media and some in various governments to differentiate, yet the remarkable thing is just how similar responses are. The differences are largely ones of timing, subject to differing timetables dictated by the rate of spread of the virus to different locations from other hotspots or disease centres.

Most have begun with efforts to track and trace, with testing, to try to contain the spread via the isolation of early cases and their contacts. Most lost that battle and went on to the second phase, total lockdown of all but food, healthcare and some other essentials.

Now there are issues over how much success a country needs to record before it starts some relaxation of controls, and what the dangers are of a second wave or flare up in the virus if relaxation occurs.

President Trump is very critical of the WHO. He thinks they were too tolerant of China who failed to notify early or to let in WHO experts at the beginning. He also seems impatient with their approach to treatment and medical analysis, turning to a range of US specialist companies and experts to try to get earlier breakthroughs in treatments and prevention. He also points out that in his view the USA carries a disproportionately high burden of paying for the Organisation.

Do you think the WHO has done a good job so far? Has it given best advice? How does the mantra of more and more testing work once the disease is well spread throughout a nation? How often does an individual have to be retested for the system based on tests to work?

Update from HMRC on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

Further to our recent correspondence, I have now received the enclosed update on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme:

Dear Sir John,

This afternoon, the Chancellor has announced some important changes to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Further details on the changes, plus updated guidance on other areas of HMRC support is below. Please do share these messages with your constituents.

Additional HMRC support during coronavirus

Furlough Scheme Cut-Off Date Extended to 19 March

Thousands more employees will be able to receive support through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme after the Chancellor extended the eligibility date to 19 March 2020. Individuals originally had to be employed on February 28 2020.

Under the scheme, employers can claim a grant covering 80% of the wages for a furloughed employee, subject to a cap of £2,500 a month.

But following a review of the delivery system and to ensure the scheme helps as many people as possible, new guidance published today has confirmed the eligibility date has been extended to March 19 2020 – the day before the scheme was announced.

Employers can claim for furloughed employees that were employed and on their PAYE payroll on or before 19 March 2020. This means that the employee must have been notified to HMRC through the RTI system on or before 19 March 2020.

The change is expected to benefit over 200,000 people.

HMRC has been working at pace to be ready to deliver the scheme, which is due to be fully operational next week.

Updated guidance for employers is available on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

Updated guidance for employees is also available on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

Self-employment Income Support Scheme

Thank you for continuing to share the guidance for the Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS):

[How to claim a grant through the coronavirus Self-employment Income Support Scheme](#)

[How HMRC works out total income and trading profits for the Self-employment Income Support Scheme](#)

We have recently updated the guidance to provide clarifications to some queries we've received, including:

- detail of the treatment of losses, averaging and multiple trades
- clarifications on the calculation of self-employed profits and what is meant by total income
- confirmation that individuals are able to continue working, including taking on employment role
- confirmation that owner-managers of Ltd companies can access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) for their salary
- confirmation that individuals can access Universal Credit and the SEISS
- clarification on overlaps between the SEISS and CJRS (for example, you can claim the SEISS and continue working).

We would greatly appreciate your help in sharing this update as widely and as quickly as possible.

Benefits and Tax Credits

Benefits and Tax Credit payment increases came into effect on the 6 April. Individual payment dates will vary. Customers don't have to take any action – they will receive increased payment by 18 May. More information is available on [GOV.UK](#).

This year, HMRC will automatically renew all tax credits claims apart from those identified as high risk. This means that around 3.9 million customers will have their claim auto renewed. These customers will receive an auto renewal pack and they will only need to contact us if their details differ from the pack.

We will need more information from 150,000 customers and they will be sent a 'reply required renewal pack' and will be expected to complete it in the normal way.

If any of your constituents are currently a tax credit claimant, and they claim Universal Credit, their tax credit award will be closed from the day before their Universal Credit claim is made. Once they have made a Universal Credit claim it is not possible for them to go back to tax credits.

More guidance is available on [GOV.UK](#).

Coronavirus scammers target taxpayers

Fraudsters are continuing to take advantage of the package of measures announced by the Government to support people and businesses affected by coronavirus.

HMRC has detected more than 40 coronavirus-related financial scams to date, most by text message.

We have asked Internet Service Providers to take down more than 60 web addresses associated with these scam campaigns.

HMRC's advice:

Stop:

- Take a moment to think before parting with your information or money.
- Genuine organisations like banks and HMRC will never contact you out of the blue to ask for your PIN, password or bank details, or to withdraw money or transfer it to a different account.
- Don't give out private information, reply to text messages, download attachments or click on links in texts or emails you weren't expecting.

Challenge:

- Could it be fake? It's ok to reject, refuse or ignore any requests. Only criminals will try to rush or panic you.
- Check [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) for information on how to [recognise genuine HMRC contact](#) and [how to avoid and report scams](#).
- If you think you have received an HMRC-related phishing/bogus email or text message, you can check it against examples published on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

Protect:

- Use the latest software, apps and operating systems on your phone, tablet or laptop. Update these regularly or set your devices to automatically update so you don't have to worry.
- Forward suspicious emails claiming to be from HMRC to phishing@hmrc.gov.uk and texts to 60599.
- Contact your bank immediately if you think you've fallen victim to a scam, and report it to [Action Fraud](#).

Business Support Campaign

Thank you for your support in sharing our business support advice in recent weeks. We have now moved our [Coronavirus Business Support site](#) onto [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) and this content will be used in campaign material from now on.

The original Business Support website will continue to remain available in the short term, but we would be very grateful if you could point your members to our new site to ensure they have the very latest information.

Thanks to all the volunteers

Let's say a big thank you to all the volunteers. Many are willing to give their time and energy to helping the elderly and vulnerable during this period of lock down. WBC and various charities are directing their efforts.