

When will we be allowed out of Lockdown?

The government's scientific advisers come across as pessimists about our future. They seem to think the policy answer for wherever we are in combatting the virus is more and longer lockdown. If the virus is spreading more we need tougher lockdown. If it is falling we need to continue with lockdown as only lockdown can get it falling. If a tough lockdown is in place and it does not seem to be working it is the fault of the public, as too many must be breaking the rules.

The government accepted nine months of variable lockdowns last year, and sustained it with the public by suggesting as soon as enough people have been vaccinated we can relax. Now the government advisers are telling us it is not as simple as that. They will not be satisfied even when all the people most at risk of dying from the disease have been vaccinated. They say they do not know whether people who are vaccinated can still pass the virus on, nor how long immunity from vaccination might last. The advisers leave most of us without reliable figures on bed occupancy, NHS capacity and Nightingale use. They have changed the definitions of what is a covid death, and decline to tell us where the various numbers have to reach before they would recommend a relaxation.

Ministers say they are following the science. They are of course following a few prominent government scientists, who speak for one version of the science. The science on the pandemic is fortunately changing, as scientists work hard to understand the disease and remedies better, and as they study the pattern of infection worldwide. There are also various divisions of opinion over what treatments work or work best, over vaccines and how much and how often they have to be administered to an individual, over what the rate of spread may be at any given time and how best to conclude someone died of CV 19 rather than other complex conditions that many elderly people also suffer from.

Ministers need to offer us guidance on how we get out of this latest long lock down. Either they need to show us mass vaccination is the promised game changer and they will relax as soon as all the vulnerable who wish have been jabbed, or they need to come up with a plan for us to live alongside the virus better if vaccination is not going to ban it.

Tax rises are the last thing the UK

needs this year

Government actions designed to limit the spread of the virus and reduce the burden on the NHS have done great damage to jobs, business and output. Knowing they would the government rightly made generous provision to subsidise employment, offer grants and loans to businesses, and increased benefits to people to sustain demand. This naturally led to colossal borrowing by the state and to the effective nationalisation of large parts of the economy from private hospitals to the railways.

The Treasury now rightly says we cannot go on with the excessive borrowing and very high levels of state spending needed during lock down. They should add that state borrowing will fall rapidly as soon as lock down is removed and a decent economic recovery is allowed and encouraged. A large number of people who have kept their better paid jobs and been on full pay throughout the last year have money to spend as soon as they are allowed to buy services that entail face to face encounters. Many businesses will soon be back with revenue in the tills and staff on overtime again. As this happens so the amount the state spends on benefits, grants, loans and cushioning of the lockdown diminishes. So also tax revenue soars as people pay VAT on services again, income tax on earnings and transaction taxes.

The last thing we need is new taxes or rises in tax rates. In order to promote recovery the Treasury should be thinking about lower rates and fewer taxes. We need a big expansion of business capacity. The danger is we lose a generation of entrepreneurs, of people working for themselves or running small businesses, as a result of the lockdowns. The most energetic will of course flourish again, but we need to create conditions where the average, the not so highly motivated, those worried about risk taking are persuaded enterprise is for them and the odds are favourable to setting up and running a successful business.

The only way to get the deficit down to sensible levels and to slash additional borrowing is to promote a strong and rapid recovery. We need to be doing that from early in the new financial year, so that we just put behind us one year of huge state borrowings. Tax rises will delay and impede recovery, and will put off that new generation of businesses and self employed we will badly need to lead us out of additional debt.

The U.K. needs to earn its living

The answers I have been getting from DEFRA are worrying. They show no sense of urgency to use our new freedoms to promote more growing and rearing home grown food. They are not standing up for U.K. interests in interpreting the Trade Agreement with the EU. They are not bringing forward early plans to

raise our fishing capacity or to expand our market gardening areas.

The thrust of policy seems to be to wilding our landscape instead of farming it better. There are too many proposed grants for so called environmental gains and not enough for food production. Many of us want to slash the food mikes, employ more U.K. people and enjoy more good U.K. produced food. That means extending the season for vegetables and soft fruit with more glasshouses and polytunnels. It means working with the food manufacturing industry to put more U.K. produce into imaginative meals and good recipes for ready meals. It means strong U.K. branding.

I see some of the supermarkets understand U.K. consumer wishes. Many fresh food items have the Union flag on. None carry the EU, Spanish or Dutch flags. Let's go one step further and have a farming policy which delivers us more great British food. The world does not owe us a living and it is not good to be so dependent on overseas supply of things we can grow for ourselves.

[A vaccination update from West Berkshire](#)

The vaccination programme is being delivered by the NHS but we retain a keen interest in how the roll out is progressing locally. We were pleased to be joined at Monday's Local Outbreak Engagement Board Dr Abid Irfan from the Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group and to hear his update on the progress made so far.

We know what residents are most interested in is what is happening in their community – and when they and those they care about will get their doses.

Whilst there is monumental effort by the NHS nationally to distribute the vaccine, much of the hard work to get doses to residents is being done by local GP surgeries. They have been working collaboratively to set up local vaccination centres which they are running together, and with the support of our local Clinical Commissioning Group.

There are two local vaccination centres; one in Pangbourne, involving three GP local surgeries, and one in Newbury which is a larger site covering nine individual GPs surgeries. Until the end of January they will be vaccinating anyone over 80 as well as frontline health workers and social care workers. From there they will move on to the over-75s, and then the over 70s and those who are clinically extremely vulnerable.

GP surgeries have worked really hard to get these vaccination centres up and running as quickly as possible. It has been great to read the praise for the centre staff from patients grateful to have received their vaccine. Although vaccinations are being delivered as quickly as possible it will take time to

get to everyone – please be patient and wait for your GP to contact you about making an appointment.

The speed at which our NHS partners are working and the complexity in arranging a national vaccination programme means that along the way they will experience some logistical difficulties. This week Newbury Racecourse has come in for a little criticism for not allowing vaccinations to continue at their site on race days. The reality is that it would be challenging for the site to operate seven days a week due to the vaccine distribution process. GPs were aware of these operational issues before setting up the centre and they did so confident that they would still be able to reach their targets within timelines – even without doing on the odd few days.

Speaking of the vaccination centre, we have received several enquiries asking whether more trains can stop at the Newbury Racecourse station. We've asked the question of GWR, and are pleased to say that they have agreed to put on more trains. It will take a couple of weeks to implement, but we're grateful to them for their flexibility and delighted that local residents will have more sustainable travel options when journeying to get their vaccination.

Elsewhere we are ploughing on with our plans for new community testing facilities in the district. We are close to agreeing our first testing site for Newbury which should open next month and will allow testing for critical and key workers, as well as people involved in the management of local outbreaks. There will be a phased approach to those identified for testing and the relevant cohorts will be invited to join the testing programme over a series of weeks. Once that is up and running we will then be looking at additional sites in the east and west of the district, and potentially a mobile unit too. Testing to identify asymptomatic Covid carriers is important in managing the outbreak, and a potential release of the restrictions so we are working to get these open as quickly as we can. We'll keep you updated on this as our plans progress.

Away from the pandemic response, business as usual continues and this week we were thrilled to announce this year's Community Champion Awards. We haven't been able to do an awards ceremony this year but it shouldn't take anything away from this year's winners with the standard as high as ever. This year we introduced special categories in relation to coronavirus, in addition to our usual categories and it allowed us to recognise a broad spectrum of community-minded activities this year. There are far too many to mention here but do please take a look at the website and read about the incredible winners we've had this year.

We're continuing to look beyond the immediate demands of the pandemic to plan for the future and we have a number of important consultations closing in the next few weeks. These include the Newbury Town Centre Masterplan Study (which closes on 31 January), Local Plan Review 2037 (closes on 5 February) and the Minerals and Waste Plan (closes on 15 February). We have also started a consultation this week on our proposal for a new sports ground at Newbury Rugby Club. Each one is really important in helping us take into account local views as we look at how the district develops in the coming years. Whilst we all find ourselves confined to our homes please take a time to look

at these documents and tell us what you think.

- For more information about vaccinations, including the number of people vaccinated as we receive the data, visit:
<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/covid-vaccination>

- To find out more about the Community Champion Awards visit
<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/awardwinners>

Yours sincerely,
Lynne Doherty
Leader of the Council

Nick Carter
Chief Executive

[Uniting the USA? Strong democracy needs good opposition and belief in the system](#)

The President has boldly set as his main aim uniting a fractured and divided USA. He wisely accepts this will not be easy. Too many of his followers seem to think if they just insist more strongly on their views of the world and claim the electoral right to enforce them the country will come together behind a new left wing Democrat settlement. If they reinforce this with tough action against any who disagree, through court cases against certain types of speech and protests, and censorship on media and social media, they will impose a more disciplined conformity on an unruly country.

They need to understand some things about how normally healthy democracies like the USA work. They provide in the constitution for strong opposition to government or Presidential plans. There should always be a good democratic alternative government on offer, that has an alternative view of the more contentious or questionable policies pursued by the incumbents. A great democracy does not have 95% support for what the majority government does. It debates choices and options and exposes the chosen course of government to criticisms. Exercising majority governing power is a constant exercise in persuasion, listening, seeking improvement, compromising with the Opposition when they have a good point. A good Opposition know when to disagree and when to campaign hard against a policy or law. A good government gives ground when it is wrong but does not compromise its main aims, pledges and beliefs.

A successful democracy as the USA usually is has top level agreement between all the democratic parties over two crucial things – the system by which governments make and sell their decisions to elected bodies and the

wider public, and the results of free and fair elections. There has to be a belief by the main elected officials that an election produced a fair and accurate result. In opposition parties need to believe they have sensible opportunity to make their case and to seek change peacefully. When the Commons has a government with a decent majority the Opposition accepts that government has a mandate to get through the main business from its Manifesto and from its statements of aim and principle. A good Opposition also makes it difficult every time government stumbles, wanders too far from its promises or principles, or offers incompetence instead of good administration. In the Commons an Opposition can only win a vote by working with governing party MPs who also think on that occasion the government is wrong, which can happen quite often. Opposition is there to question, to ask for second thoughts, to offer alternatives but not to stop government governing. Only the electorate can do that when they come in an election to judge the result, short of a major governing party split and collapse.

The tragedy of the USA in the last few weeks is the breakdown in trust or belief in the system by the main Opposition party. A large number of Trump voters think the results in a handful of key swing states were fiddled, but their side has been unable to persuade the courts or the Senate of that allegation. As those institutions hold the reserve powers to order a re run or insist on a different electoral College result President Biden can fairly claim he won and passed all the checks and balances in the system. It leaves Trump voters arguing that the whole system is corrupt and out to get their man. This impression is not going to be stilled or calmed by the Democrat decision to impeach President Trump after he has left office. It will build the sense of grievance amongst many Trump supporters. If President Biden is to heal his country he cannot avoid tackling and talking about the issues around voting systems that perturb Trump supporters.

The Republican leaders have an important role to play. They need to show that they can now offer strong but sensible opposition to this new President. Going through his back history to try and find a way to impeach him as has become all too common in US politics would not be helpful. Setting out a positive alternative vision to the left's, and making it difficult in a 50/50 Senate to get through anything the Conservative half of the country disagrees with makes perfect sense. The Senate and House elections produced no landslide or big majority for a Democrat solution to US problems. Republican legislators need to show Trump voters they can use the power of opposition afforded to them to resist hated Democrat policies for their followers. For his part the President needs to show which parts of the Republican offer he thinks has some merit if he wants to build bridges. He needs to see just how divisive to Trump followers the Democrat position is on gun control, relaxation of abortion, bans on carbon fuels and completely open borders to name but four highly charged US issues .