

City centres, the virus and work patterns

The Prime Minister is clearly concerned that if we continue with homeworking for the many, with social distancing for hospitality, and bans on live events, the economies of our city centres will be gravely damaged for as long as this lasts. The longer it lasts, the less likely that it will bounce back to the levels of city wealth and income we saw in January.

Even though the national lockdown has been relaxed, the current rules advising people against public transport and telling employers to require homeworking wherever possible means greatly reduced business for bars and restaurants, shops and personal services in city centres. The longer it goes on the more likely the many small businesses that populated these areas will give up, and the more likely the large chains will look to cancel more of their leases on expensive city centre properties.

The PM has come up with compromise with his scientific and medical advisers, who urge caution and want the effective city centre lock downs to continue through the proxy advice to avoid public transport and busy pavements. He says from August individual companies should decide if they can provide safe working back in the city centre office, having consulted their staff. To do so might well mean a reduced staff in the office at any one time. It may well mean staggered hours to avoid peak hours on trains , buses and tube. It will mean social distancing at work, limits on using lifts, more cleaning and the rest.

It underlines the cruel dilemma government faces. The economic advice is straightforward. Liberalise everything, give incentives to get back to work, and seek to inject a V shaped recovery into an economy gripped by a deep recession . The medical advice is also clear. To be safe, to fend off a second wave, keep up as much social distancing and isolation as possible. Do not encourage large numbers on public transport, and do not allow anything like full complements in offices.

Where would you strike the balance? Would you go for jobs and growth, or for greater security?