

Coronavirus shows that health and work are inextricably linked

It's not often that a Health Secretary gets invited to the British Chambers of Commerce.

And I don't think you've invited me here because of my reputation as an app developer.

I want to talk today about coronavirus and the contribution that British business can make in helping us as a nation to tackle it.

But I also want to say what a huge honour it is to address you today.

For a pro-business Conservative like me, the keynote speech at the BCC is a bit like being asked to play at Lord's.

This organisation speaks for British business so well because it is so firmly rooted in communities.

I know that because my mum was a member of her local Chamber up in Cheshire.

And because your brilliant chair Sarah was, until very recently, chair of my local Chamber in Haverhill in Suffolk.

Why I back business

Before I turn to coronavirus, I want to say something about why I believe in business, which I think is very important and which we must always hold onto and remember.

It's not just the jobs you create.

It's not just that I'm deeply mindful of who it is that pays for the NHS.

It's more than that.

It's that business done right is a force for good in the world.

Because great businesses succeed by solving other people's problems.

Look at the life sciences.

Just recently, I announced a deal with Novartis that will mean the NHS is among the first in the world to access a brand-new cholesterol lowering drug at scale.

This is a twice-yearly injection that could prevent tens of thousands of heart attacks.

Life sciences: the clue's in the name. They save and improve lives.

And business done right is a moral force for good because it links effort and reward.

It's about something for something.

For this is really personal.

I grew up watching my parents battle, against the odds, to build a brilliant software business.

And I know what the challenges feel like.

In the recession of the early 90s, we almost lost everything because of a late payment problem.

The business was strong, orders were coming in, but we were literally one cheque from going under.

And I remember the feeling of injustice, that everything they'd worked so hard for was on the line, all because of a problem that was not of their making and was outside of their control.

Now fortunately, that cheque came through and the business went on to thrive. But that experience is engraved on my heart.

In politics I've always worked for economic security as the foundation of everything else.

Because I know, like you know, that the economy is not just numbers on a spreadsheet, it's people's hard work and livelihoods and dreams.

Right now, leading the healthcare system's response to coronavirus is of course taking up the overwhelming majority of my time.

But I'm very conscious that over the last few weeks, small businesses across the country will have been listening to the news and worrying about the future.

Something outside their control.

So let me turn to the biggest near-term challenge facing British business.

Coronavirus action plan

Our approach to tackling coronavirus is to prepare for the worst and work for the best.

We're basing our preparations not just on the most likely scenario but on the reasonable worst-case scenario.

This week you'll have seen we published our 4-part action plan to contain,

delay, research and mitigate the virus.

That plan is driven by the science and guided by the expert advice of the Chief Medical Officer and others.

Contain – the phase we're currently in – means detecting the early cases, tracing their close contacts and preventing the disease from taking hold in the UK for as long as is reasonably possible.

This approach has bought time for the NHS to ramp up its preparations.

But the scientific advice is that we may not be able to contain the virus forever, especially if the number of cases continues to rise in Europe.

At that point, on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, we will activate the next phase of our plan, which is to delay.

This is about slowing the spread, lowering the peak impact and pushing it away from the winter season when the NHS is under maximum pressure.

I will always prioritise protection of life, but we will seek to minimise the social and economic disruption too.

Because the scientific advice is very clear that going too far or too fast carries risks of its own.

Ultimately, we are working to a timetable that is set by the progress of the virus itself.

With 85 confirmed positive cases in the UK, shutting down all our schools and universities for example would not have a clinical benefit at this stage.

But it would impose huge social and economic costs.

So we will follow the science.

And that brings me to the third phase which is research.

Research been ongoing ever since the moment COVID-19 was identified at the end of last year.

We have some of the finest scientific minds in the world working day and night on a vaccine.

But we do not think a vaccine will be available in the coming months.

And just as important, is research to understand what currently available drugs and treatments might help those who are already sick.

I'm incredibly proud of the team at Public Health England who were among the first to sequence the genome of the virus.

And that British businesses like Oxford Nanopore are providing the testing kits used around the world.

We could not do this without you.

If coronavirus does become established in the UK population, we will only be able to delay widespread transmission for so long.

At that point, we will move to the mitigate phase of our plan.

This is about focusing our resources as a nation on supporting those who are most seriously ill and keeping essential services going at a time when large parts of the workforce may be off sick.

You may have seen some of the estimates that we published in the action plan.

We have a range of options to support businesses, supply chains and the wider economy should the situation require it.

I know that the Business Department and the Treasury are thinking very hard about how to do this in the budget next week.

I know the hit that many businesses are already taking.

I understand the sense of trepidation that something outside your control is such a looming risk on the horizon.

I will do everything I reasonably can, not just to protect business but to help business through.

This is going to be a difficult time for us all.

What I can offer is transparency and support and a rational science-led approach.

And I know this, not least because I started my life surrounded by small business: we in government can't do this alone.

The role of business

Tackling coronavirus is a national effort.

As UK businesses, you have a crucial part to play in helping us respond.

First, we need you to engage.

Engage with us, keep talking to us so we incorporate your views into our preparations.

Second, we need you to stay informed.

We've published specific [guidance for employers on GOV.UK](#).

It tells you what to do if someone in your workplace comes into contact with COVID-19, along with advice for responding to it.

Third and most important of all, we all need to support our employees to do

the right thing, including to self-isolate if necessary.

Yesterday we announced that we will bring forward measures to allow the payment of statutory sick pay from the first day that you are sick.

Many occupational sick pay systems already do this.

Our principle is clear: no one should be penalised for doing the right thing and following the official medical advice to self-isolate if they test positive.

It's in your employees' interest, it's in your interest, and it's in the national interest.

Health and work

One of the things that this experience has taught us is that health and work are umbilically linked.

It's a lesson that we can't afford to forget once we get through this.

Yes, of course you need a strong economy to pay for the NHS, but a strong NHS is good for business too.

Healthcare that's always there for you, unconditionally, supports a risk-taking entrepreneurial economy.

And increasingly, it's recognised that the nation's health is not just the NHS.

We know that only around a quarter of what leads to longer, healthier lives is the result of what happens in the health service.

A quarter.

The rest is down to genetics, the environment and the lifestyle choices we make.

Businesses have real influence over the last two.

A job that's purposeful and rewarding is good for your health. And almost by definition, employers have a chance to intervene much earlier than the NHS.

We all need to play our part.

Mental health support. Musculoskeletal support. Bike racks and shower facilities. Flexible working. Support for healthy eating.

These are not businesses costs, they are investments. Just like your investment in your skills and training budget.

It's how, after this epidemic, we will bear down on the £9 billion a year lost to sickness absence.

And it's one big part of how we deliver on our long-term goal of 5 extra years of healthy life.

We are not powerless in the face of this virus.

We have the best minds and a clear plan of action.

Everyone can do something, even if it's as simple as washing your hands more often.

The coming weeks will be tough, but with calm heads and clear determination together we will see this through.