

Dear Constituent

Over the last few days I have been in regular contact with the government trying to get improvements in a wide range of areas, and seeking better information about where we are in fighting the virus and expanding NHS capacity.

Let me reassure that currently the local NHS has some spare Intensive care beds, following a doubling of its capacity to handle the virus. It also has well advanced plans to expand capacity further, should this prove necessary. It would do so in two phases, leading to possible additional doubling of capacity. This would lead to a 300% increase on the starting position.

The most important thing is to try to bring the death rate down. As there are still no generally recognised and adopted cures the best way to get the death rate down is for all vulnerable people to self isolate for as long as is needed whilst the epidemic is still widespread. The NHS has notified people whose other medical conditions make them more vulnerable to the severe version of the disease. The elderly are also more at risk.

I have held phone calls with Wokingham Borough Council and seen West Berkshire's work to marshall volunteers and help provide delivery services to those who are self isolated at home. West Berkshire sets it out through info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-communityhub. Wokingham refers those needing help to admin@citizensadvicewokingham.org.uk

I have also lobbied government over the national NHS Volunteers scheme. requesting that it includes help for people self isolating who cannot get out to shop or who need some telephone or social media contact.

I have contributed proposals on food supply to speed switching food from catering contracts to supermarket shelves. It is good to see more full shelves and a better range of products available, There were too many empty shelves during the week or so of maximum purchases when many people decided to stock up at the same time as many others needed to buy more to eat at home instead of having a school or work lunch. I would like to thank all those who have been growing, packing, transporting and selling the food to us in the shops. They have done a great job in difficult circumstances. I hope constituents will remember to thank them and recognise the problems they have encountered through no fault of the businesses and staff concerned. There was plenty of food available overall but demand shot up to include individual stockpiling and it took time to switch some of the catering supplies.

I pressed successfully for schemes to offer state financial support for companies to keep staff on that no longer are allowed to work, and for the self employed who are banned from earning a living. I do not normally favour state subsidies to business, but do think this is an entirely unprecedented situation. The government is preventing people and companies from earning a living for public health reasons and to help the NHS, so the state should offer money to pay the basic bills during the period when work is

prohibited.

Unfortunately the wide ranging and seemingly generous schemes outlined by the Chancellor were slow to come into effect and had various restrictions in the small print which requires change. This week saw some welcome alterations to the bank lending schemes, insufficient changes to eligibility for the furlough and self employed schemes, and little progress with speeding it all up. I am pressing ever harder. If companies cannot access cash to keep people on they will make them redundant. If the self employed have no income they may have to abandon their business and seek Universal Credit.

I pressed for the government to publish regular updates of how many people need hospital and intensive care treatment for Covid 19 and how much spare capacity the system has. As one of the main aims of the lock down is to buy time for the NHS to be able to cope with the epidemic it is good to see these numbers now, to see there is spare capacity and to see substantial new capacity being opened in major centres against continuing rises in numbers. What we now all want to see is a falling off in the increase in the seriously ill as the impact of lock down is felt. As fewer people pass the virus on to vulnerable people who could get the serious version that requires hospital support, so we should see benefits from the policy.

I am quite clear that the damage being done to jobs, companies and the self employed is large. We need to get out of lock down as soon as possible. I hope these severe measures soon bring the relief we want to see. I am making proposals of how we could relax the restrictions later this month to rescue the economy, whilst still continuing to give maximum protection to all those who are particularly vulnerable to this epidemic.

Thank you for all you are doing to help bring this to an end.

John Redwood