

Dear Constituent

I write to wish you a happy Easter, despite the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in. I hope many of you can contact your friends and relatives with suitable technology, and that you can enjoy your homes and immediate family contacts. For any who have illness in the family, I wish you a speedy recovery.

Let me begin with some better news. On April 10th at the news conference the government showed that most recent hospital patients with CV19 actually fell by 2%, mainly owing to a turn down in the graph in London which still has the most cases. Let us hope we are somewhere near the peak of numbers going into UK hospitals. There were 20,204 in UK hospitals with the virus on Friday (these figures excluded Northern Ireland). There were 3335 UK wide in intensive care. These large numbers are so far well within the stated enhanced capacity of the NHS , though I do not doubt the big efforts required of many staff in the front line facilities to sustain these numbers.

For me, the daily tasks of trying to get the government to ease problems for people financially damaged by the shut downs continues, as does the need to help the local NHS and social care providers where required.

I have stressed repeatedly to the government that their cash assistance to people and companies needs to be faster and easier to access. The initial success in getting schemes to allow workers to keep their jobs with state payment of 80% of wages , and with assistance for the self employed, was most welcome. There remain delays and gaps in provision.

The Treasury has made a few improvements and needs to make more. I have passed on frustrations with banks over access to credit lines. The Governor of the Bank of England and the Chancellor have written a joint letter to the commercial banks asking them to open the schemes and lend the money, but issues still remain.

I am sending in more detailed proposals for tackling the pinch points in existing financial support and for widening access to help schemes. Directors of small businesses are not looked after, job changers can lose out, and companies placing employees into furlough are still not in receipt of any cash to help pay the wages. Ministers want to help, but it is taking time for the administrative procedures to be put into place and to operate on the scale required.

There have been issues over the supply of protective clothing for health and care workers. I have taken these up centrally as have many others and more is promised. Companies around the country are engaged in increasing manufacture. There is plenty of government money to buy the kit, and plenty of Ministerial will to see more delivered, but the system is stretched by the sudden and continuing surge in demands.

Many people want to see more tests done to see if people have the virus. Testing care staff who are ill or have been in contact with those who are would allow the return to work of those without the disease. Ministers have made very clear they want many more tests carried out. They were also prepared to buy 3.5 million tests kits to see if people had had the virus and gained some immunity as well. These kits turned out not to be reliable so the order has not yet gone ahead. The tests for the disease that are being supplied are important for patients in hospital and for care workers as priorities. Government is encouraging the ramp up of more production.

The big decision to be made is how long should the lock down continue? The medical and scientific advice is that it is necessary to limit the spread of the disease. It does do grave damage to the economy, denying many people the right to work, costing us many lost jobs and damaged businesses. I have been putting forward proposals of how we might start to lift the restrictions so more can go to work, whilst keeping strong protections for the old and vulnerable with other medical conditions who are most at risk from the virus. I am also seeking more accurate figures about the impact of the virus and the capacity we have available to handle patients. It is vital that this important decision is taken on the basis of reliable data.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood