

Dear Constituent

This is not the letter I wanted to be writing to you this Spring. I had been working hard on an agenda with the government to boost our economy, speed up our growth, create more better paid jobs and improve public facilities in Wokingham. We were making progress when the virus struck.

Now I have to report to you that the economy will shrink substantially as a result of the measures being put in place to combat the epidemic. I am only too well aware that many of you are now experiencing severe difficulties in your businesses, with activity drying up or with the business effectively closed by cancellation of events, eating out, tourism and the rest.

I have switched my main activity to pressing for a comprehensive economic package to keep more people in jobs and to mitigate the worst of the impact of the enforced closures and big decline in demand in many areas. I am pleased that the Bank of England under a new Governor is working closely with the government and has come up with major injections of cash and support to the banking system so commercial banks have the means to help their customers through a difficult time. I have asked for a wide range of financial measures to support business and the self employed, with the stress on grants rather than loans where businesses have lost much of their revenue through no fault of their own. I welcome the emphasis on trying to avoid redundancies, as businesses need to keep talented teams together ready for the upturn when restrictions are lifted on normal life. Yesterday's measures help but do not do enough for the self employed in particular.

I am very conscious that the government has no election mandate for the economic measures it has taken with the purpose of cutting the spread of the virus. Indeed, they are the opposite of what we wished to do and talked about doing. So far I find a minority of you think the government should be taking more and tougher measures, whilst another minority think the fear of the virus is overdone and we should treat it more like winter flu and let it run its course. The majority seem to be in support of the government's tightening of controls as the virus started to spread, to seek to limit the strains on the NHS. I am urging the government to proceed only with measures which command cross party support. The government's chosen way of battling the virus is to limit human contact to limit spread. This requires buy in from most people to succeed, so it cannot be done with just one main political party support where a significant constituency in the country fundamentally disagrees. The government is following an international consensus on how to respond, and drawing on evidence and guidance from the World Health Organisation.

The government is taking emergency powers, which include the right to quarantine individuals who are carrying the disease, and the power to prevent public gatherings. There are also powers to direct and flex the health and schools sectors to meet the extraordinary requirements on healthcare. These powers expire after 2 years. Some in Labour have been suggesting they should be reviewed and only if necessary continued for a second year after one

year. I am urging the government to accept that sensible advice.

I am posting on this website relevant communications from the government that might help people with difficult problems created by the new circumstances. In general terms the position is as follows

1. People caught abroad. The FCO has promised to work with the national governments involved to organise ways back home for all UK citizens wishing to return soon. They should contact the UK Embassy or Consulate near to them who will know if and when this can be organised in their case.
2. Self employed and businesses starved of customers and cash. Various grants, tax holidays and tax deferrals are listed on government websites and [here](#). We await the details of yesterday afternoon's package which I will also post, which was designed to put more help into business to ward off redundancies.
3. People's right to a school place within the reduced educational provision. The list of occupations which qualify parents for places at school for their children has been published, based on the need of the parents to work away from home to maintain essential services. The list of key workers is available to view [here](#).
4. Food supply. There is plenty of food available to feed us all. There have been temporary shortages on the shelves of supermarkets pending extra deliveries. This has mainly been brought about by some people deciding to fill freezers and store cupboards with an unusually large reserve which leaves the shops temporarily empty for customers who need an evening meal. At some point presumably the freezers will be full and demand will return to more normal levels. It would be neighbourly for people not to do this, and great if people who have stocked up now kept away from the shops and used some of their stocks. Informal rationing is being operated by the supermarkets, who are doing a wonderful job in difficult circumstances. If there are too many empty shelves too often they will need to tighten the ration rules.

I wish you all success in avoiding or overcoming the virus yourselves and in your families. I and my staff will help where you need assistance with government rules or think government can do something to improve the situation. None of us have all the answers to this new disease which so far evades treatment and vaccination. Government policy is changing at pace and it sometimes takes a little time for the detail and implementation to catch up.

The best advice I can give is commonsense. Try to avoid contact with anyone outside your immediate family at home as anyone may be carrying the virus or you may yourself be doing so. Behave towards others as if you did have the virus by keeping a respectful distance. Look after the vulnerable in your family. Buy what you need, but be mindful of the needs of others. This is a time when communities can come together to help each other. It is a time where if you have the capacity it would be great to help those in need, and for local and voluntary efforts to emerge to take some of the strain. Lonely people in isolation would appreciate safe communications by social media or phone.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood