

Letter to Matt Hancock

Dear Matt

When you briefed MPs this week you stressed that the government does not have all the answers and is open to good ideas from colleagues that could alleviate the problems emerging. MPs are well placed to pick up details of what is going wrong or what needs government help or clarification. There are four main areas where I would like to offer some suggestions.

1. The need for volunteers to help where services are overwhelmed. We have the promise that many people in jobs where the business has effectively been closed will be able to keep their jobs pending re-opening thanks to pay mainly from the state. We could ask some of them to spend part of their time helping in the community. Immediately we need more people capable of doing shopping for the elderly or self isolated. Maybe some could be lent to logistics and food companies and food retailers under strain from extra demand. I doubt there would need to be any compulsion, with many companies and individuals in enforced idleness being willing to help in positive and appropriate ways. There would need to be definition of what should be unpaid volunteer work and what work should be paid for by the temporary alternative employer.
2. The need to match the scheme for the employed in affected areas with a top up income from the Tax and National Insurance system for the self employed. The Tax Authorities know who they are, what they earned last year, and the number of their bank account. The self employed should be able to notify the authorities of the extent of the downturn of their income from turnover loss and get a tax rebate or reimbursement to top their income up to 80% of past levels as long as they were still offering their service and relying on it for their livelihood. Any self declarations that turned out to be false would result in subsequent tough penalties and their publication.
3. Food supply. It looks as if the main problem is aggressive hoarding, with stories of people buying abnormally large quantities and buying up new freezers to store it in. On top will be some genuine increase in supermarket demand as people who before had some of their meals out in a staff canteen or at events and working meals instead eat all those meals at home. This latter does not expand the total demand for food but means diverting food from catering trade wholesalers to supermarket retailers immediately. The government should toughen its advice to supermarkets to impose appropriate controls on volume buying, and state that the police will stand behind the supermarkets in enforcing sensible measures to limit greedy behaviour. If necessary the Bill should grant enforcement powers for temporary supermarket ration rules.
4. Greater conversion to on line and remote solutions to service provision. You have done a great job persuading the NHS to do much more on line or by phone at a time when exposing ill people to others who may have this virus would not be helpful. I would suggest that state education makes a more concerted effort to put educational materials and lessons

on line so this generation of GCSE and A level pupils do not miss out on the remaining weeks of their courses and formal revision. There would need to be help for those pupils who lack internet access at home through the loan of machines or opening school IT areas for their attendance with suitable segregation of pupils.

I will set out more detail behind these proposals in letters to the lead secretary of State in each case. I am writing to you in the first instance knowing how central you are to the total policy and responding to your invitation.

Yours ever

John