

Saving lives and livelihoods – the policy dilemma

The government is accused of mixed messages and shifts of policy in response to the pandemic. It is in practice trying to achieve a precarious balance between bearing down on the virus and allowing the resumption of more normal economic life.

There are now two strong camps in the nation. There are the freedom lovers who think more of the special restrictions and measures should be lifted. They do not think the pandemic is that serious and want to see liberties restored. They point out the death rate as published is now very low and the pressure is off intensive care. There are pandemic fighters, who want every measure of control taken that can help bear down on the virus and go on to eliminate it. They resent any moves to more normal lives and worry that all relaxations come at a heavy medical price. They argue it is only a matter of time before the current upsurge in reported cases of the virus finds itself into the Care Homes and homes of the vulnerable and raises the death rate.

The government itself reflects these divisions in society. The Chancellor argues the case for more economic relaxation, whilst the Health Secretary puts forward the case for more restrictions based on official advice from the medical and scientific establishment. Policy tries to do a bit of both.

In order to inform public policy better and to influence the many people who feel both impulses, there need to be some further improvements in the data and approach. We need to have better numbers collected over a sustained period for how many cases as a proportion of the population, how many serious cases needing intensive care, and how many death wholly or largely attributable to CV 19. Some of the back numbers are unreliable, and there have been various changes in definitions.

The officials of NHS England and Public Health England need to take the government's policy of increasing testing, and the substantial sums of money Ministers have made available, and show how the large demand for tests today can soon be met. The NHS needs to concentrate on getting its staff back to work in every surgery and ward to start to reduce the backlog of other treatments and to stop avoidable deaths from causes other than CV 19.