

Flattening the curve

If you can measure it you can manage it. Government policy towards the virus is to manage down the numbers of people with the illness seeking admission to hospital, for the doubly good reason that we do not want many people seriously ill and there are limits on hospital capacity to deal with them.

They are advised by epidemiologists, people who predict the likely numbers of individuals who catch a disease in an epidemic based on past experiences of other epidemics and daily data on the course of the one they are following. In a situation where there is no known or agreed successful treatment for a disease and no vaccination to block its spread, their advice is to stop many people catching it by social segregation. In the meantime medical research may find treatments and a vaccine for future protection. It also allows rapid expansion of the capacity of the medical facilities, and wholesale transfer of trained medical personnel and wards to treating the epidemic victims.

The issue I am seeking more guidance on from the government and their epidemiological advisers is what does winning look like? When will they have flattened the curve enough?

Public Health England on behalf of the wider government publishes daily two sets of figures. One is the daily addition to the case total, and the other is the grim daily addition to the total deaths ascribed to the virus. The problem with these data sets is they are incomplete and prone to error. In default of reliable tests for significant samples of the entire population, repeated regularly, we do not know the current infection rate or the case total. Many people have caught a mild version of it – or something like it – and have self isolated. Their recovery will not be reflected in the total because they were never tested .

The Death rate is also based on a set of judgements. Worldwide practice varies, with some doctors attributing numerous deaths of people with the virus to pre-existing or other serious conditions, whilst others are more likely to regard any patient dying with the virus as dying because of the virus. The UK is currently thinking of adding more deaths to the total by ascribing death to the virus in cases not admitted to hospital. To get a more accurate figure most deaths would need to include a virus test, and protocols would need to be followed over how to judge the virus contribution to mortality.

So I am asking if we have a consistent set of figures based on clear definitions with resilient data collection, which is needed to decide how much to flatten the curve and to determine how successful policy is. We all are willing the government on because we want to cut the death rate. The next few days are crucial as we should be seeing a drop in new cases reflecting the days people are spending in isolation.

Guidance on social distancing and when to self-isolate

I am aware that many are unsure about social distancing, and when to self-isolate, particularly for those who are over 70 and those under 70 with certain underlying conditions. I have just received updated guidance from the Government on social distancing which I thought would be useful.

The guidance is available to view [here](#).

The role of Parliament in the crisis

I am uneasy that I cannot go to Parliament and raise there the issues and problems that concern my constituents. I appreciate this is the normal time for an Easter recess, but these are not normal times. My case load, email box and website are even more active than usual. There is heightened awareness of government given the large increase in powers and the direct effects it is having on all our lives. I of course take things up by email, phone and letter, as Ministers are working.

I am seeking reassurances today that Parliament will be allowed back after the recess as planned. I understand we will need to continue adapting the work pattern to offer more protection to those involved, assuming the social segregation measures are still in place. The Speaker set out some changes which helped before the recess and more might be possible, to limit the number in the chamber at any time, but to ensure that public questions and arguments can still be put. Maybe there can be a temporary use of remote technology, so Parliament can have its version of the daily Number 10 press conferences with MPs asking the questions and making the points to the Ministers on duty.

This should be a time to demonstrate the importance of single member constituency representation at Westminster. Each of us receive many practical pieces of advice and difficult cases that reveal cracks or imperfections in the rules and government programmes. These need to be put to government Ministers by MPs who are used to speaking truth to power and who know the Ministers well and how they might respond.

I would like strengthened accountability during this recess. The Cabinet office does allow a daily call to put issues, but it would be good to have a recess written question facility to all departments and virtual Ministerial

statements with questions from MPs when the government is making important announcements.

I am raising these issues with the Speaker.

[The Irish protocol and state aids](#)

Two highly qualified and experienced lawyers told the Conference (held before the virus restrictions but the comment held over here owing to virus news) that the UK needs to get rid of the Irish protocol one way or another. The current protocol seeks to treat Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK, and in default of a comprehensive borders and trade agreement seeks to lock Northern Ireland into the rules and customs of the EU.

The UK government is right to say it will not place a trade border between GB and Northern Ireland. This could be the result of the negotiations achieving a free trade and trade facilitation package that avoids any need for one. Alternatively if there is no trade deal, the UK government could simply refuse to impose one.

Sammy Wilson for the DUP pointed out that most trade flowing between NI and GB stays within the UK so there is absolutely no need for checks and tariffs as it moves across the Irish Sea between the two parts of the UK. He also pointed out we have a complex Northern Ireland/ Republic of Ireland border today, with the need to calculate VAT and Excise payments. This is all done with an invisible border, with the tax calculations and payments being made by computer from the truck manifests. There is no need for a person at a border post with a calculating machine taking fivers. It should similarly be possible to handle international trade crossing the North Sea within the UK by electronic means and by payments at international borders.

The general mood of the conference was the government must keep its word of no new physical customs border between GB and NI, whether by agreement or not. It is difficult to see how the EU could enforce any interpretation they might place on the Withdrawal Agreement to require a GB/NI border in the event of no agreement. This would be an internal matter for a sovereign UK.

[Update from the Citizens Advice Bureau](#)

in Wokingham

I have received this information from the Citizens Advice Bureau in Wokingham:

Your communities are strong and resilient. There are simple things you can do to help them continue to thrive!

1. Check-in on vulnerable family, friends and neighbours

Just helping them with their shopping and checking they have everything they need can make a huge difference. Know someone self-isolating? Call or text them to check that they're ok.

2. Volunteer with a local charity

Wokingham Borough Council is working with local charities to provide community support during this difficult time.

To volunteer, visit the Wokingham Volunteer Centre website at www.volunteerwokinghamborough.org.uk.

Do you need support?

If you are in need of help or support, reach out to your community. You are not alone!

1. Call on your family, friends, neighbours or those you trust

Our communities are showing solidarity and community spirit during this difficult time. Most of us will have family, friends or trusted neighbours who can help. Just reach out!

2. Call on your local charity

If you are already in contact with a local charity, call them.

3. Call on your community & voluntary sector

Wokingham Borough Council is working with local charities to provide a community response for those who don't have support and need advice or practical help. This is not an alternative to the NHS or social services.

It is local residents looking after each other. Citizen's Advice is working with local charities. Call them on 0300 330 1189 (if prompted enter 0118 978 7258) or contact them via admin@citizensadvicewokingham.org.uk.