

Buying from home

Recent experiences with delayed and cancelled deliveries of medical equipment and clothing from abroad should lead us to ask whether we should source more of these important items from home.

Procurement and state aid rules has required us to source many things through open tender globally or within the Customs Union of the EU. Today there are many UK companies that could make medical machines, offer clothing and produce drugs and vaccines. Some can do so already, some would need to invest in capacity and would want reasonable assurances of sustained contracts.

The challenges posed by the virus are leading many countries, governments and companies to reconsider their arrangements. There was always an override to procure the most sensitive and potent parts of defence equipment nationally, with further limitations on buying from outside friendly states and the NATO alliance for things we do not make for ourselves. It looks as if these arrangements can be widened to cover more goods.

Recent experiences will re open the case for Chinese involvement in our digital systems and networks. Delays with PPE will lead to a wish to have more capacity here in the UK that can be scaled up in times of emergency.

I have always argued that our defence policy requires us to own the relevant technologies and to have plans to produce much more of our requirement at home against the day we have no wish to see were we to get into a larger war where enemies tried to throttle supplies from overseas.

It would also be a good part of strategic and emergency planning to make sure we have the capacity at home to handle medical emergencies, which must include the supply system to provide the drugs, medical supplies and equipment needed for any given pandemic or other disaster.

West Berkshire

I had a most reassuring conversation with the Chief Executive of West Berkshire Council today. He reported no known problems with protective clothing for West Berkshire social services. They have established a virus test centre in Newbury for key workers to use if they have symptoms or worries about their health or exposure to the disease.

He praised the work of community groups in Burghfield and Mortimer. There are some money issues which I will take up with the government over social care and the distribution of the additional £1.6bn announced for Councils recently.

I thanked him and his staff for all the work they have put into social care, business grants and other requirements from the virus. I also join him in saying thank you to all the volunteers who are helping the community.

Parliament to meet

I am pleased that Parliament is to meet today and in the following days, with new rules encouraging participation from remote locations. I had made an early request for our return, and am delighted the Speaker has been so active in securing a way of bringing it about.

In the meantime there have been various routes to make points to Ministers and to contribute to the policy debate, as I have been doing.

COVID-19: Business 'support finder' tool and ventilator specifications

The Government has launched a new 'support finder' tool which will help businesses and self-employed people across the UK to quickly and easily determine what financial support is available to them.

For more details, please visit this link:

<https://www.gov.uk/business-coronavirus-support-finder>

The Government has produced an update to the specification for any manufacturers seeking to make ventilators.

For more details please visit this link:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/specification-for-ventilators-to-be-used-in-uk-hospitals-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak?utm_source=284796da-db81-4c5e-b732-7a20710333bf&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate

If your business is able to support, please register that capability here:

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-support-from-business>

Dear Constituent

The government has decided to continue the lock down for another three weeks. They are afraid that an early relaxation would allow the virus to spread more rapidly again, losing some or all the gains seen in fewer patients going to hospital in recent days.

In response to past representations by myself and others the government is now doing more work on a timetable for getting more people back to work. It is unfortunate there may be no early arrival of a vaccine to protect the population in large numbers, nor even an early medical agreement on a treatment which makes it much more likely patients with severe cases on Covid 19 survive. For that reason we need to plan to live with the virus whilst still being able to run our economy at a reasonable level of output with more people in jobs and more companies generating revenue than today.

I have suggested to the government that a back to work plan should encompass new ways of working with better protection for employees. Office based businesses could encourage much more homeworking, with limited numbers of staff in the main office observing social distancing. Factories and warehouses need to operate at levels that do not require staff to be close together, with additional automation where necessary. Any business staff in touch with the public should be given protective screens or personal protective clothing suitable to the risk level.

We should continue to give strong advice to at risk groups to stay at home, and do more to support them with remote technology to ensure deliveries and safe social contact. The protection of care homes needs more work. I supported moves to ensure all patients to be discharged from hospitals back to care homes should be tested. We need to avoid introducing the virus into a home through the return of a patient. I am pleased the government has now promised to do this.

Yesterday saw the Furlough scheme to subsidise employment which I have long championed open for claims. It is vital as many jobs as possible are saved by this means, to keep them in being until their employers can re open and afford the wages again. The self employed package still excludes some groups who deserve support and is still on the low side so I am asking the Treasury to look again at it.

Let us hope the positive trends in cases and deaths continues as a reward for the sacrifice many are making. On the latest figures too many people are still dying, but our death rate in relation to total population is still well below Belgium, Spain and Italy who have suffered particularly badly. The next few days are important. If the rate of death and of new patients to hospital continues to decline we should be able to start to relax controls. In the meantime I am conscious there are pressing needs like getting more dentists to work on emergency treatment, and tackling some of the backlog of medical appointments that were cancelled or delayed to make way for Covid 19 patients.

I would like to say another big thank you to all of you who have volunteered to help in so many ways. Some are delivering food parcels, some tackling loneliness of those staying at home alone, some are making protective clothing. I also wish to thank all who are going to work to care for people, to treat people in hospital, to provide us with food and to keep basic services and deliveries going.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood