

“Contain, delay and mitigate any outbreak”

These words from Public Health England have framed policy so far. The first phase (Contain) saw efforts to trace, test and isolate anyone carrying the virus and the people they had met. The second phase (Delay) has seen big efforts to impede the spread of the virus by keeping people apart and keeping them from places of work as well as from entertainment. The final phase (Mitigate) is to learn to live with the disease, limiting its spreads with sensible precautions with enough capacity to treat patients who do get it whilst we await vaccinations.

Their initial plan played down the extent of the controls needed for the second phase we are now in. They told us on March 3 that if we got to this stage it would mean “people distancing strategies such as school closures, encouraging greater home working, reducing the number of large social gatherings- whilst ensuring the country’s ability to run as normally as possible”. They seemed to move on from the bit about as near normal as possible when they came to design the detail of the lock down. It emerged it entailed closing all physical shops other than food and medicines, stopping the car and homes markets and much else besides. They promised to “implement a distribution strategy for the UK’s stockpiles of key medicines and equipment” . After early issues with inadequate supplies the army was brought in to help and orders stepped up to business. .

The idea of delaying the virus was to reduce “the risk of overlapping with seasonal flu and other challenges that the colder months bring”. This implies they expected to lift the controls come late Spring and early summer.

We now see some other countries deciding to relax their controls progressively but carefully in the next few weeks. China has done so. Austria has just set out a timetable starting next week by re opening lots of small shops. Sweden and South Korea have not gone very far in imposing controls in the first place though Sweden is now taking more powers. The issue is what is the trigger to start relaxing the controls? Is it a tailing off in the death rate? A tailing off in the recorded number of new infections? How much value can we place on the numbers for new infections when most people that get it stay at home and are not tested?

We do need greater visibility on how this crucial call will be made. Some will argue the controls must go on for longer to avoid a possible second wave. Others will point to the big economic damage delays in getting back to work creates. As there was always a three phase strategy it would at least be good to know what the trigger is for going to the third phase and putting Shut Down UK behind us.

The PM

Hearing the news that the PM is in an intensive care ward came as a shock. I wish him a speedy recovery. Many Constituents want me to pass on their good wishes to him and his family.

The role of Public Health England

Public Health England set out the strategy for handling this pandemic in a document published on 3 March as the "Coronavirus Action Plan". So far Ministers have followed it.

This body conducts important research into disease, is advised by a scientific advisory committee, and spends £4.25 bn a year. It is run by an Executive team with six people paid more than £200,000 last year including pension benefits.

Its last Report and Accounts to June 2019 says on its cover that the organisation is "credible, independent and ambitious". On page 4 it states the aims of the organisation:

"PHE exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. PHE exists to protect..." (sic)

If you read on you discover it also exists to reduce health inequalities, but missed out the crucial last word in the first iteration of aims. Credibility and ambition do not appear to extend to proof reading a formal annual publication before going to press and putting it on the web.

Last year the body wrote off £207 million "in relation to counter measures held for emergency preparedness and vaccines past their shelf life". It had also written off money the year before in the same way. Some of this is inevitable when you are holding supplies for a purpose you hope does not materialise which then deteriorate in store.

On 3 March PHE told us that we "have planned extensively over the years for an event like this, and the UK is well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the population". The Agencies that have to respond are properly resourced with "people, equipment and medicines they need". "The UK maintains strategic stockpiles of the most important medicines and protective equipment for healthcare staff." Do you agree? Tomorrow I will look at the evolving strategy.

An exit strategy

We need to lift the ban on people working. A 3 week firebreak against the virus has bought the NHS time to expand capacity and to handle the resulting case load. As a result there are many more Intensive care beds and oxygen systems available.

Government in the next phase should still have as its main aim limiting the number of deaths. That is why it should still strongly advise all those at risk groups and the elderly to stay at home out of contact with possible virus spreaders. It should redouble efforts to ensure all at risk get home deliveries of all they need, and plenty of social contact through the phone and social media.

The rest of us should be free to go back to workplaces whilst continuing with strong hygiene measures and whilst keeping a sensible distance from others where possible. We need to rescue the small businesses and save the self employed by letting them earn money again.

We should not go for the return of just those people who pass a test to say they have had the virus. The right to work should not depend on some government test which might not even be accurate. We do not want to create a perverse incentive to put yourself in harms way to try to catch the virus so you can then win your freedom. It is difficult to see how you could enforce a ban on people who had not had the virus from travelling and working.

The economic cost of continuing with these lock downs will be massive. Unemployment will shoot up to record levels, many businesses will go bankrupt or go through major financial reconstructions, state spending and debt will leap up, and there will be a major reduction in the standard of living and disposable incomes of many people previously or still working in the private sector.

Dear Constituent

Over the last few days I have been in regular contact with the government trying to get improvements in a wide range of areas, and seeking better information about where we are in fighting the virus and expanding NHS capacity.

Let me reassure that currently the local NHS has some spare Intensive care beds, following a doubling of its capacity to handle the virus. It also has well advanced plans to expand capacity further, should this prove necessary.

It would do so in two phases, leading to possible additional doubling of capacity. This would lead to a 300% increase on the starting position.

The most important thing is to try to bring the death rate down. As there are still no generally recognised and adopted cures the best way to get the death rate down is for all vulnerable people to self isolate for as long as is needed whilst the epidemic is still widespread. The NHS has notified people whose other medical conditions make them more vulnerable to the severe version of the disease. The elderly are also more at risk.

I have held phone calls with Wokingham Borough Council and seen West Berkshire's work to marshall volunteers and help provide delivery services to those who are self isolated at home. West Berkshire sets it out through info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-communityhub. Wokingham refers those needing help to admin@citizensadvicewokingham.org.uk

I have also lobbied government over the national NHS Volunteers scheme. requesting that it includes help for people self isolating who cannot get out to shop or who need some telephone or social media contact.

I have contributed proposals on food supply to speed switching food from catering contracts to supermarket shelves. It is good to see more full shelves and a better range of products available, There were too many empty shelves during the week or so of maximum purchases when many people decided to stock up at the same time as many others needed to buy more to eat at home instead of having a school or work lunch. I would like to thank all those who have been growing, packing, transporting and selling the food to us in the shops. They have done a great job in difficult circumstances. I hope constituents will remember to thank them and recognise the problems they have encountered through no fault of the businesses and staff concerned. There was plenty of food available overall but demand shot up to include individual stockpiling and it took time to switch some of the catering supplies.

I pressed successfully for schemes to offer state financial support for companies to keep staff on that no longer are allowed to work, and for the self employed who are banned from earning a living. I do not normally favour state subsidies to business, but do think this is an entirely unprecedented situation. The government is preventing people and companies from earning a living for public health reasons and to help the NHS, so the state should offer money to pay the basic bills during the period when work is prohibited.

Unfortunately the wide ranging and seemingly generous schemes outlined by the Chancellor were slow to come into effect and had various restrictions in the small print which requires change. This week saw some welcome alterations to the bank lending schemes, insufficient changes to eligibility for the furlough and self employed schemes, and little progress with speeding it all up. I am pressing ever harder. If companies cannot access cash to keep people on they will make them redundant. If the self employed have no income they may have to abandon their business and seek Universal Credit.

I pressed for the government to publish regular updates of how many people

need hospital and intensive care treatment for Covid 19 and how much spare capacity the system has. As one of the main aims of the lock down is to buy time for the NHS to be able to cope with the epidemic it is good to see these numbers now, to see there is spare capacity and to see substantial new capacity being opened in major centres against continuing rises in numbers. What we now all want to see is a falling off in the increase in the seriously ill as the impact of lock down is felt. As fewer people pass the virus on to vulnerable people who could get the serious version that requires hospital support, so we should see benefits from the policy.

I am quite clear that the damage being done to jobs, companies and the self employed is large. We need to get out of lock down as soon as possible. I hope these severe measures soon bring the relief we want to see. I am making proposals of how we could relax the restrictions later this month to rescue the economy, whilst still continuing to give maximum protection to all those who are particularly vulnerable to this epidemic.

Thank you for all you are doing to help bring this to an end.

John Redwood