

Let's see a plan for the nationalised railway

Trains travel largely empty. Losses must be colossal. The railway has all the costs of the pre CV19 era, with the turnover of the post CV 19 social distancing era. Ministers need to seek a new plan and tell us how they will make the railways more useful and less costly to taxpayers.

For a long time the railway has been effectively nationalised. Network Rail is completely state owned and heavily subsidised. The private sector train operating companies have to run a timetable laid down by government, under heavy regulations that leave little scope for innovation or service change. Rail pathways are strictly rationed. It is little wonder many of them struggle to survive as management has little scope to cut costs or boost revenues. Trying to get productivity and service improvements is very difficult. There is a long tradition of industrial action against management induced change.

The railway normally prevents choice for passengers and competition to reduce fares and raise quality of service. Rail operators respond to requirements imposed by Regulators. Their remuneration in part depends on targets, where it may make sense to game the rules. Quite often the train operator fails to provide a reliable on time service owing to failures of the nationalised network operator. The whole system has out of date signalling which limits the numbers of trains per hour. Monopoly providers seek to prevent new challengers competing.

Instead of building a very expensive new line, HS2, the railway should accelerate digital signalling to increase track capacity by around 25%. The railway needs to reconsider what sustainable travel patterns are likely in this new world and adjust services accordingly . It is difficult to see how passengers will be attracted back and better served without private capital and competition in service provision. The nationalised monopoly based model we have been running for sometime is not delivering the services and quality we want. It is now sending unaffordable bills to taxpayers.

On line visit to CLASP

Yesterday I spent an hour talking to Wokingham's CLASP group. They raised a range of issues with me about the response to the virus, service for those with learning difficulties, use of public transport and the role of the Council. They asked me to tell them about the range of work and problems I deal with as local MP. I encouraged them to use this website. I would like to thank all involved in this charity for the work they do. I

promised to take up a couple of matters for them on receipt of the details.

Letter to the Education Secretary

Dear Gavin

You were right to warn us that grade inflation can cause problems for universities allocating limited places to the best candidates. Grade inflation leads to demands for more discriminating higher grades, as with the introduction of the A* to offer some distinction between a large number of students who all came to qualify for an A grade.

It is important that next year the Examining Boards and Ofqual re establish a sound process for awarding grades to students that commands general confidence in the qualifications and allows universities to select the best students for the courses they offer. I am glad to hear that we will be returning to an exam based system. Awarding grades determined by the pupil's own teachers places the teachers in a difficult position of having to defend the grade, and leaves open the worry that some teachers take a more generous approach to their own students than others. An exam is professionally marked by teachers marking the work of other people's students, removing the chance of judgement being influenced by personal knowledge and relationship with the pupil. The grade arrived at is recognised as independent of the pupil's own teacher and school.

Next year the Examiners and the Boards will need to ask themselves how to pitch the standards and the grade boundaries. Should they return to something like the level of 2019, or should they incorporate the grade inflation of 2020? It is an important issue because it will send out a message about how the Examiners see standards. If the best universities and courses stay with similar numbers of UK students between the two years it merely determines how high a grade any given pupil needs to achieve to get to the best institutions. If there are roughly the same total number of places grade inflation has an impact on grades needed to get a place at all.

There will also be questions to resolve over what to expect of A level candidates who lost some months of full time education in school this spring and summer. The Boards will also need to consider what impact if any complying with CV 19 guidance on social distancing will have on their education in the 2020-21 academic year. Will there be any adjustments to practicals, events in subjects like music and drama, foreign language conversations and other elements in some A level assessments? The Boards both need to be fair the class of 2021 and ensure that nonetheless they attain good standards that are comparable to other years.

One thing it should be possible to agree. Getting all exam year pupils back into school and offering them full teaching and good curriculum from here is

essential for their education and for maintaining standards. I would appreciate details of your approach to the teaching and standards of exam for 2021.

Yours

John

University places

I joined the on line meeting with Education Ministers yesterday evening to discuss the A level change of policy. The main talking point for MPs and Ministers was the knock on from the decision to University admissions. The University Minister said she would issue a letter today to the Universities urging them to offer places to all those with conditional offers who could now meet the requirements following A level upgrades. Any student who has accepted a place at their second choice can now contact their first choice institution if they can meet the conditions to see if they will honour their original offer. If they are happy with the place elsewhere there is no need. It would be prudent to sound out the first choice university about their conditional offer and whether they are still offering a firm place before cancelling the offer accepted elsewhere.

There may be shortages of places for qualified students following the upgrades for some subjects or at some institutions. Ministers were aware of particular pressures on places for medicine and promised to review capacity with the Health Secretary. MPs pressed for further communications about the availability of places in medical areas.

Managing the public sector

There are a number of worries about the day to day management of public services by Departments and quangos. Ministers are responsible for policy decisions , for budget priorities and new legislation. They rely on the goodwill and abilities of many officials to supervise the day to day running of existing policies, to hire good people, to buy in necessary stocks, to distribute benefits, collect taxes and provide licences and approvals.

We have seen in recent months parts of the public sector struggling to carry out regular functions, It is true the lock downs were disruptive, but most of the things government needed to do could be carried out from home with suitable computer back up, and by a limited number of key workers continuing

to go into offices and other government installations.

I have drawn attention in past blogs to the big shortfall in normal NHS work , and the shortage of work sent to the private hospitals which were contracted to undertake some of it. As the CV 19 hospital numbers came down there was a slowness in creating isolating units for the remaining CV 19 patients and returning most NHS capacity to the other needs. It appears the NHS is still well below capacity on many specialities , and it is taking time to restore full GP services in some locations.

It appears that the Passport Office allowed a substantial backlog to build up for UK passports. This is something which allows on line applications and processing and should be compatible with more homeworking. I also learn from the media that there is a backlog in issuing provisional driving licences to new drivers. Again it is difficult to see why this could not be done remotely.

I have not had reports of failures to issue cash payments to furlough employers, to benefit seekers or to small businesses under the new scheme. It shows that some parts of government were able to deal with large new surges in demand and to implement new programmes rapidly. It makes the failures in established areas more surprising.

We saw the failure of Public Health England to buy enough protective clothing and to establish a strong enough test regime quickly. We are now witnessing Ofqual's inability to implement a policy which does uphold standards whilst being fair to young people when the ability to take examinations was removed.

I would be interested in your examples of where the public sector responded well to new circumstances, and where it failed even in areas where it was simply meant to be doing what it had always done, adapted to more homeworking and social distancing.