

The shops are opening again

It is welcome news that most shops closed to help arrest the pandemic are to open again today if they wish and if they can do safely.

Many retailers have been inventive in working out how to allow people into shops to see the stock, to choose and to buy whilst observing the rules of social distancing. The food stores pioneered techniques including asking people to wait outside, limiting the numbers in the shop at any time, going round the store in a prescribed way, keeping your distance when waiting to pay and protecting staff with screens and protective clothing. It helps if customers wear some facial covering. These and other ideas will now be adapted by the non food retailers who start trading again today.

I trust people will welcome this relaxation and will want to go and buy things from the shops. Many people say they value their local High Street and want the shops there to be available for them. To help secure their future it is important to back them in the only way that counts in the next few weeks, by visiting them and buying things from them. Of course if you are vulnerable or have to self isolate different considerations come into play, but for most people the risks of shopping for non food should be no bigger than the risks we have been taking to shop for food in recent weeks.

I have argued throughout this crisis so far that government needs to give the highest priority to saving lives, but also has to follow policies that can save livelihoods. I was pleased the government took up the idea of government cash to support staff who could not go to work, but this cannot go indefinitely. The only way to pay the wages in the months ahead is for people to be back at work serving and supplying customers who will pay the bills.

High Streets were struggling a bit against the formidable competitive challenge of on line shopping before the pandemic hit. It has now got a lot tougher, with almost three months of no trading from shops whilst people switch to the internet offer. That is why if we want to help restore our High Streets we need to support our favourite retailers as they go to the cost and trouble of adapting to the new conditions and opening their stores today.