

# Oliver Dowden speech to the Law Family Commission on Civil Society

Thanks Gus, and it's a pleasure to be at the launch of the Law Family Commission.

Can I also pay tribute to Andrew Law and the Law Family Charitable Foundation, whose generous support has made this Commission possible.

I was interested to read the report and Gus O'Donnell's article in the FT – and I was particularly struck by what Andrew Law wrote in his foreword, about how we can best coordinate the “millions of individual acts of benevolence that take place every day in our nation”.

That's exactly what we are looking to do in government with our approach to civil society.

And I think this report is a timely and useful intervention. This launch comes at the end of one of the most challenging years in recent history – and I'd like to talk a little bit about that context, and what it has taught us about civil society, before getting into the government's approach in the coming years.

I know how hard hit civil society has been by the crisis – unable to fundraise face to face, unable to open charity shops, cafes and other retail outlets – especially at a time when the public has looked to the sector for frontline support more than ever.

The Commission's report identifies one key challenge, first and foremost – and that is what it calls our collective failure to properly value what civil society delivers.

But I want to be clear up front: that is not this government's attitude.

That's why we made a £750 million investment into the sector when the COVID crisis hit, to help ensure it could keep delivering essential support to those who needed it the most.

That was the first sector-specific financial intervention my department sought, and one of the first the Treasury granted across the entire economy. It was by far the biggest package of its kind in Europe, and a signal of our clear commitment to the sector.

Because in the unique challenges it has posed, and the enormous response required, I think COVID demonstrated beyond doubt that we can't afford not to value civil society.

At the same time, the wider context for civil society has shifted. When this pandemic hit, we witnessed a surge of goodwill in our communities.

The Commission's own research has found that 18 million people in England helped friends or neighbours during the first lockdown, by doing their shopping or walking the dog.

There's a strong appetite for community, and for helping good causes. And as we look back on this extraordinary year, I think it's a good moment to stop, to reflect, and to try and answer two important questions:

How do we capitalise on that surge of goodwill, on the army of volunteers who put their hands up during COVID – and make sure the epidemic of kindness we've witnessed in the last 12 months lasts far beyond this pandemic?

What lessons can we take from the past year, from the way civil society has had to radically adapt – and does COVID offer us and civil society a new way forward?

So let me offer some reflections on the key points from the report you have published today, and give you a taste of what the government is looking to do to unleash the potential of civil society.

And I use the term "unleash" deliberately there. Because I strongly believe, as your report rightly highlights, that there is huge power in civil society, and that it should be the government's job to unlock it – not try to replace it, or end up stymying it.

Not running things from the top-down – but stewarding the sector, unlocking resources and empowering volunteers.

So my first priority is for the government's work to focus on where it can add most value in this space.

The way the sector uses digital and data is a good example of this.

The Commission's report talks about the "digital deficit" – how more than one-in-three charities say they don't have the resources to invest in technology.

But I've been struck by the way charities have innovated and adapted during the pandemic – particularly through their use of digital technology: 92 percent of organisations have moved their services online as a result of COVID.

And the government has played an important role here, with a significant amount of the £200 million we have made available to small and medium sized charities via the Coronavirus Community Support Fund being spent on helping them to digitise their offer.

I know that charities can't deliver everything online, and that some of their most important work is done face-to-face.

But one of COVID's positive legacies could be the way it has helped digitise the sector for the long-term. And of course, going digital means more data, and that means making it easier to both evaluate and boost an organisation's

impact.

In my wider role as Secretary of State, I spend a lot of time thinking about how we can make better use of data in the wider economy. In fact, it's one of the areas where I think we can make a really significant impact now that we have left the EU.

But just as data isn't always well used in the public sector, your report highlights the 'data deficit' in civil society. 87% of charities say a focus on impact measurement is important to delivering their objectives, but fewer than half describe their knowledge and use of such approaches as "good" or "very good".

In truth, I think the government has the same data deficit.

The early stages of the Covid crisis showed that Whitehall didn't know as much about civil society as we thought we did. Where the volunteers were, which charities were best placed to step in and support public services, and what the real picture of its financial health was.

That matters: because without that understanding, we in government can't be as effective in supporting the sector or making the most of what it has to offer.

So I have made it a priority for my department to build up that knowledge – bringing in new skills and tools in order to do so. This was an important part of our settlement for the Office for Civil Society in the recent Spending Review, and I hope to see it bear fruit in the coming months as we take a different approach.

Secondly – and this is another issue that the Commission's report highlights – we want to look at how we can help bring more resources into the sector.

But not all of it needs to come from the same old sources. We need to look at bold new ways to raise funds.

So, for example, the Commission's report highlights what it calls the "philanthropic deficit" in this country. While the UK is undoubtedly a generous nation – and we saw that in abundance throughout the pandemic – we lag behind countries like the U.S., to the equivalent of an estimated £45 billion a year. That's very nearly the entire income of our charity sector income.

I want to know how we can use philanthropy more in this country in the future. Why is it that we don't get philanthropy on the same scale as you see in the U.S.? What role can the government play in stimulating it?

And as part of this, my excellent colleague Baroness Barran, the Minister for Civil Society, is doing some very important work on leveraging finance.

She has led two hugely successful fund-matching partnerships during the pandemic – firstly, the BBC's Big Night In, which saw government funds match public generosity and secondly the £85 million Community Match Challenge,

which doubled government investment by unlocking support from philanthropists, foundations and grant making organisations.

It's also become increasingly clear that a growing number of people are looking to invest their money in companies that align with their values. So we're looking at how we can drive impact investment. So in the same way people can now invest directly in funds focused on green investment, we want to look at how this could be applied to the work being done by civil society, to sit alongside the investment government is making.

We're also looking to expand the UK's Dormant Assets Scheme. This is money that is sitting in unused accounts, begging to be used to tackle some of society's most pressing challenges.

Since 2011, over £745m has been released from that scheme to support work on things like youth unemployment and problem debt. And we made another £150m available in May to help people who have been left particularly vulnerable as a result of COVID. Very shortly, we'll be publishing our response to a consultation on the expansion of that scheme.

And when we talk about making sure that investment has the greatest possible impact, I think we also need to ask some important questions about the National Lottery.

It was established in 1996 – and it has undergone only one real change since then, when a Labour government changed the way funding was distributed.

I'm keen, particularly as we move to a comprehensive spending review, to review where that balance lies.

During this pandemic we've seen how valuable organisations like grassroots sports clubs are in their communities. I want to see how we can best use those kinds of existing organisations to help communities, so that we make the most of our strongest assets on the ground.

And our third priority, something the report again highlights, is how we can unlock another important resource – which is time.

The Report warns that the country's early-pandemic enthusiasm for volunteering and sense of community is beginning to wane.

And yet we hear from so many people, and particularly the young, that they really want to get into volunteering. The will is there – but there are just too many obstacles in the way.

One person might volunteer to help in a care home, for instance, and have to go through a whole process of checks to do so. And then when they try to volunteer in another nearby care home in the same area, they find that they have to go through the exact same process again.

How can the government help simplify this process, and make sure the pandemic spirit of volunteering lives on long beyond this crisis?

Danny Kruger has spoken about a volunteer passport to coordinate the supply and demand of volunteers, which is something we're looking at closely.

We've already strengthened our links with voluntary organisations through the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership, which was given a £4.8 million grant during the coronavirus crisis. That has set us up to work much better together in the future.

These efforts are all part of one of this government's central goals, which is leveling up the country. Leveling up extends to civil society.

One thing we've learnt from COVID is that those areas that already had a strong volunteering infrastructure were able to respond to the crisis much more effectively and much quicker than those without.

So how can we level up the country so that, when the next crisis hits, everyone has access to rapid support?

An important part of this is the Government's new £4 billion Leveling Up Fund.

Danny Kruger's report recommended it, and it's a central piece of the spending review.

But now that we have the funding, we have to make sure the money gets to where it is most needed.

And as we do that, I want to ensure the decisions aren't just made by people sitting in offices in London. It should be driven and directed by the communities on the ground.

As I've touched on throughout my speech, a lot of this comes down to data and analytics, and getting a clear picture of how things stand.

One of the most important things we can do is to try and understand not just the health of the sector, but its value. As Andy Haldane highlighted in a lecture last year, the collective contribution of civil society to our economy and society is hugely underestimated by current economic measures.

And that is why this Commission is so important, and why we'll be wanting to work closely with you throughout this project.

Gus knows better than anyone that my job is to quantify to the Treasury, in terms they understand, what all of us speaking today know: that civil society is not just special but incredibly important.

I look forward to working with all of you in making that case.

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# Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons on coronavirus regulations: 1 December 2020

Mr Speaker, I beg to move that these Regulations now be approved.

And I want to begin by telling the House that I was hugely encouraged by a visit I paid only yesterday to a vaccine plant in North Wales

where I saw for myself the vials of one of seven vaccines backed by the UK Government

that could turn the tide of our struggle against Covid,

not just in this country but around the world.

It is the protection of those vaccines that could get our economies moving again,

and allow us to reclaim our lives.

And that one plant in Wrexham

could produce 300 million doses a year

and yesterday was the momentous day when it began to manufacture the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine.

And it was a very moving moment Mr Speaker when I talked to one of the brilliant young scientists there,

And she described the extraordinary moment for her in her life,

to be part of an enterprise that was she thought truly going to offer humanity a route out of this suffering.

But Mr Speaker, we have to be realistic,

And we have to accept that this vaccine is not here yet, no vaccine is here yet

and while all the signs are promising

and almost every scientist I've talked to agrees that the breakthrough will surely come

we do not yet have one that has gained regulatory approval.

We can't be completely sure when the moment will arrive

and until then we cannot afford to relax,  
especially during the cold months of winter.

The national measures which are now shortly ending in England  
have eased the burden on the NHS and begun to reverse the advance of the  
virus.

Today, the R is back below 1

and the ONS survey is showing that signs of the infection rate are levelling  
off

and Imperial College London has found that the number of people with Covid  
has fallen by a third in England since 2nd November.

But while the virus has been contained, it has not been eradicated.

The latest ONS figures suggest that out of every 85 people in England, one  
has Coronavirus; far more than in the Summer

between 24th November and yesterday, 3,222 people across the UK lost their  
lives;

and despite the immense progress of the last four weeks,

our NHS remains under pressure, with hospitals in three regions – the South  
West, the North East and Yorkshire – all treating more Covid patients now  
than at the peak of the first wave.

So we can't simply allow the current restrictions to expire for the reason he  
gives with no replacement whatever.

With the spread of the epidemic varying across the country, there remains a  
compelling case for regional tiers in England and indeed Mr Speaker a  
compelling necessity for regional tiers.

But I hope the House is clear what I am not asking for today.

This is not another lockdown,

nor is this the renewal of the existing measures in England.

The tiers that I am proposing would mean that from tomorrow  
everyone in England

– including those in tier 3 –

will be free to leave their homes for any reason.

And when they do, they will find the shops open for Christmas,

the hairdressers open,  
the nail bars open,  
gyms and leisure centres, swimming pools open,  
churches, synagogues, mosques and temples will be open for communal worship.  
Organised outdoor sport will resume,  
and in every tier you will be able to meet others in parks and in public  
gardens subject to the Rule of Six.

And every one of those things has been by necessity restricted until today.  
Every one of them would be allowed again tomorrow.

Of course I accept that this is not a return to normality. I wish it were so.  
But it is a bit closer to normality than the present restrictions.

And what we cannot do is lift all of the restrictions at once, or move too  
quickly, in such a way that the virus would begin to spread rapidly again.

That would be the surest way of endangering our NHS and forcing us into a new  
year lockdown, with all the costs that that would impose.

We all accept that the burden on the hospitality sector has been very great.

We feel this deeply, because our pubs, our hotels, restaurants they are in  
many ways the heart of the communities

And part of the fabric of our identity as a country

And everybody can see that the hospitality industry has borne a  
disproportionate share of the burden in this crisis. There's no question  
about it. And that is obviously because we want to keep schools open Mr  
Speaker and we have to take such measures as we can.

I would just remind the House however, that we are not alone in this.

In France bars, restaurants and gyms will not reopen until 20th January at  
the earliest.

In Germany, the hospitality sector will remain closed in its entirety over  
Christmas.

But we will do everything in our power to support our hospitality sector  
throughout this crisis.

We have already extended the furlough scheme for all businesses until the end  
of March,

We've provided monthly grants of up to £3,000 for premises forced to close,



and £2,100 for those that remain open but have suffered because of reduced demand.

We have allocated £1.1 billion for local authorities to support businesses at particular risk.

And today Mr Speaker we are going further with a one-off payment of £1,000 in December to wet pubs – that is Mr Speaker pubs that do not serve food as the House knows

recognising how hard they have been hit by this virus in what is typically their busiest month.

We will also work with the hospitality sector in supporting their bounce back next year.

Mr Speaker I want to stress, that the situation is profoundly different now because there is an end in sight.

And I am not this afternoon seeking open-ended measures.

On the contrary, these regulations come with a sunset clause at the end of February, sorry at the end of the 2 February I should say Mr Speaker.

At that point we will have sufficient data to assess our position after Christmas,

and though I believe these types of restrictions will be needed until the Spring,

they can only be extended beyond 2 February if this House votes for them Mr Speaker.

These are points that have been made with great power as I say by Hon Members on all sides of the House.

We will review the allocation of tiers every fourteen days, starting on 16th December. I just want to make an important point to my Rt Hon friend and to all members who are rightly concerned about the position of their constituencies, our constituencies, in these tiers.

Hon Members have it in their powers, in our power to help move our areas down the tiers,

by throwing their full weight Mr Speaker, our full weight as leaders in our communities behind community testing,

and seizing the opportunity, seizing the opportunity to encourage as many people as possible to take part.

Of the kind we've seen in Liverpool Mr Speaker

where since the 6th November over 284,000 tests have been conducted,

and together with the effect of national restrictions,

the number of cases fell by more than two thirds. This is the model that I would recommend.

We are now proposing that from tomorrow Liverpool City Region and Warrington should be in tier 2, where as previously obviously they were in tier 3.

And we want other regions and other towns, cities, communities to follow this path,

And that is why – with the help of our fantastic armed forces –

we will be offering community testing to tier 3 areas as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker let me just say, I find it extraordinary that the Official Opposition –represented by the gentleman opposite –

Currently have no view on the way ahead and are not proposing to vote tonight.

I do think it is extraordinary that in spite of the barrage of criticism that we have no credible plan from the party opposite. Indeed, we have no view on the way ahead. It's a quite extraordinary thing Mr Speaker that tonight to the best of my knowledge

The RHG Opposite who has always said he will 'act in the national interest' has told his party to sit on its hands and to abstain in the vote tonight Mr Speaker.

And I think the government has made its decision, we've taken some tough decisions Mr Speaker and the Labour opposition has decided tonight heroically to abstain Mr Speaker

And I think when the history of this pandemic comes to be written, I think the people of this country will observe that instead of having politicians of all parties coming together in the national interest they had one party taking the decisions and another party heroically deciding to abstain

Mr Speaker, in the story of 2020, I think there are two great feats in which we can take a great deal of comfort.

First, our country has come together in an extraordinary effort that has so far succeeded in protecting our NHS and in saving many lives.

And while our scientists have been zeroing in on the weaknesses of Covid, telescoping ten years of work into ten months,

and now their endeavours are about to deliver the means as I say to rout the virus. That is clear.

The Government is backing not one potential vaccine, but seven.

We have ordered 100 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, that is now seeking regulatory approval.

We have ordered 7 million doses of the Moderna vaccine, which has almost 95 per cent effectiveness in trials.

And Mr Speaker, we have ordered 40 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which

if approved by the regulator –

could start being administered before Christmas.

In total, Mr Speaker our Vaccines Task Force has secured more than 350 million doses,

more than enough for everyone in the UK, the Crown Dependencies and our Overseas Territories.

All we need to do now Mr Speaker is to hold our nerve until these vaccines are indeed in our grasp,

and indeed being injected into our arms.

So I say to the House again let us follow the guidance, let us roll out mass testing, let's work to deliver mass testing to the people of our country, let's work together to control the virus and it is in that spirit that I commend these regulations Mr Speaker I commend these regulations to the House.

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## [Child Trust Fund court fees waived for parents](#)

- vast majority of affected families will not have to pay fees
- working group to look at further reducing administrative burden on parents of children who lack mental capacity
- vital safeguards for vulnerable young people remain

A Child Trust Fund (CTF) is a long-term, tax-free savings account for children. The money belongs to the young person and they can only take it out when they turn 18.

If a young person lacks mental capacity and as a result cannot handle their finances, a parent or guardian must apply to the Court of Protection to allow them to manage these funds. This vital safeguard exists to protect vulnerable people from fraud or abuse.

Parents and guardians who apply to the court before their child's 18th birthday already do not pay fees, unless the child has other substantial assets. The Ministry of Justice and HM Treasury are working closely with trust fund providers to ensure that parents are aware of this and can take necessary steps.

Today's announcement means that families who need to access the money in this fund to help support the young person's future can now ask for fees to be waived. Those who have already paid can request a refund under the plans. A new working group will also consider what more can be done to streamline the process and make it more accessible for parents.

This follows concerns from parents and campaigners that the system can be stressful and costly for families.

Justice Minister, Alex Chalk said:

We want to reduce the obstacles families face in supporting young people who lack mental capacity.

This fee remission will ensure that families who need to go to the Court of Protection to access these funds will not suffer financially as a result.

Our working group will look at improving this process even further, making it more streamlined and accessible.

Professor Baroness Finlay of Llandaff Chair of the National Mental Capacity Forum, said:

The Mental Capacity Act offers important protections for vulnerable people who cannot make decisions for themselves.

We need to balance the needs of families with children with a learning disability with ensuring appropriate safeguards are in place. Improving guidance and removing the need to pay fees are welcome steps to providing that balance.

Dan Scorer, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at the learning disability charity Mencap, said:

High costs and the complexity of the legal system are stopping families from accessing Child Trust Fund money for young people with a learning disability who can't manage the funds themselves.

We welcome the government's commitment that no one will have to pay fees to solely access a Child Trust Fund via the Court of Protection.

We hope that the establishment of an advisory working group will help streamline the legal process to help families access a Child Trust Fund.

Any changes made must both make it easier for family members and protect the best interests of people with a learning disability.

Eligibility for fee remission is based upon the capital and income of the person who is lacking capacity – in this case the child. The vast majority of those applying to the Court of Protection will not have to pay a fee if they:

- apply prior to the child's 18th birthday
- ask for a fee waiver through the Help with Fees scheme

or

- ask for a fee waiver due to exceptional circumstances, which includes the CTF being the only asset of the child (regardless of the amount), and where their monthly income is below £1,085

Updated guidance has been provided to the Court of Protection to address these circumstances and when a fee remission is applicable. This will ensure that parents, guardians, and young people do not suffer the consequences of not being informed they need to apply prior to the young person's 18th birthday.

## **Notes to editors**

- The Lord Chancellor has the power in certain cases to grant a fee remission. This power can be used to grant a fee remission for those applications to the Court of Protection made after the account holder's 18th birthday. Families can apply for this remission immediately.
- However, we strongly encourage families to make an application before the dependant's 18th birthday. If a property and affairs application is made to the Court of Protection before the dependent's 18th birthday, the balance in the Child Trust Fund does not count as capital. This means they can apply for a remission under the Help with Fees scheme and do not have to pay fees unless they have any other asset worth over £3,000 or income, not including certain benefits, over £1,085 a month.
- If the application is made after the 18th birthday, but the circumstances are as above, they are also be eligible for a fee remission.
- In cases where the application is made after the 18th birthday, and the amount is more than £3,000, then normally they would have to pay the fee. However, we are now encouraging families to apply for their fee to be reconsidered, which could then allow the Lord Chancellor, on a case-by-case basis, to determine that they will be eligible to not pay the fee. The government's intention is that no one who needs to apply to the Court of Protection solely to access a Child Trust Fund will pay fees.
- The Working Group, comprised of officials within the Ministry of Justice

working with HM Treasury, will look into other options to make the process easier for those needing to go to the Court of Protection to access the Child trust Fund. They will report back in due course.

- A CTF is a long-term, tax-free savings account for young people. The government launched the CTF scheme in 2005 to provide each eligible child born between 1 September 2002 and 2 January 2011 with a financial asset upon reaching adulthood. Parents and guardians received a voucher from the government to deposit in a CTF account, and anyone can pay into the accounts. The money belongs to the young person and they can only take it out when they turn 18.

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## [Update on fast-tracks grants](#)



The MMO has closed the fast-track grants scheme to new applications after fully committing its remaining funding.

The scheme re-purposes the balance of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), with £300,000 available to fishing vessel owners for health and safety improvements.

The MMO is now working with applicants to issue grants as quickly as possible.

We are also reviewing and assessing bids for the £500,000 ports and harbours fund following the closure of the application window on 29 November.

Grants of up to £100,000 each are available for existing projects that are aimed at mitigating impacts of Covid-19 at ports and harbours and bringing benefits to the local area.

The MMO will be in touch with applicants in due course. For more information, see the MMO website [here](#), or contact the MMO Grants Team by phone on 0208 026 5539 or via email to [EMFF.Queries@marinemanagement.org.uk](mailto:EMFF.Queries@marinemanagement.org.uk).

The MMO has administered the EMFF and other funds investing over £40m in the fishing industry and coastal communities since launching in 2016. It also issued a further £9m across the industry earlier this year through the

Fisheries Response Fund and the Domestic Seafood Support Scheme.

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1. 1 December 2020

Photo update

2. 1 December 2020

Link not working

3. 1 December 2020

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## [‘Lockdown was the only way to stop the NHS being broken’ – The Times Weekend Essay](#)

It was a decision none of us wanted to take. But it was a decision none of us could avoid. When ministers met just one month ago to consider whether to introduce a second national lockdown we were presented with a Devil’s dilemma.

We were being asked to impose restrictions on individual liberty which went against every instinct we have had all our adult lives. We would be asking friends and families to avoid each other’s company. We would be closing shops, bars and restaurants, and not just denying people the social contact which defines us as human beings but also suppressing the animal spirit which keeps our economy going. We would be asking millions who had already given up so much to sacrifice even more.

So why did those of us gathered round the cabinet table that Friday afternoon decide that we would, indeed, choose to make November 2020 such a difficult month? For the same reason that Emmanuel Macron in France, Sebastian Kurz in Austria, Micheál Martin in Ireland, Mark Rutte in the Netherlands, Angela Merkel in Germany, Stefan Löfven in Sweden and so many other democratic leaders chose to restrict their people’s freedoms. And for the same reason that the eight political parties in power in devolved administrations have taken similar steps to the UK government. Because the alternative would have been indefensible.

We had to act, as they did, because if we did not our health service would

have been overwhelmed.

That Friday morning I was in Surrey, looking forward to a trip later to an award-winning business in my constituency, the Hogs Back Brewery. But a cloud already hung over my day. I knew that the data coming in from the frontline of the fight against the virus was ominous. So I was not surprised, although I was certainly chilled, by the summons to an action meeting to consider the difficult steps that might now be required. Of course, I'd change my diary: was the meeting tomorrow, or Sunday? No – please get back to London as soon as possible.

That afternoon we were confronted with what would happen to our hospitals if the spread of the virus continued at the rate it was growing. Unless we acted, the NHS would be broken.

Infections were doubling fast. The number of days taken to see that increase was open to question. But the trend was not. Infection numbers were growing in areas which had previously seen low prevalence. And as the numbers infected increased so, with iron logic, did the numbers in our hospitals. We could not know exactly when, or how late, we could leave it and still have time to pull the handbrake to avoid disaster, but sooner or later our NHS hospitals would be full.

Not just administratively at full stretch. But physically overwhelmed. Every bed, every ward occupied. All the capacity built in the Nightingales and requisitioned from the private sector too. The NHS could, and would, cancel the operations of patients waiting for hip replacements and other routine procedures to free up more beds. But that wouldn't be enough. The numbers infected with Covid-19 and requiring a bed would displace all but emergency cases. And then even those. With every NHS bed full, the capacity of the health service to treat new emergency cases – people who had suffered serious accidents, heart attacks, strokes – would go.

The questions we asked that afternoon – and had asked before – were the questions we were to hear everyone ask after we took our decision. Couldn't NHS capacity have been increased to meet this pressure? Well it had been; the Nightingales had been built, staff redeployed, retired doctors and nurses called to the colours. But while capacity had been, and can be, increased, there is a limit. With the numbers becoming infected and facing hospitalisation doubling, there comes a point where no more flexibility exists. It is difficult to strengthen flood defences when the tsunami is surging towards the shore. Hospitals need doctors and nurses and you can't double their numbers in a month. And even if you could, you would still need to slow the virus spreading to stop even that capacity being overwhelmed.

Could not more patients be treated at home? And surely improvements in treatment – dexamethasone and non-invasive oxygen support – had made the virus less deadly? Well yes, some patients could be treated at home but the difference could only be made at the margins. And yes, these new treatments reduced mortality. But they relied on patients being in hospital and receiving the treatments from trained professionals. And that was precisely the resource that would run out.



Keeping our hospitals open, available and effective was not just crucial to dealing with Covid-19. It was imperative for the health of the whole nation. But the only way to ensure we can take care of cancer patients, administer radiotherapy and chemotherapy, and help stroke victims and treat heart attacks is by protecting the NHS. And the only way we can do that is by reducing the spread of the virus, thus limiting the number of Covid-19 patients in hospital. Reducing infections is not a distraction from saving other lives, it is a precondition of saving other lives.

And just as we want to reduce Covid-19 infections to save lives, so reducing them is the key to saving the economy. Think for a moment what would happen to our economy if we allowed infections to reach such a level that our NHS was overwhelmed. Would families seek out crowded bars and buzzing restaurants if they knew they could be infecting friends and relatives who could not be treated if they fell ill? Would we flock to the January sales if the doors to our hospitals were shut? Would investors, entrepreneurs and tourists make a beeline for Britain if we could not even guarantee the lives and welfare of our existing citizens?

All the arguments against lockdown came up against that harsh, brute reality. If this government could not guarantee that the NHS was there for our citizens, it would not just be a political and moral failure. It would mean Covid-19 patients who could be saved would die; cancer patients who could be cured would be lost; thousands in pain would suffer for longer; countless more would lose years of their lives; the economy would grind to a halt, as a population we could not protect sought to save their loved ones; and the world would hang an indelible quarantine sign over our nation's name.

So we acted. And we did so knowing that the most difficult lesson we had learnt that year is that tougher measures than we would ever want to impose are required to restrict the virus's spread. The tiers we had in place before the lockdown had not suppressed it sufficiently: they were neither strong enough to reduce social contact sufficiently, nor applied widely enough to contain the virus's spread. And that is the difficult lesson we cannot unlearn as this lockdown ends.

Thanks to the chancellor's swift action, millions of people have been helped financially through the dark days of this crisis. Since March, we have provided more than £200 billion in fiscal support. We have extended the furlough scheme to the end of March next year, and businesses that are forced to close can get grants of up to £3,000 a month. For councils, we have also provided an additional £900 million on top of previous funding, to support local economies and communities and fund local healthcare needs.

This coming month brings hope. Vaccines that will defeat the virus are motoring towards regulatory authorisation and distribution. We are seeing strong efficacy rates coming out of the Pfizer/Biontech, Moderna and Oxford/Astrazeneca trials, and the regulator is reviewing both the Pfizer and Oxford vaccines to determine if they reach the required robust standards for quality, safety and effectiveness. The end of the national lockdown means that in all areas shops can reopen, people can go to the gym, hairdressers and beauty services are available again, collective worship can resume and

outdoor sports can restart. And, of course, this Christmas, friends and families across the UK can travel to celebrate in each others' homes.

But for many, these relaxations are cold crumbs of comfort at the start of a long, harsh winter. The new, tougher tiers which cover most of the country still limit social mixing, keep friends apart and hit pubs and bars particularly hard.

Yet they are grimly, inevitably, necessary. The level of infection across the country remains uncomfortably and threateningly high. The pressure on hospitals is still severe: across the UK, about 16,000 beds are filled with Covid-19 patients, which compares with almost 20,000 at the April peak and as low as 740 on September 11. From the current high base, any sharp uptick in infection could see the NHS under even more severe threat again.

Before the lockdown, the increase in infections was like a tap filling a bath faster and faster with every day that passed. Lockdown first slowed the pace at which the bath was filling up, then stabilised it. Slowly, it has begun to lower the water level. But as we exit this lockdown the level is still high and it would not take too much, or too rapid an increase, for us to risk it overtopping again.

If, however, we can keep the level of infection stable or, even better, falling, and hold out through January and February, then we can be confident that vaccination will pull the plug on the problem. That is why in our Winter Plan we have set out new, stronger tiers. Bluntly, our previous tiers were not as effective as we had hoped. In general, infections continued to rise in Tier 1 and Tier 2 areas and even the bare, basic, old Tier 3 wasn't enough.

These are, of course, uncomfortable truths. Not least for those of us who argued that these measures, on their own, would be enough. But we cannot ignore the evidence. What has worked, however, is the combination of a toughened Tier 3 and widespread community testing. In Liverpool, the mayor Joe Anderson bravely adopted measures above and beyond the old basic Tier 3 and championed mass testing. The result: falling infections, reduced hospitalisations and a smooth transfer to the new Tier 2.

Learning from that experience, we are confident that our new, tougher tiers will have a real impact, and equip us to respond to local conditions – guarding against spread, stemming signs of growth, or bringing a local outbreak back under control so that hospital capacity is not overwhelmed.

Why is it, some ask, that when they come into force on Wednesday, so many areas will be in Tiers 2 and 3, when they entered the lockdown a tier below? Because the level of infection, while stabilising, is simply still too high, and many hospitals remain under pressure. And why is it that we did not take an even more localised approach, and carve up local authorities? Because we are a small, densely populated country where this virus has proven it can spread with ease – so casting the net wide is more effective. And for another reason too, which is that many NHS hospital catchments are expansive, and so to protect our hospitals you need to tackle the virus right across the areas they serve.

The truth, however uncomfortable, sets you free. And these new tiers, alongside the wider deployment of mass testing, have the capacity to prevent our NHS being overwhelmed until vaccines arrive.

In politics there is often a readier market for comfortable evasions than uncomfortable truths. Some have argued that you can avoid restrictions on everyday life, let the young in particular go out and about, and build up collective or herd immunity – “Just look at Sweden”.

But Sweden, which has in fact always placed restrictions on its population, has found that even the battery of measures it adopted was not enough. Infections rose dramatically in October and early this month, and hospitalisations continue to rise as its government has, reluctantly but firmly, introduced new measures to keep households apart, restrict commerce, stop people visiting bars and restaurants and comprehensively reduce the social contact that spreads infection.

Others have argued, in good faith of course, for a sort of Sweden-that-never-was – for the strict segregation of the most vulnerable while the rest of us go about our business until the pandemic passes. But what would that involve? How, practically, could we ensure that every older citizen, every diabetic, everyone with an underlying condition or impaired immune system was perfectly insulated from all contact with others for months to come? How many are we expected to isolate completely and for how long? Five million? Ten? No visits by carers or medical staff, no mixing of generations, the eviction of older citizens from the homes they share with younger? No country has embarked on this course, with no detailed plan for implementing such a strategy ever laid out.

That is not to deny the course we are on has costs. But those costs are not ones we choose; they are ones we must endure. It is this virus – which in its combination of rapid spread and targeted lethality poses a bigger public health threat than any pandemic since the Spanish flu of 1918 – which brings terrible costs. As previous pandemics always have.

And when the country is facing such a national crisis, the truth is that all of us who have been elected to parliament, not just ministers, must take responsibility for difficult decisions. Covid-19 is no respecter of constituency boundaries and the hardships we are facing now are unfortunately necessary to protect every single one of us, no matter where we live. In any analysis of this government's, or any government's approach, the cost of lockdown and restrictions cannot be reckoned against the status quo ante, but only against the cost of inaction, or inadequate action, and the overwhelming of the NHS.

We know now that the costs, significant as they were, generated by our pre-lockdown measures still did not bring us the benefit of a virus under control. We know now, as do other European and western nations, that we can keep the enemy at bay until vaccination turns the tide, but it will be tough. For France, with cafés and restaurants closed across the country until January; for Germany, where even as I write they debate whether even school closures may be necessary; in the US, where Joe Biden, the president-elect,

knows he must enter office imposing tougher restrictions to cope with resurgent infections, the need to act is the same. Because the grim calculus of infection is the same. We cannot alter the mathematics, bargain with the virus or evade our responsibilities.

But we can see an end to this. We can end the suffering. Mass testing, vaccination, liberation. But until that liberation comes, we must stand firm. Stand in solidarity with each other. And shoulder the sacrifices required to save the lives of those we love.

The original article can be found on the Times' website [here](#)