

Newsletter from John Cryer MP

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What a time we are living through – not least politically. This is quite a lengthy report as much has been happening since my last one around the VE Day anniversary.

Covid-19 Caseload

Every aspect of our daily life continues to be dominated by Coronavirus and my caseload is at unprecedented levels. We continue to receive casework day and night through a huge volume of calls and emails and often from very desperate people, including anxious local businesses about their survival, as they are struggling to stay afloat. The key issues they face is gaining access to the government's support measures via the council and the banks. I have helped many but unfortunately some businesses do not meet the eligibility criteria and for them the future is very uncertain.

This is the busiest the office has ever been, and we are working around the clock to help as many people as we can. I never thought that we would be signing off emails and letters with 'please stay safe.'

We have seen a massive increase in local people applying for Universal Credit and the office is dealing with a much larger benefits caseload. People have no money and no income due. Their children are at home due to school closures so it imperative that these claims are processed without any delays. The benefit numbers have risen in line with expectations.

4,410 actual claimants in Leyton and Wanstead in April 2020. That's 5.7% of the population aged 16-64. The UK equivalent count is 5.1%

This is 2,150 higher than March 2020 and 2,590 higher than April 2019.

There were 610 claimants aged 18-24 in April 2019, 300 higher than March 2020 and 350 higher than April 2019

I have written to everyone in Leyton and Wanstead in the most vulnerable age group, ie: over 70s, with relevant information twice, to keep them in touch with developments, how to contact myself, the councils and relevant health and welfare information.

Self Employed Support Scheme (SEISS)

I was pleased with the announcement by the Chancellor on 12th May that the Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) would be extended until October but we need further confirmation that SEISS will also be extended.

The SEISS payment was back dated to cover March, April and May, but there have been no further details on how the government will support the hundreds of self-employed workers from June onwards. The situation faced by self-employed workers in the creative industries is desperate. It is unlikely that the creative sector will be fully reopened until Spring 2021 due to the difficulties of being able to satisfy the requirements of social distancing for workers and audiences.

In addition, too many creative workers are currently excluded from the Self Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and will be waiting until 2021 before workplaces, including theatres, pubs and live entertainment venues, are able to fully re-open, enabling many to earn a living. Furlough is due to last until June but Self-Employed support ends in a few weeks; this is a glaring inconsistency. I can therefore confirm that I have written to the Chancellor asking him to review the eligibility criteria for SEISS and for urgent reassurances that the scheme will be extended in line with the Furlough Scheme.

Covid-19 and the Government Response

The Government has increased testing, but nowhere near enough. Rather than being honest and upfront about the difficulties involved, they seem to think up numbers on the spot:

“We’ll do 100,000 by the end of next week”. Matt Hancock and other Ministers’ pronouncements on this could almost be considered some form of farcical humour were it not so serious. We now hear that testing figures may have been double counted, I assume much like counting a pair of gloves as two pieces of PPE.

A member of Public Health England staff has told my office they have been ready and waiting to ramp up testing; this was several weeks ago.

The Government is still under pressure to accelerate the supply of protective equipment and address growing fears that frontline staff risk both catching and spreading coronavirus. I have been contacted by extremely worried NHS staff who work across London Hospitals and I have raised their concerns directly with the Health Secretary.

I am sure you are as horrified as I am with the Covid-19 death rates within the BAME and Jewish communities (I have supported the calls for an inquiry).

I am told that recent data also confirms an undeniable link between rates of deprivation and the virus. People in the poorest tenth of society are more than twice as likely to have died from Covid-19 as those in the wealthiest tenth. This disease is not affecting us all equally, it is highlighting deep inequalities.

Wider opening of schools.

As you know, over the past few months schools have remained open to vulnerable children and children of key workers and schools have found innovative ways to support home

learning. I have been in communication in the past few days with a number of local heads, the local authority and the NEU and will continue with that.

Returning to school is clearly a priority for the sake of children's education and well-being. I know from my work with schools across the constituency and from 10 years of casework that school is a lifeline for many children – the place where they feel safe and secure, where they are fed and well cared for. That is a credit to our schools and the staff that work within them. Having said that, I recognise the very real difficulties that a wider reopening of schools on 1st June will cause. Concerns around the feasibility of social distancing measures proposed and the protection of children, staff and parents have been raised in recent days by parents, school leaders, teaching staff and trade unions.

It is bitterly disappointing and concerning that the government has chosen not to work with the trade unions prior to announcing the wider reopening. I feel very strongly that the government has chosen to ignore the very people to whom they should be listening. For example, the NEU is very concerned about the guidance that PPE will not be necessary. Further, they are frustrated that despite requesting it, the government is yet to share their scientific evidence and modelling.

I also consider that there need to be assurances given to students and teachers with underlying health conditions or who live with someone with underlying health conditions. Thought needs to be given to those students and teachers who rely on public transport to get to work for whom walking, cycling or using a car is not an option.

No one wants children out of school longer than is absolutely necessary, but the plans also need to have the confidence of schools, teachers and their unions and parents. It seems to me therefore, that rather than insist on a blanket return for Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 from 1st June, the government should work with schools, unions and parents to work towards getting more children back to school as soon as reasonably possible in a way that is safe and that has the confidence of everyone.

Jaden Moodie – Serious Case Review

The horrific murder of 14-year-old Jaden Moodie in January 2019 shocked and saddened everyone across Waltham Forest and the nation. I have met the family and raised knife crime at every possible occasion in parliament including organising a debate in parliament. It is heart-breaking having our children being slaughtered on our streets. This week the Serious Case Review has been published. It is now clear Jaden was criminally exploited by drug gangs. The SCR makes clear that a critical moment to help him and was missed, largely due to the lack of effective communication by agencies across the country.

The review points out that despite the enormous challenge that county lines presents for local agencies there is an "absence of a national approach" to guide all concerned. We should all be worried that review concludes that this serves children like Jaden "badly".

We all owe it to Jaden's memory and his friends and family to take the lessons from his murder and address the issues raised to help prevent more children's lives being cut short in this way.

Kashmir

Many constituents have been in touch with me about the situation in Kashmir.

My view on Kashmir is that, from everything we can gather, human rights are being violated under the lockdown imposed by the Modi government. I regularly hear from constituents who have families in Kashmir and who often cannot get any information; any information that can be gleaned is often grim.

Governments who have nothing to hide usually do not exclude the media from whole areas of their country, as had happened in this case.

The revocation of article 370 was opportunistic and inflammatory and went against the policy of every Indian government since independence. Since then, the lockdown has taken hold and the Modi government has chosen to bring forth legislation which seems to be motivated by religious bigotry and which is directly in contradiction to the Indian constitution whose basis is secular.

I do not say this because I have a particular axe to grind against Delhi or in for of Islamabad but because I am deeply concerned for the rights of the Kashmiri people.

Hong Kong

Over the past two weeks we have seen striking evidence that Hong Kong's autonomy is rapidly eroding. We must confront the reality of Hong Kong's diminishing rights and freedoms under China's rule.

A Leyton constituent who contacted me who moved to the UK from the Hong Kong 10 years ago argues as the world is distracted by the coronavirus pandemic, China continues to ramp up action to undermine the political structures in Hong Kong, grasping every opportunity to promote its own political agenda.

Hong Kong people need every support they can get from the international community in this dark time. I can confirm that I have contacted the Foreign Secretary to acknowledge that "One Country Two Systems" and the Joint Declaration have been breached due to this security law. I have urged the Foreign Office to offer full protection British National Overseas passport holders in Hong Kong.

Dominic Cummings

You would have to be living on another planet to not be aware of the quite ludicrous acrobatics of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, much of the Tory Party over Dominic Cummings and his breaking of lockdown. It was quite clear from the reporting from the Mirror and Guardian, that he had done just that. Ministers rushed to defend him, then we had the bizarre press conference in Downing Street, where the press and the viewing and voting public were kept waiting for 30 minutes! Followed by various fantastical anecdotes about checking eyes by having a test drive with a child in the back seat. I went for my own eye test this week – no children were strapped into the back of my car for the purposes of checking my vision.

Enough of the levity, the Prime Minister and Cabinet Colleagues, when they should be spending time focussed on Covid-19 and other aspects of governing, seem more focussed on defending and holding onto Dominic Cummings. The Prime Minister has been more visible at the head of the ship of state over the last few days than for quite a while. Had Cummings apologised I suspect this would have all blown over. What it has shown is that the priorities of this government are all wrong – they defend Cummings and spend time and effort doing so. But they also say “he was only looking after his family”, “he cared for his child” etc. All true, but when your messaging all the way along has been ‘stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives’ what does that say? To the people who didn’t break lockdown to take their children to others for help whilst they got sick, to the people who didn’t visit friends and family who were sick even for a last goodbye through a window or who attended a funeral by zoom and saw other family members stricken by grief. I am always struck by the comments people have made on social media about this and in emails to me. We cannot know what will happen over the next few days but Ministers trooping out to defend Cummings and smirking on LBC are failing to take into account those personal stories that so many of us have. Since I have a very elderly and close relative who has been seriously ill it is difficult to watch all this without bitterness.

Contacting me and advice surgeries

I am still asking constituents to hold off contacting me for the moment, if possible, unless it is a Covid-19 related issue. We still have many cases coming in round the clock that need to be dealt with, related to things like welfare entitlements, housing, wages, access to grants and loans. If you have an existing case with my office, but it is not urgent, then again, please be patient.

For the moment, I continue to deal with all large numbers of cases by phone, email or letter. I have also been advertising help and support in local papers both in Waltham Forest and Redbridge. I do not think it will be possible for quite some time to hold face to face surgeries – not least because I cannot guarantee the ability to social distance and the safety or constituents, venue staff and my team. When that changes I will of course begin face to face surgeries immediately as well as my previously regular coffee mornings and other means of contact.

Coronavirus Update and Information

You can find further information on the websites of the Government, Redbridge and Waltham Forest Councils – both of whom have been doing sterling work on this issue.

Government Coronavirus Information <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Redbridge <https://www.redbridge.gov.uk/coronavirus-information-hub/>

Waltham Forest <https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/service-categories/covid-19>

You can also find information on my website. The information on my website is not exhaustive, but covers such things as Business and Employment support, help with being prioritised for food shopping, domestic violence victim support, volunteering, Local information, Volunteering and Mutual Aid, Domestic Abuse, MOTs during Covid-19, Consumer information, Travel advice and more <https://www.johncryermp.co.uk/covid-19-updates>