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THE PRIME MINISTER

23 June 2020

Dear Sir Bernard,

Thank you for your letter of 5 June following my appearance at the Liaison Committee on 27 May. I have set out responses to the various follow-up questions below.

You also asked for responses to issues that Greg Clark, Jeremy Hunt, Stephen Timms, Mel Stride and Darren Jones raised with me during my appearance. As they subsequently wrote to me direct about those issues, I have asked that copies of the replies to their letters are also sent to your Committee.

*1. You undertook to come back to me about the date of your next appearance before the Committee (Q1). As I said in the hearing, the Committee feels strongly that this should be before the summer recess. The Committee looks forward to your response.*

I remain committed to appearing before the Liaison Committee three times each Session. As I am sure you will appreciate my diary is extremely busy but my office will be in contact to arrange a date for my next appearance in due course.

*4. Thank you for committing to look at the proposal of an apprenticeship guarantee in response to Robert Halfon (Q65). You have subsequently said you believe young people should be guaranteed an apprenticeship. Could you update the Committee on your proposals?*

Apprenticeships will play a vital role in the economic recovery, ensuring that employers and people of all backgrounds develop the skills they need to succeed. I agree with the Committee that it is particularly important in the current climate that young people have the opportunity to get the skills they need for a prosperous future.

As the Chancellor has set out, we will develop new measures to grow the economy and to boost skills. For apprenticeships, we are looking at how we can support employers, especially small businesses, to take on new apprentices this

year, and will provide further detail in due course. We will also ensure that there is sufficient funding to support small businesses wanting to take on an apprentice this year. I am also keen to consider how traineeships can help more young people to acquire the skills and the experience they need to enter the labour market.

*5. You also committed, in another answer to Robert Halfon, to write to the Committee about refunding tuition fees to students who work for the NHS during the current pandemic (Q66). The Committee looks forward to your response on this point.*

This issue was also raised with the Education Secretary by the Education Select Committee. As he wrote in his follow-up letter of 2 June to the Committee: “The Government is extremely grateful to all students who are choosing to work in the NHS during this extremely difficult time and will be ensuring all students who do so are rewarded fairly for their hard work. Nursing students who volunteer as part of the COVID-19 response will receive a salary and automatic NHS pension entitlement at the appropriate band. They will continue to be required to pay fees for their final term and will continue to receive their student maintenance loan and Learning Support Fund payments as normal. Universities will continue to provide support to students. The time that students spend in clinical practice will count towards the number of practice hours that they need to qualify.”

*7. Caroline Nokes (Q73) asked what advice you had taken about the impact of the phased reopening of schools on women’s ability to return to work. Could you set out what advice you have received about the proportion of women who will not be able to return to work whilst schools remain partially closed? What assessment has been made of the resulting impact on parents and businesses?*

Anyone who is unable to work from home and can return to work safely should do so, but as I have made clear on a number of occasions, employers should be as flexible as possible to support their employees with childcare responsibilities. We have encouraged employers to provide flexible working arrangements for their staff, where possible - allowing for home working and changes to start and finish times. This flexibility can help working parents balance work and childcare needs. We have also been clear that those with caring responsibilities (including childcare) can access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which will continue until October. I believe the increased flexibility available to those on this scheme - with furloughed employees able to come back to work part time from 1 July - will further benefit those seeking to return to work whilst managing childcare requirements.

And of course parents who are critical workers are eligible to access childcare and school places throughout. And since 1 June, early years' childcare providers in England have been able to welcome back all children. If their usual nursery is shut, parents should contact their local authority for an alternative place.

*10. In response to a question about quarantine from Huw Merriman (Q97) you said the Government would use three-week review periods to "be sensible". Will the proposal to lift quarantine restrictions from countries with lower infection rates than the UK be part of the next review period (ie leading up to 29 June)?*

In line with all our COVID-19 measures, the measures will be kept under regular review to ensure they remain proportionate and necessary. The first review will take place by 29 June. They will be assessed on an ongoing basis thereafter, together with all our measures to fight this disease.

The factors we will consider in these reviews include the rate of infection and transmission, the measures that international partners have put in place, levels of imported cases in other countries where there are more relaxed border measures, and the degree to which antibody and other testing methodologies prove effective in minimising the health risk. We will also take into account the impact on our economy and industry.

*11. In answer to questions from Huw Merriman (Q99-100), you said you were "actively looking at what we can do" where companies are using the furlough scheme alongside redundancy consultations or to erode workers' pay and conditions. Could you set out what proposals the Government is looking at and what timescales they might be introduced to?*

During this difficult time, I am absolutely clear that employers should act responsibly and only use the Job Retention Scheme to protect jobs. Employers should not use the Job Retention Scheme to make someone redundant on less favourable terms than they would otherwise have received.

Terms and conditions of employment are for negotiation and agreement between employers and employees (or their representatives). Once agreed they form a legally binding contract of employment. While it is always open to either party to seek to renegotiate the terms of the contract, if the employer changes any of the terms without the employee's agreement, the employee may be entitled to seek legal redress.

An employer can opt to make a worker redundant under certain conditions, if they deem this to be the best course of action to take for their business. Any redundancy process should be fair and reasonable, with appropriate equalities considerations. Employees can appeal to their employer if they feel they have been unfairly selected or they may also be able to make a claim to an employment tribunal for unfair dismissal.

*12. You stated, in response to a question from Yvette Cooper (Q103), that all advice from SAGE, including minutes, will be published. When will the full scientific advice on the decision not to have quarantines in place from high-infection countries during the early stages of the crisis be published?*

SAGE provides timely and coordinated scientific and technical advice to support UK cross-government decision makers during emergencies. SAGE previously advised that restricting travel to the UK would have little impact on the COVID-19 epidemic in the UK, and would not be a useful measure in containing the outbreak.

Transparency is important in these unprecedented times. That is why we are continuing to publish the statements and the accompanying evidence to demonstrate how our understanding of COVID-19 has continued to evolve as new data emerges, and how SAGE's advice has quickly adapted to new findings that reflect a changing situation. The SAGE minutes and papers referring to the advice around border measures at the early stages of the crisis have now been published and are available on the gov.uk website.

*13. In answer to a question submitted by Tobias Ellwood (Q107) you pointed to the very recent appointment of Simon Case. Why has the Government decided to only tweak its Cabinet structure in response to this enduring emergency? Why was a central situation centre not established to execute the operational /delivery side of the Government response; rather than establishing four Cabinet Sub-Committees lead by very capable policy makers - but with limited experience in responding to national emergencies? Would you be willing to meet with the Chief of the Defence Staff to discuss this proposal?*

COBR remains the mechanism through which the Government responds to emergencies, whether related to COVID-19 or otherwise. It has played its role from the start of this crisis, acting as a central mechanism taking real time decisions to coordinate the UK's operational response. Throughout January to mid-March, there were regular COBR meetings overseeing preparedness and implementation of measures to respond to a potential novel-Coronavirus pandemic.

The new Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs) created on 17 March were tailored to coordinate a widening of the response to the coronavirus pandemic across Government incorporating policy and strategy. The MIGs reported to the daily C-19 Strategy meeting that I chaired, attended by the relevant Cabinet Ministers, the MIG chairs, and senior officials including the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. During this period COBR meetings continued to be convened to take decisions as needed.

Thank you, once again, for writing.

Yours  
Bernard Jenkin

Sir Bernard Jenkin MP