

Aaron Lawson – Written Evidence (LBC0016)

Investment in Public Health and Education is Key

As an Educator of Environmental Public Health in Higher Education, the positive aspects from the pandemic and resulting lockdown have greatly improved my work-life balance. Working from home has changed both myself and many others daily routines, allowing for important time to be saved from the daily commute, and also allows for more flexible working hours. This change has improved my work-life balance as working from home provides people with the comfort and flexibility to perform their jobs effectively. It also saves many businesses money as they no longer need large, premium office-space but rather can provide a small stipend to each employee to setup a suitable workspace at home. The change in working practices since the lockdown has also greatly benefited the environment, with evidence from all of the world indicating the restoration of parts of the ozone layer, lower levels of air and industrial pollution and the recovery of many vulnerable habitats. Going forward, employers should encourage working from home where possible as the health, social, environmental and economic benefits are many.

However, there are also many considerable challenges that have arisen from the pandemic. The Government's public health communication strategy has come under much scrutiny, with problems including conflicting messages (e.g. the lack of apparent handwashing compliance, the wearing of face masks and the social distancing rule), the spread of false information online (e.g. 5G is causing COVID-19) and the lack of clear guidance for businesses has meant that public confidence in government advice has been fractured over the course of the pandemic. This, coupled with other issues such as the initial lack of proper PPE for healthcare staff and carers, and the flouting of lockdown and quarantine rules by both members of the public and some government officials has led to a blasé attitude among certain groups within the population, and riled up some political and ethnic tensions and this is something that will continue unless properly addressed. From the public health perspective, adherence to the public health advice has changed over the course of the lockdown, and although much of the focus has been on social distancing and wearing of masks, very few messages have focused on the adequacy of handwashing practice. Many messages have simply stated 'wash your hands' or 'wash for 20 seconds' but virtually none have outlined how people should wash their hands with regards to the scrubbing technique nor the importance of good hand drying behaviour. Adequate hand hygiene behaviour is the most effective method in preventing the transmission of COVID-19 however as the ease of lockdown restrictions continue, in the coming months and years it is likely that people's handwashing habits will decline again as previously conducted research has suggested. Therefore, it is essential that the government continues to invest in public health and in research, so that long-term, societal behavioural change concerning hand hygiene practice and compliance, social distancing and responsible personal health and hygiene behaviour can be achieved.

Furthermore, as someone who works in higher education, it has been challenging delivering the same standard of teaching to all during the lockdown due to the poor national infrastructure in place regarding internet broadband connections and availability of hardware (computers) for students. This has resulted in students living in rural areas not having the same access or quality of teaching delivery as those in urban areas. If online, distance-learning teaching is to continue, the UK Government must commit to ensuring that every household in Britain has the right to access of fibreoptic internet connection, regardless of background. The education of the younger generation is crucial for securing our future. As such, further investment is required in higher education so that quality education is accessible for all, no matter their background.

Addressing the challenges that have emerged from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will not be easy. It will require a greater level of cooperation both within government, industry and academia to ensure that the UK emerges from it strong. Ultimately, this will require substantial funding to protect people's jobs and livelihoods, and particularly those working in essential skill-based roles like in the NHS, those involved in COVID-related research and those in industry working to address these problems.

Coping with the current pandemic and learning from the mistakes made will ultimately help the UK be more prepared for another potential pandemic (if it ever comes). My hope for the future is that my generation (18-29 years old) can have equal opportunities like previous generations regarding job opportunity, job retention and salary. We have already endured two major recessions and a global pandemic in the past decade and I myself as an early-career lecturer have struggled to meet a basic living standard due to the high cost of living in rented accommodation, increasing inflation and working in low-paid, temporary contracts for many years.

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