



As I write in the middle of September we are facing tighter measures to try to halt the recent rise in COVID cases. This is disappointing but not entirely unanticipated. There are, of course, many views on how the Government should respond to these issues and there will be some who are not happy with new measures either because they think they are not strong enough or because they find them too restrictive. Several very specific scenarios have been raised with me for guidance on what to do but it is impossible for the Government to set out the requirements in every individual situation. The key has to be in the distancing and hygiene measures that have been set out.

Reports of scams in relation to COVID Track and Trace are worrying particularly where people are trying to get money for supposed tests. Scams also risk undermining the genuine process which is important to help control the spread of the virus. There is no charge for Government COVID tests and NHS track and Trace will not ask for any sort of payment details, pin numbers or to download anything from the internet.

Now to a completely different issue that I know is dear to the hearts of many in the constituency – planning. The Government has published proposals on reforms to the planning system and the consultation is open until the end of October. I am pleased to see this as I think that radical reform of the planning system is necessary. The proposals, if accepted, will improve the way that councillors and local communities carry out an important local planning function – the production of a local plan. I mention local communities here because Neighbourhood Plans remain crucial for the future of the planning system and I am pleased that the Secretary of State has confirmed ongoing support for Neighbourhood Planning. I know will be welcomed by the many communities that have put a huge amount of effort into setting out their own vision for their future through a Neighbourhood Plan.

Whilst on the subject of planning many of you will know that I have long defended the Green Belt and look forward to being able to continue to do so under the new system. I was disappointed that the Planning Inspector examining the South Oxfordshire Local Plan seems set to approve the release of sites within the Green Belt for development. However it is the job of the Inspector to determine this against all the other aspects of the plan and it is good to see that the designation of the land as Green Belt has led to a requirement that if Green Belt land is released then there should be compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of the remaining Green Belt land, with measures supported by evidence of landscape, biodiversity or recreational needs and opportunities. Things do change over time and we cannot preserve things in aspic when competing needs create opposing demands but these protections do ensure that mitigations are put in place.

Another important issue on the agenda at present is what has become known as the green recovery – that as we emerge out of COVID restrictions and get the economy going again we learn from the environmental benefits of lockdown. This is something that has to be reflected across Government Departments and I continue to work with colleagues to be mindful of this as any new proposals come forward.

Finally, I am pleased that we have reached agreement in principle for a free trade deal with Japan. The UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement was agreed in principle by Japan's Foreign Minister. This deepens the economic partnership between two democratic island nations who believe in the fundamental principle of free and fair trade and provides additional benefits for UK companies. It is also a sign that we will be able to make trade deals as I have always believed we would.

Now that Parliament has returned there is a busy programme. On many issues I make comment on my website so please do have a look. www.johnhowell.org.uk. If you have an issue that you would like to raise with me, if possible, please email me at john.howell.mp@parliament.uk. If you cannot email you can write to me at my constituency office - PO Box 84, Watlington, OX49 5XD.

If you would like to receive my periodic electronic newsletters, and briefings on specific issues, please visit my website www.johnhowell.org.uk and subscribe at the link on the home page.