

Dear fellow Islander,

Thank you for taking the time to contact me.

The ongoing COVID-19 (Coronavirus) outbreak presents a major challenge to our society, including us on the Isle of Wight. We will come through it and we will do so whilst looking after everyone in our community. Like other MPs, I have been snowed under with emails and letters from 1,000-plus constituents who have thus far contacted me in the past week on this single issue.

To make sure everyone gets a timely answer, I have prepared a long and reasonably detailed response which I hope addresses almost every issue raised by Islanders. Constituents who have a specific need or issue raised in relation to personal circumstance will get an individual response. This document will be updated and additional topics added as required.

I have divided this guidance under the following headings:

- Background. What is Covid-19?
- Critical Advice
- Issues raised by Islanders:
 - Steps to keep the Isle of Wight safe. Visitors coming to the Island
 - The Coronavirus Bill
 - Should Businesses Be Working?
 - The Voluntary Sector
 - Jobs, Small Business and the Island Economy
 - Food Deliveries
 - What about my MOT?
 - Advice from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) for Islanders unable to get home from being abroad
- Contributions in Parliament from your MP on Coronavirus
- Key numbers and website for more information and specific guidance

Background. What is Covid-19

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without special treatment. Older folks and

those with underlying medical problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer may develop a more serious illness.

The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes, so it's important that you also practice respiratory etiquette (for example, by coughing into a flexed elbow).

For more information, please go to the World Health Organisation at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

This virus will pass, **but the more we work together, the quicker it will pass**. That is why the Government has taken unprecedented action to limit the spread of the virus, to support peoples' jobs and to make provision to look after the more vulnerable in our community. It needs to be said that this is a learning process for all of us.

Critical Advice

First, can I reiterate the health advice, which is designed to ensure that the NHS can cope with the expected infection rate. This is especially important on the Island.

Please stay at home, only leaving for the following very limited purposes:

- Shopping for necessities as infrequently as possible
- One form of exercise a day – for example, a run, walk or cycle – alone or with members of your immediate household
- Any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person
- Travelling to and from work, but only where this **absolutely necessary** and cannot be done from home

In addition:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water, ensuring that you do so for at least 20 seconds at a time. Cough and sneeze into a tissue or handkerchief, and then throw it away
- If you begin to experience symptoms of Coronavirus - a persistent dry cough or a temperature of over 37.8 degrees Celsius - you should remain indoors and self-isolate for a period of 14 days
- If anyone else in your household begins to experience symptoms of Coronavirus, you should self-isolate with them for a period of 14 days
- Do not attend your local GP surgery, hospital Emergency Department or pharmacist's office, Instead, seek advice online through the NHS 111 service or call 111 directly if you are unable to manage your condition at home
- Do not dial 999 except in an emergency
- **The Isle of Wight Council's helpline for vulnerable Islanders is 01983 823 600**

This is all being done to slow the spread of the disease so that fewer people are sick at any one time. The NHS only has a limited number of doctors, nurses and specialist equipment. Emergency capacity in the NHS is being expanded. The more people who get sick, the harder it is for the NHS to cope.

Steps to keep the Isle of Wight safe - Visitors coming to the Island

Government advice is clear. The visitor economy needs to be temporarily halted. People need to isolate in their primary residences and should not be travelling to the island for non-essential purposes. There are powers in the new Coronavirus law which will enable the Government to take further steps to prevent non-essential travel, should it be deemed necessary.

My clear message to the owners of **second homes on the Island** is that, in accordance with the Government's advice, at this time they should remain in their primary homes and defer travel to our beautiful island until after the pandemic has passed.

Those who have recently arrived back should self-isolate according to health instructions. In addition, there is no need to panic-buy. Doing so is inconsiderate to the elderly and at-risk groups, as well as key workers.

Neither Islanders nor mainlanders should be using the ferries for non-essential travel. I was on the ferry this week and I can reassure Islanders that there are very few people using the service. Tourism visitors are not travelling to the Island at the moment.

However, if the Island is entirely quarantined then we won't get key workers, additional health support, food or medicines to the Island, so the ferries need to run to make sure we are getting the supplies we need.

The Coronavirus Bill

The Bill takes some frankly draconian powers. The Bill has gone through Parliament this week. There were no votes on it because there was unanimous support from all political parties, although some MPs raised doubts about elements of it. Some amendments were made. We will have to review the Bill every six months, although the Bill itself will not be amendable in individual parts. The Government has made it very clear that it does not want to use the new powers in the Bill but has done so on contingency bases. For those interested in the Bill, debates on it are here: <https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2019-21/coronavirus/stages.html>

Should Businesses be Working

Companies and individuals must behave responsibly and to ensure safe arrangements at work and preferably travelling to work. Those companies on the 'do not work' list, such as pubs and the hospitality industry, should not work. Those companies which can still operate should do so, mindful of the new situation.

On 25 March the government stepped up measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus and save lives. All businesses and premises outlined in the Government guidance (the most recent list linked, [here](#)) must now close. As of 2 pm on 23 March 2020, closures on the original list from 20 March are now enforceable by law in England and Wales due to the threat to public health. The government will extend the law and enforcement powers to include the new list of premises for closure.

These measures will be reviewed in three weeks. For the moment they are:

- Takeaway and delivery services may remain open and operational in line with Government guidance ([here](#))
- Employers who have people in their offices or onsite should ensure that employees are able to follow [Public Health England guidelines](#) including, where possible, maintaining a two-metre distance from others and regularly washing their hands with soap and water often for at least 20 seconds (or using hand sanitiser gel if soap and water is not available)

- Online retail is still open and encouraged and postal and delivery service will run as normal
- Hotels, hostels, B&Bs, campsites and boarding houses for commercial use may stay open. Where people live in these as interim abodes whilst their primary residence is unavailable, they may continue to do so
- Non-residential institutions - such as community centres, places of worship, and town halls - should operate in line with current Government guidance ([here](#))
- Outdoor recreational areas, such as enclosed spaces in parks, including playgrounds, sports courts and pitches, and outdoor gyms should remain closed

The Voluntary Sector

At times of crisis, people come together. We have a fantastic voluntary sector on the Island, and I know it will emerge stronger after this, as individuals and communities come together to help each other through this period. I take this opportunity to thank all those people who do voluntary work on the Island, and for those who will help support the NHS and all of us through the next few weeks.

Below, I have linked initiatives that may be of interest. Please bear in mind that if you're from an at-risk group, e.g. 70 years of age or over and/or with a pre-existing medical condition, we ask that you temporarily stop volunteering until the government guidance changes:

- NHS Volunteer Responders has been set up to support the NHS during the COVID-19 outbreak. It covers a variety of roles. A link to this is [here](#)
- A superb local volunteer database has been set up by Community Action Isle of Wight. This distributes volunteers to cover all of the Island's communities. The link can be found [here](#). This has an associated discussion group which can be found [here](#)
- To the wider public, '[WightAID](#)' is an initiative providing an opportunity for those who wish to donate money directly into the community support being delivered across the Island - much of which is being undertaken by volunteers
- Volunteer groups are working with the Isle of Wight Council to set-up up delivery systems
- Please also consider donating to the Island's food bank at this time- thank you

Jobs, Small Business and the Island Economy

I am very aware that businesses are worried about Coronavirus - the impact it will have on their incomes and their ability to provide for their families. This is especially true in the Island due to the potential loss of tourism business. I am in regular contact with organisations across the Island, this includes businesses large and small as well as groups such as the Isle of Wight Chamber of Commerce, the National Farmers Union (NFU) on the Island and the voluntary sector that also employ many Islanders. I have raised their concerns with ministers in public and in private.

We are still waiting for a support package for the self-employed - it is expected this week. However, thus far the key points of our plans to keep people in their jobs are:

- Government will help pay people's wages through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – offering grants to employers who promise to retain their staff, covering most of the cost of paying people's wages

- We are also deferring the next three months of VAT until the end of the financial year – an injection of over £30 billion of cash into businesses to help businesses pay people and keep them in work
- We are also acting so that, if the worst happens, there is a stronger safety net to fall back on. So, we are increasing Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit by £1,000 a year for the next 12 months – that’s nearly £7 billion of extra support

Here is some more detail for those interested:

- **For the Job Retention Scheme.** Any employer in the country – large, small, charitable or for-profit – who promises to retain their staff, can apply for a grant to cover most of the cost of paying people’s wages. Government grants will cover 80 per cent of the salary of retained workers up to a total of £2,500 a month – above the median income. There is no limit on these grants. The cost of wages will be backdated to 1st March and will be open initially for at least three months – and we will extend the scheme for longer if necessary.
- **Deferring the next three months of VAT.** That means no business will pay any VAT from now until the end of June, and they will have until the end of the financial year to repay those bills.
- **The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme will now be interest-free for twelve months, an extension from the initial announcement of six months.** We have already introduced and announced an extension to the Business Interruption Loan Scheme, which is for small and medium-sized businesses. On Tuesday, the Chancellor expanded the amount that can be borrowed from £1.2 million to £5 million, and we are now extending the time frame of no interest on these loans from six months to twelve months.
- **Protecting commercial tenants by ensuring that, if they cannot pay their rent because of coronavirus, they will not be evicted.** These measures, included in the emergency Coronavirus Bill, will mean no business will be forced out of their premises if they miss a payment in the next three months.

Offering more generous support to those who are without employment:

- **Increasing Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit by £1,000 a year – a cash injection of nearly £7 billion in the welfare system.** We are increasing the Universal Credit standard allowance, for the next 12 months, by £1,000 a year. We will also increase Working Tax Credit by the same amount for the next 12 months. Together these measures will benefit over four million of Britain’s most vulnerable households.
- **Strengthening the safety net for people who work for themselves by suspending the minimum income floor for twelve months – meaning self-employed people can now access, in full, Universal Credit at a rate that is equivalent to Statutory Sick Pay for employees.** For the self-employed, we are also deferring income tax self-assessment payments for July until the end of January 2021. We will announce further measures to support self-employed people over the coming days.
- **Helping people stay in their homes by providing nearly £1 billion of support for renters, by increasing the generosity of Housing Benefit and Universal Credit,** so that the Local Housing Allowance will cover at least 30 per cent of market rents in local areas.

The Government has also said it would support jobs potentially affected by Covid-19 by:

- **Providing a £330 billion package of loans and guarantees.** Any viable good business in financial difficulty who needs access to cash to pay their rent, the salaries of their employees, pay suppliers, or purchase stock, will be able to access a government-backed loan, on attractive terms.

- For the Island's **retail, hospitality and leisure sectors**, all businesses in this sector are exempt from business rates for 12 months – that's every single shop, pub, theatre, music venue, restaurant, and any other business in the retail, hospitality or leisure sectors.
 - I have made the Government very aware that the Island will be particularly badly affected by the loss of the tourism and visitor economy.
- In addition, government will provide small businesses in these sectors with an additional grant scheme of up to £25,000. Any business with a rateable value of less than £51,000 can now get access to a government grant.
 - On this issue, I have asked the Government to increase the rateable value to include more medium-sized Island businesses.
- Government will also provide £10,000 grants to the 700,000 of our smallest businesses.
- Government is also supporting small and medium-sized businesses to cope with the extra costs of paying Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) by refunding eligible SSP costs. In addition, businesses and self-employed people may be eligible to receive support with their tax affairs through HMRC's Time to Pay service. Arrangements are agreed case-by-case. Businesses can contact HMRC's new dedicated COVID-19 helpline for advice.
- The Government has also relaxed planning rules so pubs and restaurants can operate as hot food takeaways during the Coronavirus outbreak. Currently, planning permission is required for businesses to carry out a change of use to a hot food takeaway. The government has confirmed regulations will be temporarily relaxed to enable businesses to deliver this service without a planning application. This will support businesses and help people who need to self-isolate, as well as vulnerable groups and older people who have been strongly advised to avoid social contact outside their homes to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

For individuals, the Government has announced:

- **A three-month mortgage holiday for those in difficulty due to coronavirus. Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) is now available for people diagnosed with COVID-19 or who are self-isolating, helping people with their finances – and a doctor's note can be obtained via NHS 111.** SSP will be available from day one for people who have COVID-19. However, the Budget sets out that this will now cover those who are unable to work because they have been advised to self-isolate as well as for people within the same household who display symptoms. Those who are advised to self-isolate will be able to obtain a doctor's note via NHS 111 as medical evidence for SSP.
- **Allowing people to obtain a new isolation note online.** Isolation notes will provide employees with evidence for their employers that they have been advised to self-isolate due to coronavirus, either because they have symptoms or because they live with someone who has symptoms. The notes can be accessed through the NHS website and NHS 111 online, and then emailed to the user (or a trusted friend or family member, or directly to an employer, if someone doesn't have email).

The benefits system is also being made more flexible:

- **The Government will support people who are not eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, like the self-employed, through the welfare system so that nobody is penalised for doing the right thing. Government will make it quicker and easier to access benefits.** Those on contributory Employment Support Allowance (ESA) will be able to claim from day 1, instead of day 8. To make sure that time spent off work due to sickness is reflected in people's benefits, it is also temporarily removing the minimum income floor in Universal Credit. This means self-employed people who fall out of work will still get their full payment.

- **Suspending face-to-face assessments for all sickness and disability benefits for the next 3 months.** This temporary move (effective from 17 March) is being taken as a precautionary measure to protect vulnerable people from unnecessary risk of exposure to coronavirus. Those who are entitled to a benefit will continue to receive support, and new claimants will be able to access the safety net.

Food Deliveries

Supermarkets have plenty of food and are gearing up to deliver more. However, due to the demand for home delivery, they are finding it difficult to meet demand.

Rather than queue for prolonged periods outside the bigger stores, may I suggest that Islanders take this opportunity to support their own local shops which, especially in rural areas of the Island, deliver. These include:

- **Norris Family Grocers** has a full range of food and drink and deliver to Niton, Chale and Whitwell. Orders at: orders.nfg@gmail.com, or 01983 730275
- **Brighstone Village Shop** delivers in the West Wight and has a very wide variety of foods and drink: 01983 740 843, and email thevillageshop.brighstone@gmail.com
- **D.W Jarvis Family Butchers and Online Shop** are working as normal. 01983 562382
- **Root and fruit & Barrow boys** deliver Island-wide: www.barrowboysiw.co.uk, 01983 566636 or email info@barrowboysiw.co.uk
- **Four Winds Dairy IOW** deliver: milk, butter, eggs, cheeses, cream, jams/marmalades, chutneys, and fruit and vegetables. 07472 747484
- **Island Foods** continue to provide an island-wide delivery service available 6 days a week. 01983 717606
- **Brownrigg's Farm Shop** delivers: Brownriggfarmmeats.co.uk, email info@brownriggfarmmeats.co.uk, 01983 840 191

What about my MOT?

Vehicle owners will be granted a six-month exemption from MOT testing, enabling them to continue to travel to work where this absolutely cannot be done from home, or shop for necessities. All cars, vans and motorcycles which usually would require an MOT test will be exempted from needing a test from 30 March 2020. Vehicles must be kept in a roadworthy condition, and garages will remain open for essential repair work. Drivers can be prosecuted if driving unsafe vehicles.

Advice from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) for Islanders abroad

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented international border closures and other restrictions. Clearly, I am very concerned about Islanders - and any Britons - who are trapped overseas.

I am making sure the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will do what it can to repatriate islanders who are stuck abroad, especially as British nationals may be facing a period of lockdown as countries overseas restrict travel without notice. The Foreign Secretary has already talked with leaders of many other nations to enable Brits to return from countries they are stranded in. Advice and options vary for each country, but British nationals and family/friends in the UK are advised to do the following;

1. Subscribe to alerts for the country you are in <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>. Updates are occurring regularly

2. Follow Embassy/Consulate Social Media (search UK in [country name] on Twitter/Facebook)
3. Contact your airline, travel company, cruise line or other transport and accommodation providers
4. Get in touch with your insurance provider
5. Continue to follow the NHS coronavirus guidance to ensure your wellbeing

For outbound travel, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) advises British people against all non-essential travel worldwide. If British Nationals need to change or cancel your travel plans, follow these steps:

1. Contact your airline, travel company, cruise line or other transport and accommodation providers
2. Get in touch with your insurance provider

What am I doing as your Member of Parliament?

I have raised the Island in almost every debate, Urgent Question (UQs) or Government statement which has taken place on the floor of the House of Commons (in debates, one can talk to a number of issues, in UQs or Statements one is generally only allowed to ask a question). The reason I have raised the Island is because we are more vulnerable than most other parts of the UK due to our dependency on ferries. Key workers, mutual aid for the hospital, medicines and food supplies are also reliant on the three cross-Solent operators.

After a week pressing the Government, we now have permission for the three ferry firms (Red Funnel, Wightlink and Hovertravel) to talk to each other without being in breach of Competition Law. We needed that to happen so that they discuss operational issues in case there were outbreaks of coronavirus amongst staff.

I have also raised with Ministers twice on the floor of the House of Commons the issue of medicine supply after I was contacted by a senior doctor on the Island.

On the Island, I am hosting - by phone due to the situation – meetings with a wide range of groups, individuals and organisations. In addition, I talk daily with members of the Isle of Wight Council or the NHS. Almost all the feedback I receive is passed directly to Government Ministers. In some instances, I have talked to doctors and then passed that information, request or concern to Government Ministers in Parliamentary debates minutes later. I have been doing everything in my power to ensure the safety and security of people on the Isle of Wight.

Specifically:

- On the 16th of March, I spoke of the need for a national decision on behalf of insurance companies as to if they will, or will not, recognise coronavirus under business interruption insurance. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video, [here](#)
- On the 16th of March, I spoke of the need for unavoidably small hospitals that serve island communities to be supported by the Government in mutual aid, clear advice and the supply of medicine and equipment. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video [here](#)
- On the 17th of March, I spoke of the need to relax competition law to allow discussion between the cross-Solent ferry operators to build a resilience plan during the outbreak. I asked the Government to support the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in allowing passengers to sit in cars during ferry journeys, to protect at-risk groups and for social distancing purposes. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video [here](#)
- On the 17th of March, I spoke of the need for more to be done to support social enterprises who will now face significant income cuts. Specifically, I raised my concerns that rate relief will not be enough and asked the Chancellor to act quickly in supporting small businesses access grants. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video [here](#)

- On the 19th of March, I spoke of the need for a review of rateable value and clarity for my Chamber of Commerce in the application process. I asked for either a voluntary sector package or a universal employment retention programme during this health crisis. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video [here](#)
- On the 23rd of March, I spoke of the need to look after the self-employed during, and after, the coronavirus outbreak. Particularly in light on our reliance on tourism and the visitor economy. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video [here](#)
- On the 23rd of March, I spoke of the need for the Coronavirus Bill to enable nurses to give controlled drugs as part of patient group direction. This provision would allow flexibility in supplying life-saving medicine. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video [here](#)
- On the 23rd of March, I spoke of the need to ensure support for cross-Solent travel operators in the Coronavirus Bill. The link for the words is [here](#) and the video [here](#)

Parliament is now in recess. This would have taken place now anyway, but it is being extended by one week. We are due to sit again towards the end of April. Regardless of whether Parliament is sitting, I am here to argue for the Island's case with Government. **I will continue to do this.**

Key Contact Numbers

The Government has set up the following hotlines, which I urge you to make use of. These will be able to provide you with a quick response to an urgent query:

Business support & Ventilators:

0300 456 3565

Universal Credit:

0800 328 5644

HMRC:

0800 015 9559

School closures and education:

0800 046 8687

The Government's comprehensive page is here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close/further-businesses-and-premises-to-close>

The Council's helpline for vulnerable Islanders is 01983 823 600

The Isle of Wight's help page is at: <https://www.iow.gov.uk/Residents/Care-Support-and-Housing/Community-Health-and-Wellbeing/Public-Health-Coronavirus-COVID-19/Advice1>

To Sum Up

Thank you for taking the trouble to write to me. As I said, Coronavirus will pass but the more we work together, the quicker it will pass. That is why the Government has taken unprecedented action to limit the spread of the virus, to support the economy and to make provision to look after the more vulnerable in our community.

Kind regards,

Bob Seely