



As August gives way to September, and Parliament and schools return, for many there is a hope of something nearer to the normal we used to know. There is also a hope that we will learn new ways of working and take some of the positive learning from recent experience forward. I appreciate too that many concerns still exist and we must be on our guard to remember that COVID 19 has not gone away. Instead we have learned more about how to live with it and we also have treatments that can alleviate symptoms and keep people out of hospital.

Summer without fetes has been strange. In the early summer I am usually out and about visiting at least one fete in the constituency every weekend. I have missed the informal conversations at these events and when out and about in the streets. Whilst technology has enabled some things to continue there is no substitute for face to face meetings. As human beings we rely on the non-verbal signals to understand more of what someone is saying and it is just not possible to read the signals in the same way on screen. I think this accounts for much of the mis-understanding that can come from emails too. During recent months I have continued to hold surgeries and these have had to be via zoom. Although I prefer to meet people face to face, with the geographical size of the constituency, I have come to realise that this may be a practical thing to continue going forward to reduce travel time especially where a meeting would be quite short. So in the Autumn I will continue to hold virtual surgeries and will arrange face to face meetings as restrictions permit.

As we begun to emerge from lockdown I know that there have been huge disappointments for some people. One area of disappointment has been for couples planning to marry. I know just how much planning goes into a wedding and some couples had adjusted their plans to be able to go ahead under the phased recovery plan which would have allowed small wedding receptions to go ahead in August. So when the COVID statistics showed the risk of a second wave which led the Prime Minister to put the brake on easing restrictions I appreciate that this was a huge blow to couples and their families. I do not underestimate the emotional strain on families and indeed on the wedding industry, but I do support the Prime Minister in taking early action to apply the brake to keep us all safe.

A second area of disappointment has been around exam results. As it was impossible to hold public examinations the results had to be determined based on past performance and predicted grades. There has been much publicity over the fact that some students were disappointed with the outcome of this. I know the anticipation and anxiety around waiting for exam results and fully appreciate the disappointment when the outcome is not as hoped. Although there is an appeal process I was concerned that early decisions made by further education establishments based on the results did not allow for appeals. I made an urgent plea to the Minister for an immediate temporary halt to the UCAS Clearing system to allow for appeals before it was too late with places reallocated. I understand that universities are making allowance for this.

On the other side of things, it has been a delight to see hospitality outlets reopen and pub and restaurants gardens attracting custom back in the lovely summer afternoons that we have had. Although limited, the chance to meet up with people again was welcomed by many in our area. I have been pleased to see that, by and large, people have been following Government guidelines on social distancing and hand hygiene.

Let us hope that the work for a vaccine for Covid-19 continues to make good progress and that the availability of different drugs to treat symptoms continues to grow. Only with these will full confidence return and all business and social activities be able to recommence.

When Parliament returns there will be a busy programme of work. 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.