



A year after the first lockdown many people reflected on what has happened during the last year and how they have dealt with the situation. As with all places of work, in an MP's office changes have had to be made. Working with my team we have written a shared view of our situation. The full article is available on my website with extracts shared below. I hope it will be of interest.

We agreed that whilst working from home has some up-sides it does have several down sides. Along with everyone else we have been using online methods of communication and telephone but there has been much less general sharing of ideas and the general chat that cements relationships and builds the team. The feeling of remoteness and isolation is strong. In addition to the isolation the scope of the work has narrowed to mainly involve responding to emails. In the period from the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 to March 2021 we received over 30,000 emails from constituents, this was more than double the usual and in addition to internal emails and those from other organisations with which we work.

The nature of the constituent emails fell broadly into two categories. Many emails raised concerns about personal issues and problems relating to COVID-19. There was also a huge increase in standard campaign emails. With the personal concerns the team did all we could to help but sometimes there was nothing that we could do. The reaction to this largely fell into two extremes – those who were grateful for our efforts despite the outcome and those who blamed us for the situation. Dealing with people shouting down the phone at you because you cannot change a situation was difficult.

Campaigning organisations quickly realised that people had time on their hands and were at home by their computers. Campaigning organisations can do a very good job but when the same email is received dozens of times over with exactly the same wording the message starts to lose something. These campaign emails are all the worse when the sender has not even bothered to fill in the missing parts – Dear [INSERT THE NAME OF YOUR MP HERE] and at the end [INSERT YOUR NAME HERE] left just as in the template. We also noticed an increased aggression in the tone of some of these emails which is not conducive to engagement.

For those of us juggling childcare and work, the pressures increased. It is almost impossible to focus on work with young children in the same space. So finding permissible childcare was a challenge, and then having little respite between work and family responsibilities, has led to feelings of exhaustion.

We could not have even begun to second guess the issues that people would contact us on, seeking help and advice. We have had to learn about situations and assimilate large amounts of information very quickly. We have had to respond, as best we could, to the different emotions expressed to us. In phone calls the team has had to deal with constituents literally crying down the line to them. Whilst in normal times there is always some of this during this period it has increased. All this cannot but take its toll on the listener, the one trying to help. One member of the team tells of the nights she has laid awake at night worrying about individual constituents. This is beyond the call of normal working life.

Although through the excellent work of the House authorities and the Speaker's Office a way of keeping Parliament in operation was quickly found it has not been the same. In some ways the democratic process has been stifled. The lack of Westminster Hall debates for a long time took away the opportunity for MPs to raise and discuss a whole range of issues. The remote operation of the Chamber reduced the number of speakers possible in any one debate and also removed the opportunity for quick exchanges, by way of interventions, which are an important part of the process of debate. As a result we saw a series of set pieces from those selected to speak in a debate rather than robust debate between MPs and the ability to challenge Ministers in quite the same way as usual greatly suppressed.

The need for patience, care and tolerance for one another will not go away. We might like to think it will be there as a new normal. Whatever the longer term brings, as we emerge from lockdown and learn to live with COVID-19 there will be a need to rebuild our shared lives, to take from this period the best and properly deal with the worst. We doubt many people have escaped this time untouched and it will take time for us all to find a new level.

If you would like to read the full article or find information on other issues please visit my website [www.johnhowell.org.uk](http://www.johnhowell.org.uk)