

Stop sniping at businesses - they're the ones that will get us back on our feet after this

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29 March
2020

The last few weeks have been tough, as infections and deaths due to Covid-19 rise, and as we all adjust to the new social rules we must live by. Horrendously, we know the coming weeks will be harder still, before the measures brought in start to take effect and as we travel towards the peak of the virus.

That framework of rules was enacted with a heavy heart; no British Prime Minister wants to restrict the daily lives of citizens, close businesses or ban gatherings. Every one of us is being forced to learn to live differently, but there is no other option.

However, we have seen some, intentionally or otherwise, wrongly interpreting the current rules, and unfairly criticising businesses that are implementing them correctly.

On March 19, the Government issued guidance setting out who the key workers were whose children schools should remain open to. This list included those doing tremendous work on the front line of this fight in the NHS and social care systems, as well as those delivering key public services, those ensuring vital utilities keep running, those who keep the goods flowing around our country, those who keep us fed and those who secure our streets. The children of all other workers would have to remain at home. It was a difficult decision but the Government's scientific advisers believed the time was right to reduce the number of children in our schools.

On March 23, the Prime Minister implemented rules that told people to stay at home, other than for four reasons: shopping for necessities, one form of exercise a day, any medical need, or for work – if that work cannot be done from home. Again, the Prime Minister observed the advice from scientists who have been assessing all the evidence and made the call.

These two pieces of guidance are perfectly clear. It has therefore been disappointing that those who feel the need to criticise any and all private sector work have started attacking companies for staying open when their work cannot be done remotely. It does not matter whether they appear on that key worker list, what matters is that they follow the rules our Government has set out.

These businesses need to be defended, because we need to minimise the damage to our economy where possible, and be ready to spring back into action as soon as this lockdown is over. There will always be some work that cannot be done from home, whether it is construction or packing boxes in an Amazon warehouse – but we still need

houses built and for deliveries to be made. If the scientific view changes, and all of this work becomes too high a risk, the Government will update its advice. But until then businesses should not be criticised for following the rules.

Where jobs can be done from home, they must be. Many businesses already have systems in place to allow this. Those that don't yet, but can, have been implementing them with speed. But those that can't should not be attacked.

Of course, businesses whose staff cannot all work from home need to follow social distancing guidelines. This is not a time for recklessness. If some staff need to be furloughed in order to do this, then that must be done, and companies can take advantage of the support that has been provided by the Chancellor. But not every member of staff needs to be furloughed to allow for safe working.

The Prime Minister specified the businesses and areas that needed to close, whether or not staff can work from home. The list includes shops selling non-essential goods, libraries, bars, nightclubs and cinemas: anywhere that provides a place for groups of people to gather and find it impossible not to break rules of social distancing. Some businesses, whose staff cannot work from home, are able to control the environment their staff work in, and take steps to create that safe environment – that is why they have not yet been included.

These are difficult times for businesses. We cannot allow those who hate the private sector to use this crisis as an excuse to pile unfair criticism on them. We should stand up for those that are correctly following the rules. They are the same companies we will need to help fund our recovery when we finally get through this.

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