

Councillor S Corcoran
Leader of Cheshire East
Chair of Cheshire & Warrington Leaders Board
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12th January 2021

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
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Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government
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Dear Secretaries of State

We are writing to you jointly to set out the views of partners across Cheshire on the current lockdown arrangements, concerns about the impact on schools and our NHS, and progress in the deployment of testing and vaccines.

We support the need for a lockdown. It is the minimum necessary to address the alarming acceleration of the virus that we have seen across our communities and address the deeply concerning pressures on our hospitals.

However, the regulations have left too many areas of social and economic interaction subject to uncertainty. Last Spring there was widespread public compliance with a simple and effective message. In contrast this time, the clarity of the “stay at home” message is undermined by ambiguity between regulations and guidelines; making public compliance more difficult to secure and creating challenges for our enforcement authorities. For example, regulations enable people to exercise far from home, congregate in beauty-spots and public places, and travel for click-and-collect shopping. The more liberal interpretation of lockdown in the

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current regulations means that many more people are required to work away from home, increasing the risks that their communities will continue to be disproportionately affected. Travel in private and public transport is more significant than in the previous lockdowns. We also have evidence that mask-wearing is not sufficiently enforceable in indoor public places, or in outdoor areas where people are in close proximity.

We would support additional national measures that tighten these areas further, to be implemented alongside further financial support for businesses and their employees, and the self-employed.

The process for partial closure of schools was chaotic and poorly communicated by government, leaving our school staff, parents and pupils to deal with a terrible conflict between the education of children and the protection of public health. Our teachers and support staff, supported by our council teams, have been nothing short of heroic. But the constantly changing definition of critical workers and vulnerable children, applied inconsistently between schools facing different local circumstances, has again created confusion. We would urge the government to settle on a clear set of guidelines based on medical evidence, which schools can apply flexibly in support of their local circumstances.

We would also oppose a premature lifting of the lockdown. Cheshire experienced a rapid escalation between tiers during the Christmas period, which created real suffering amongst our local business community. Nothing would be more destabilising to business than more uncertainty about the regulations they will face. We support retaining lockdown until we see a sustained period of reduced infection, the immediate pressures on our hospitals have been resolved, and the vaccine has protected those who are at highest risk of hospital admission and serious illness. We should then exit with a clear strategy in place for recovery and renewal, supported by additional investment in our economy and communities.

We welcome the extension of asymptomatic testing under local management, and also the recognition by government that this cannot provide a “freedom pass” to breach the lockdown rules. We will deliver testing locally as part of a wider public health response, with tests made available only to those with unavoidable and repeated contact outside their households; including schools, care homes, critical businesses and front-line public services. We urge government to ensure a sufficient supply of lateral flow devices to meet this need, and to ensure councils have the funding required to deliver the programme effectively and safely. We expect this to remain in place long after the lockdown is eased. Public health

programmes will need sustained investment, long after the peak of infection is passed.

Finally, we welcome the progress being made to roll out the vaccine. Councils are playing an important role in support of the local NHS, and we are committed to moving through the priority groups as quickly as possible. More local discretion would enable us to target specific communities, groups and individuals, based on evidence of the local public health benefit. We regret that community-level data is still not available publicly, despite the huge public interest in understanding the rollout of the vaccine locally, and the links to our local outbreak plans. We urge you to learn lessons from the rollout of local track and trace which has been hampered by excessive command-and-control, and the confusion created by the recent letter sent to some over-80s about the regional vaccine sites. For most of our over-80s, attendance at the Manchester city centre site is not a viable or safe option, and we will need a greater focus on more accessible and community-based sites if progress is to be made rapidly.

This letter reflects our commitment to play our part in the next stage of response to this terrible virus. A strong and flexible local response is critical to success, and we urge you to respond quickly to the issues we have raised.

Yours sincerely,



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Leader of the Labour Group
Cheshire East Council



Councillor Louise Gittins
Leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council



Councillor Craig Browne
Deputy Leader
Leader of the Independent Group
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Clare Hayward

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David Keane

David Keane
Police and Crime Commissioner for Cheshire