

**Rt Hon John Healey MP**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS**

**LONDON SW1A 0AA**

**Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1A 2AA**

**27 March 2020**

*Dear Prime Minister*

When you made your TV address to the Nation on Monday you instructed people to stay at home and large parts of the economy to stop working. It was billed as a comprehensive ban on non-essential business but this was contradicted by Government guidance which followed, causing confusion and concern both for employers and employees.

Beyond the hospitality sector, the Government has not yet ordered non-essential businesses to shut down operations and stand down (or 'furlough') their workers. As a result, many companies are still operating but not following Government guidance to enable employees to work from home and to safeguard the health of those who they still require at work.

Faced with employers who fail to follow Government guidance, which undermines the national effort to beat the Coronavirus crisis and puts at risk the health of individual workers and their families, there are two huge gaps in the Government's action:

- first, the Government has set up helplines to advise business in this crisis but has done nothing to help staff that need advice to challenge their managers
- second, the Government has done nothing to enforce the essential health guidance issued to stop the spread of Coronavirus in workplaces.

As a result, there is nothing to help ensure social distancing, suitable protective equipment, good hygiene facilities or safe working practices are put in place and many employers are simply not following Government guidance to protect their workforce, putting them and their partners and families at risk. Arguably, such employers are failing their legal duty to safeguard the health and safety of their staff under the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act.

Faced with mixed messages from Government, I am getting many reports from very worried workers of employers who are continuing to operate as normal and forcing their employees to come to work or face disciplinary action, loss of pay or even dismissal.

Some examples I've had reported to me in the constituency this week include:

- Kitchens, canteens and break rooms being closed with no alternative provision – leading staff to eat at their desks, make more trips to shops or take breaks in their cars
- Managers being told not to address staff displaying Coronavirus symptoms
- No hand sanitiser provided
- No option or discussion about staffing working from home
- Social distancing not being observed and staff still expected to 'hot desk', sharing equipment with no special steps to sanitise it
- Employers changing people's job roles without notice or training, to better fit Government guidance over essential industry – which is exacerbating the anxiety people already feel about being in a workplace they don't feel is safe and putting their families at greater risk from the virus.

Some of this poor practice is present in very large local workplaces – warehouses, call centres, distribution centres – where hundreds of staff work in the same large space. The failure of these big employers to follow public health advice risks dispersing the virus into hundreds of families' homes and, of course, fears are hugely heightened by the inevitable reports of employees developing Coronavirus symptoms.

Without clearer guidance from Government and the action required by crisis health advice, such big employers may become a big part the problem in speeding rather slowing the Coronavirus spread.

Finally but importantly, I fully support the Chancellor's announcement of the 80% salary subsidy – job retention scheme – so employers keep staff in jobs rather than laying them off during this Coronavirus crisis. This helps individual workers maintain their incomes and helps business retain their experienced workforce, which will be an essential part of our capacity as a country to recover rapidly when the pandemic passes. Nevertheless, this week I've have many distressed constituents reporting companies simply throwing staff out of jobs or forcing them to go on to statutory sick pay. So I urge you to do more to promote this job retention scheme and tell employers the Government expects them to use it to honour the responsibility they have to their employees.

I appreciate that companies are – as we all are – trying to come to terms with an unprecedented and rapidly-changing situation but the Government must help by being much clearer with its instructions and it must do much more to advise and protect workers.

I look forward to hearing from you and, more importantly, to seeing action from you on these points.



John Healey MP