25 September 2020

By Email: matt.hancock.mp@parliament.uk
Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Dear Secretary of State

As civic leaders of major cities across the North of England, each dealing with local restrictions imposed to curb the rise of COVID-19 infections, we are acutely aware of the dangers faced by our communities, our most vulnerable residents, together with the pressures increasing every day on our health service and its front line workers. The rising spread of infection is the biggest challenge we face and we recognise that the imposition of additional targeted measures in our cities is our best defence to ensure cases do not return to those experienced earlier in the year and crucially to prevent a further national lockdown situation. As civic Leaders we stand shoulder to shoulder in doing the right thing by prioritising scarce resources, promoting sensible measures and working collaboratively with the Government and its officials in response to this national crisis.

It is apparent though that the new restrictions are threatening an economic impact on the hospitality sector which will be huge, disproportionate and not what we believe the Government intended when designing the measures. Each of our cities have a thriving hospitality sector populated by good, responsible businesses, generating thousands of jobs with many providing quality training, apprenticeships and career paths into the industry. They are a vital part of our economies going forward. As it currently stands we are seeing significant cancellations in pubs and restaurant bookings, hotel occupancy is down to around 30% and footfall in city centres is also on average down by c. 50%, worst case at 70% in some areas. The stark reality is that these businesses are facing the prospect of a complete decimation in trade, not just in the short term but as we look ahead to the sector's traditional lifeblood of the Christmas period and almost certainly continuing into spring/summer of next year which we know with certainty will result in mass market failure, huge levels of redundancies and depleted and boarded up high streets.

We are already seeing that the advisory guidance is having a limited impact and is certainly unenforceable, either by the local authority or the police, which is undermining any efforts around the rule of six. By not permitting the mixing of households in the sanitised and socially distanced conditions of licensed premises or coffee shops complying with the rule of six, it is genuinely creating a position which is the worst of both worlds in that the minority of people who flout the advisory guidance will continue to do so and the majority of responsible individuals will simply stay at home, with the unintended consequence of cities falling into a state of decline. It is almost a return to lockdown in everything but name. The evidence is suggesting that the measures are simply leading to more household mixing as it drives the act of socialising illicitly underground rather than in the COVID-

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safe environment of table service in well managed restaurants/pubs. Indeed in some areas where the restrictions have been imposed, the level of infections has actually increased.

We respect the fact that businesses are professional operations and have invested heavily in providing safe, compliant environments and a solace for people to unwind safely, in an industry which already has stringent health and safety measures in place. Local authority resources would be much better deployed targeting those irresponsible businesses which are failing to comply with strict safety measures rather than a blanket attempt to enforce compliance across all licensed premises, which is frankly impossible. If businesses cannot be given the chance to trade their way through this crisis, the juxtaposition is a call for a massive package of Government financial support which is not a sustainable position at any level.

The call to Government is to work with local authorities and businesses by accepting the need for adjustments to the restrictions to ensure there is a balance in protecting public health and the need to protect businesses and equally the mental wellbeing of the public at large who are facing a bleak six months at least as we face the reality of heading into the winter months and beyond.

The key asks are –

- recognise that the advisory guidance is unenforceable and completely undermines the efforts to enforce the rule of six – it is legal to socialise in a six with other from your household in venues but the advice is not to and businesses are warned to enforce this. The messaging is contradictory and confusing, it is unenforceable and hugely damaging to businesses together with the effect of undermining public confidence.

- if the Government is not minded to change this stance, there are only two ways to resolve the issue - either make the guidance the law and compensate business appropriately with a package of support - or allow for limited mixing via the rule of six in controlled environments.

- Where appropriate review the 10pm curfew – restaurants thrive on the 8-9pm second sitting booking slot and upwards of 40% base their whole trade on this. Without this we are seeing that it is forcing people into underground parties or houses thus highlighting the problem with no rules or compliance.

- Engage with local authorities and businesses and discuss these considerations in advance and work with us to get the messaging right, highlighting and celebrating good practice and increase public confidence to visit city centres and venues when the time is right.

We hope this letter is received in the manner in which it is sent, in the spirit of co-operation and collaboration with the best interests of our communities and our country at its heart. We have also copied this letter to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

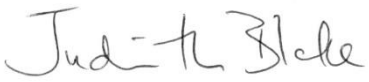
Yours faithfully



Joe Anderson, OBE
Mayor of Liverpool



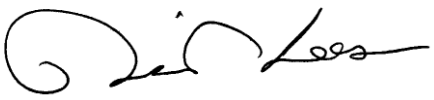
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