



# FINSBURY COVID-19 INSIGHTS

## How Covid-19 ultimately affects the UK will depend to a significant degree on what individual citizens do

One of the striking ways in which the UK Government is approaching Covid-19 is the heavy use of experts from different fields. And alongside the medical and economic advice, the UK Government has been drawing on advice from behavioural scientists, including from the Behavioural Insights Team, whose Chief Executive (David Halpern) sits on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which has been stood up to provide advice. This is because of the growing recognition that how Covid-19 ultimately affects the UK will depend to a significant degree on what individual citizens do, and how all of us respond to advice from government.

## HERE ARE FOUR VERY DIFFERENT ELEMENTS OF THESE DIFFERENT BEHAVIOURAL FACTORS.

### (1) It matters who delivers the message.

Surveys show that we are more likely to follow advice from governments when we perceive them to be delivered honestly and from trustworthy sources. A 2019 global Ipsos MORI poll showed that, in the UK, doctors and scientists are the most trusted professions; and politicians and Ministers the least. Research conducted in the middle of previous outbreaks (e.g. swine flu) came to similar conclusions: the people whose advice was most trusted were public health professionals. So a very striking element of the UK response is that the key advice and messages are delivered directly by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor, with prominent backing from the Prime Minister (rather than the other way round).

### (2) We have a tendency to follow the herd.

Human beings are social animals, and are heavily influenced by what other people are doing. So when we see other people panic-buying goods, we have a tendency to want to do the same ourselves. What starts as a non-rational response to a perception of scarcity, can escalate into a rational response to lack of produce in shops, as we begin to follow the herd (a very natural human reaction). In these situations, messaging that implies that stockpiling might represent a sensible precaution is likely to encourage this herd mentality, as it implies scarcity of the goods in question and that 'everyone else is already doing it' (this was the error that some ministers made in the 2012 petrol crisis). Which is why the messages from the government and supermarkets has focused on the availability of produce, not their scarcity.

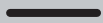


### (3) We can be encouraged to take specific actions; and turn these into habits.

One of the most concrete ways in which the Government is using behavioural insights is by testing the messaging in campaigns and posters to see which messages work best. The messages that have been shown to have the strongest effect are those that are easy to understand and simple to translate into specific actions. For example, the most widespread NHS poster (see below) tells you to 'wash your hands, more often, for 20 seconds'. But you will also notice that they encourage people to do these at specific moments in time (when you get home from work; when you sneeze; when you eat). This is a subtle, but important behavioural point. When we think about when and where we need to take an action, we're more likely to do it. And repeating behaviours in response to the same cues can help us to turn one-off behaviours into habits.

### (4) Habit disruption.

Just as habits like washing your hands can be induced by repeating them in response to the same cues (see 3), so habits can be disrupted by events that force us to change our routines. When tube drivers went on strike in 2014, it disrupted the daily routines of millions of Londoners. They were forced to travel to work by different modes of transport, or work from home. Analysis conducted on the subsequent transport choices of these individuals showed that some of them never returned to the tube. Their working patterns had been disrupted, and they discovered better ways of getting to work or working from home. Many behavioural scientists believe that we might see similar effects over the (much more significant) disruption caused by coronavirus to the way we live our lives and work. Which will likely include more home working, conference calls, and less need to travel to meet face-to-face.



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