



yesterday at a petrol station in Ahmedabad, India, amid disruption to fuel imports caused by the war in the Middle East

# Panic-buying warnings will fail, ministers told

**Ben Clatworthy** Whitehall Editor

Ministers are being told not to tell people to stop panic buying or to calm down over fears such comments would exacerbate fuel shortages.

Officials are briefing ministers using a series of documents, including one by the Government Communication Service's behavioural science team, which lists what language should and should not be used in social media campaigns and media interviews.

It says: "Approaches that focus on 'calming' people may fail to tackle the root causes of the issue. If people are rationally changing their buying behaviour to cope with unexpected situations, then trying to 'calm' them will be ineffective (and messages exhorting people to 'stop panicking' will likely create a further impression of competition for goods)."

Departments are also using the government's "crisis communications planning guide". Most of it was drawn

up after the pandemic, when Britons stockpiled lavatory paper and pasta, and the 2021 fuel crisis, when there were huge queues at the pumps.

The Cabinet Office is understood to be consulting behavioural scientists to refine future communication messages in case oil stocks run dangerously low or the public begin stockpiling.

The behavioural science guide says: "In most situations, excessive buying is not irrational or selfish and is driven by people responding to normal incentives. If an item ... is at risk of running out, then it is advantageous to buy extra."

As a result ministers and officials are explicitly told they should not "single out certain groups". The advice says: "Blaming a 'selfish minority' for excessive buying can create social tension and reduce people's desire to help and support one another."

Ministers have been at pains to play down the prospect of fuel rationing and discourage people from panic buying petrol since the start of the Iran conflict.

Their messaging has focused on the risk being one of price and not supply. However, in private ministers have been examining plans to ration petrol and diesel in the event the conflict continues to restrict the supply of oil to the UK.

Government figures show that the country has less than 900,000 tonnes of petrol in storage, 10 per cent less than a year ago and about 26 days' supply at normal demand levels. On Sunday Steve Reed, the communities secretary, said: "People should go around and buy their fuel just like they always would."

Ministers have learnt from the 2021 fuel crisis, which was caused by the leak of notes from an industry meeting at which BP fuel stocks were discussed. A simultaneous warning that a shortage of HGV drivers could result in fuel shortages at forecourts caused panic buying.

Yesterday diesel hit 171.17p per litre on average and petrol reached 147.19p, a 28.8 per cent and 14.4 per cent respective increase since February 28.

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