

COVID-19 – Daily News Bulletin

24 April 2020

Heart of London Business Alliance is committed to ensuring our members receive the support they need while the situation in relation to COVID-19 is fast-changing. Our Daily Bulletin provides you with an update on the important announcements and guidance from the Government. In addition, it is recommended that our members monitor the [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) website for guidance regarding COVID-19.

Together with our local Member of Parliament, Nickie Aiken, Heart of London will continue to lobby Government for support for our members and your employees during this difficult time.

Headlines

- Plans were announced to expand COVID-19 testing to all essential workers.
- Details were revealed of the Government's plan to borrow £180bn from bond market investors to pay for the COVID-19 crisis measures.
- The Business Secretary announced that retailers will be protected from aggressive rent collection and will only be asked to pay what they can during the coronavirus outbreak.
- Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon laid out Scotland's exit strategy stating that the nation would have to get used to a "new normal."

Government Daily Covid-19 Press Conference - Thursday

- Thursday's Downing Street press briefing was delivered by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock. He was joined by Sir Patrick Vallance, Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, and Professor John Newton, Director of Health Improvement at Public Health England.
- Hancock confirmed that the Government remained on target to meet its goal of reaching a capacity to conduct 100,000 tests per day by the end of the month. The capacity has now increased to 51,000. Speaking to the accuracy and effectiveness of the tests, Professor Newton stated that a negative result does not guarantee you don't have virus but is useful indicator to safely return to work.
- With capacity expanding, the Health Secretary announced that testing will now be made available to any key worker, or their families, who require one.
- An online portal to be launched tomorrow will allow both employers and individuals to register.
- Hancock also looked further ahead to the anticipated rollout of home test kits.
- In addition, the armed forces will soon deploy 48 mobile testing facilities, while the 31 drive-in testing centres already established will be increased to 48.
- Hancock confirmed that the NHS contact tracing app is currently in testing ahead of rollout. This will be critical for increasing testing rates among those who may have been infected but are asymptomatic. To facilitate this the government is hiring 18,000 people to track infections, including 3,000 clinicians.
- Outlining the latest coronavirus figures, Hancock noted that the rate of deaths had fallen compared to recent days. However, he continued to emphasise the importance of following social distancing as the peak infection point was not yet passed.
- Sir Patrick reported that hospital admission rates were now flat or decreasing across all regions. However, it will take several weeks before this translates through into a sustained drop in reported deaths.

- Hancock reiterated that the Government can only ease restrictions once its five tests had been met. He added that to lift the restrictions too soon would be a mistake. He went on to outline that when we move into the next stage it will be important roll out a programme of test, track and trace to help ease the lockdown.
- Questioned on the Scottish government's exit strategy announced on Thursday (see below) Hancock stated that having all nations across the UK working together has been important and the union has essentially moved together. UK wide approach continues to be the best way forward.

Government outlines new measures to protect retailers

- The Business Secretary announced that retailers will be protected from aggressive rent collection and will only be asked to pay what they can during the coronavirus outbreak.
- The government is temporarily banning statutory demands and winding up petitions issued to commercial tenants. The measures will be included in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill and secondary legislation is being laid to prevent landlords using Commercial Rent Arrears Recovery (CRAR) unless they are owed 90 days of unpaid rent. See here for more [details](#).

Revision of UK Debt Management Office's Financing Remit

- In a signal of the growing financial cost of the COVID-19 crisis, the Treasury announced that the UK Debt Management Office (DMO) would offer investors an additional £180bn worth of gilts to buy between May and July, a huge increase on the £45bn already planned for April. Combined, this will almost match the UK's peak annual gilt sales that totalled £227.6bn in 2009-10 and a significant increase on the £160Bn planned for 2020-21 before the onset of the crisis.
- The money raised will help pay for the growing package of economic support measures announced by the Government to date and is an indication that the Government does not see any likelihood of a near term improvement of the situation.
- A further update on the DMO's financing remit will be provided at the end of June. See [here](#) for more details.

Scottish Government outlines Exit Strategy

- First Minister Nicola Sturgeon laid out Scotland's plans to exit the lockdown.
- Sturgeon stated that now is not the right time to relax the lockdown and cautioned that social distancing could remain in place into next year.
- The document "Coronavirus (COVID-19): framework for decision making" sets out the current lockdown position and outlines the factors that must be considered to gradually to ease restrictions. It stated that now is not the right time to ease the restrictions, but lockdown will be reviewed every three weeks. The document states that easing restrictions will not mean returning to how things were before the virus with many industries needing to adapt. No date for lifting the lockdown was given, instead it warned that "each one of us will have to adapt to this as the new normal, at least until we are sure that we can be more protected by a vaccine or treatment". The document defines the Scottish approach as:
 - **Suppress** the virus through compliance with physical distancing and hygiene measures, ensuring that the reproduction number remains below 1 and that our NHS remains within capacity
 - **Care** for those who need it, whether infected by the virus or not
 - **Support** people, business and organisations affected by the crisis
 - **Recover** to a new normal, carefully easing restrictions when safe to do so while maintaining necessary measures and ensuring that transmission remains controlled, supported by developments in medicine and technology
 - **Protect** against this and future pandemics, including through effective testing, contact tracing and isolation
 - **Renew** our country, building a fairer and more sustainable economy and society

Government starts major COVID-19 study

- The Government announced that it was embarking on a major long-term study that will track the spread of COVID-19 in the general population
 - The study will test up 300,000 people over the next twelve months, with an initial 25,000 people taking part in the pilot stage.
 - Testing will include antibody testing to help understand levels of immunity. This will form part of Pillar 4 in the government's COVID-19 testing strategy.
 - The initial findings are expected in early May and it is hoped that they will help scientists and the government to respond to the coronavirus outbreak. See [here](#) for more details.
 - Additionally, the MHRA approved the Oxford Vaccine Trial request. Scientists in Oxford started working on designing a vaccine early in January 2020 and have now identified one to start the first clinical testing phase. See [here](#) for more details.
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Summary of UK COVID-19 Business support schemes

The UK Government has announced a series of economic interventions aimed at supporting employees, employers and businesses through the uncertainty and potential loss of income resulting from the Covid-19 crisis and the restrictions on business activity as a result.

The Government has established a business support [web portal](#) with details on eligibility and how businesses can apply for support. A summary of those measures is listed below. Please see overleaf.

Summary of UK COVID-19 Business Support Schemes (with hyperlinks)

Employment Retention Measures

- **COVID-19 Job Retention Scheme:** Employers can claim 80% of their usual monthly wage costs for furloughed employees, limited to £2,500 per individual, plus the associated Employer National Insurance contributions and minimum automatic enrolment employer pension contributions on that wage. The temporary scheme will be open to all UK employers for at least three months, backdated to 1st March 2020. The scheme is expected to be operational by the end of April. This scheme has been extended to the end of June to account for extended social distancing measures.
- **Statutory Sick Pay Rebate:** The Government will refund eligible SSP costs to all employers with fewer than 250 employees. This applies to a claim as a result of COVID-19 self-isolation and is limited to two weeks per employee. While existing systems are not designed to facilitate such employer refunds for SSP, the Government will work with employers to set up a repayment mechanism as soon as possible.
- **Self-employed Income Support Scheme:** Most self-employed workers will be able to apply for a grant of up to 80% of average monthly profits from the last three years, capped at a maximum of £2,500 per month. The scheme will cover three months' earnings with the first lump sum payments anticipated in June. The scheme will be open to those with trading profits of up to £50,000 in 2018-2019 or an average annual trading profit of up to £50,000 from 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19. At least half of a claimants' income must come from self-employment.

Bridging Loans to Mitigate Business Disruption

- **COVID-19 Commercial Financing Facility:** The Bank of England's Covid-19 Commercial Financing Facility is intended to support large companies of investment grade standing. Loans, through the purchase of commercial paper of up to one-year maturity, will be provided to support short term liquidity, mitigating against cashflow disruption. The scheme has been extended to include those businesses that are too large to qualify for the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (see below) but do not have an investment-grade rating. This will be achieved by constructing a credit rating from information about firms' relationships with their banks.
- **Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme:** To support small business access to bank lending and overdrafts, the Government is guaranteeing 80% on loans provided through the scheme, up to an individual value of £5m (subject to a per lender cap on claims). Most UK businesses with turnover of under £41 million will be eligible. The scheme is being facilitated by the British Business Bank through participating partners (which includes most high street banks). For borrowers, no interest will be charged for the first twelve months of the loan, which will be paid by the Government. The Government will not charge businesses or banks for this guarantee. As of April 3, the Government has extended the scheme so that all viable small businesses affected by COVID-19, and not just those unable to secure regular commercial financing, will now be eligible should they need finance to remain operational.
- **Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme:** The Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme will provide a government guarantee of 80% to enable banks to offer loans of up to £25 million to firms with an annual turnover of between £45 million and £500 million. This is intended to give banks the confidence to lend to more businesses which are impacted by coronavirus. Loans backed by a guarantee under CLBILS will be offered at commercial rates of interest and further details of the scheme will be announced later this month.
- **Bank of England Term Funding Scheme:** The Bank of England has introduced a new Term Funding Scheme with additional incentives for Small businesses financed by the issuance of central bank reserves. Over the next 12 months, the scheme will offer four-year funding of at least 5% of participants' stock at interest rates at, or very close to, Bank Rate.
- **Future Fund:** The Government will offer a new unsecured convertible loan facility for amounts between £125,000 and £5,000,000 for a maximum 36-month term. The scheme will launch in May and will initially be open until September 2020. To qualify a company must have raised at least £250,000 in equity investment from third party investors in the last 5 years and be based in the UK. The Government loan must be matched by third party investment and be used for working capital.
- **Innovate Loans:** UK businesses driving innovation and development will be helped through the coronavirus outbreak with a £1.25 billion government support package to ensure firms in some of the most dynamic sectors of the UK economy – ranging from tech to life sciences – are protected through the crisis so they can continue to develop innovative new products and help power UK growth. The Innovate Loans scheme will be a £750 million fund for targeted support for small and medium sized businesses focusing on research and development and be made available through Innovate UK's [national innovation agency] grants and loan scheme and will accelerate up to £200 million of grant and loan payments for its 2,500 existing Innovate UK customers on an opt-in basis. An extra £550 million will also be made available to increase support for existing customers and £175,000 of support will be offered to around 1,200 firms not currently in receipt of Innovate UK funding. The first payments will be made by mid-May.

Grant Funding measures

- **Grant Funding for Businesses who qualify for SBRR:** Individual grants of £10,000 will be made available through local authorities to businesses eligible for Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) that already pay little or no business rates.

Tax Relief Measures

- **VAT Deferral:** The Government will defer VAT payment demands for the next quarter, meaning that no business will pay any VAT until the end of June. Businesses will have until the end of the year to reconcile any accumulated tax debts.
- **Temporary Changes to the Statutory Residence Test:** HM Treasury has proposed a series of changes to UK Tax legislation and the Statutory Residence Test to ensure that for “any period(s) between 1 March and 1 June 2020 spent in the UK by individuals working on COVID-19 related activities will not count towards residence tests that potentially bring global earnings within the purview of UK taxation. These changes are time limited and will only support those people whose skillsets are currently required.” These changes are designed to allow skilled individuals to come to the UK and help respond to the pandemic.
- **Support for Businesses Paying Tax:** HMRC have established a dedicated COVID-19 helpline to support businesses and self-employed individuals unable to meet tax demands due to Coronavirus related disruption. Bespoke Time to Pay arrangements will be offered to those businesses with a legitimate need and support their recovery while operating through any temporary financial challenges. HMRC will also waive late payment penalties and interest where a business experiences administrative difficulty due to COVID-19.
- **Deferral of Self-Assessment Payment:** Income tax payments on account due under Self-Assessment on 31st July 2020 will be deferred until 31st January 2021. All self-employed individuals will be eligible.

Sector-Specific Support Measures

- **Retail and Hospitality Grant Scheme:** A cash grant of up to £25,000 will be made available to businesses in England operating in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors with a rateable value of between £15,000 and £51,000. For businesses in these sectors with a rateable value of under £15,000, they will receive a grant of £10,000.
- **Business Rate Relief for Retail/Hospitality/Leisure venues:** A 100% business rates holiday will be applied from 1st April for a period of one year to all retail, hospitality and leisure venue, including shops, pubs, restaurants and theatres. There is no limit to rateable values.
- **Business Rate Holiday for Nurseries:** Nurseries in England will not have to pay business rates for the 2020-21 tax year. This will apply to properties that are occupied by providers on the Government’s Early Years Register and are wholly or mainly used for the provision of nursery education.
- **Support Package for Charities:** Charities across the UK will receive a £750 million package of support to ensure they can continue their work during the coronavirus outbreak. This will include hospices.
- **Supermarket Competition Law:** To address a spike in public demand, the Government has waived a selection of competition laws to allow supermarkets and food retailers to coordinate operations such as opening times, product resources and the pooling of staff.

Other

- **Business Support Checker Tool:** The UK Government have released a new “support find tool” for businesses and self-employed people across the UK, to allow them to quickly determine what financial support is available to them, to handle the consequences of the pandemic. The new platform asks business owners and the self-employed to fill out an online questionnaire first.
- **Extension Period on Filing Accounts:** Businesses can apply for an additional three months to file accounts with Companies House to help avoid penalties as they deal with the impact of Covid-19. Applications can be made through a fast-track online system.
- **Coronavirus Business Support Hub:** Businesses can now access a new online portal which aims to compile “key information for businesses including on funding and support, business closures, your responsibilities as an employer and managing your business during coronavirus. The hub also includes information for self-employed people and sole traders.”
- **Business Interruption Insurance:** The Government has confirmed that the business impact of government advice restricting individuals’ movements – and the knock-on impact on their financial activity – provides sufficient grounds for businesses to claim on their insurance where they have appropriate business interruption cover in place.

- **Protection for Commercial Tenants:** The Government has guaranteed that commercial tenants who are unable to pay their rent because of the COVID-19 outbreak will be protected from eviction. The measure applies for the next three months and is intended to support ongoing conversations between landlords and tenants about their arrangements.
- **Flexible Insolvency Rules:** Changes will include allowing businesses undergoing restructuring to continue trading and receive supplies. There will also be a temporary suspension of wrongful trading provisions for company directors to remove the threat of personal liability, which will apply retrospectively from 1st March.
- **Gender Pay Gap Reporting Suspension:** The UK Government has now also suspended enforcement of gender pay gap reporting deadlines for this reporting year (2019/20). “This decision means there will be no expectation on employers to report their data.”

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