

COVID-19 – Weekend News Bulletin

27 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

- The Prime Minister will return to work from Monday
- The UK Government confirmed that lockdown measures will be eased in a staged manner, but only when the timing is right
- Updates were also provided on the security and resilience of the food supply chain
- The UK becomes the fifth country in the world to pass the threshold of 20,000 hospital deaths

Prime Minister's Return to Work Announced

- Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, the senior member of Cabinet during the Prime Minister's convalescence, confirmed during interviews that Prime Minister Boris Johnson is due to return to work full time from Monday to take charge of Cabinet and direct the UK Government's response to the crisis.
- Mr Raab confirmed that the government intends to ease lockdown measures on a gradual basis, meaning that life for most people in the UK will not return entirely to normal for "some time."
- However, Mr Raab did hint that instructions will be provided to businesses, schools and other organisations in order to allow them to establish and operate "a new normal."
- Mr Raab also confirmed rumours that the Government is considering checks on people entering the UK from overseas. Ministers had previously rejected such an approach, arguing it would have little impact given the low numbers coming into the UK and the rate of community transmission in the country.

Government Daily Covid-19 Press Conference - Sunday

- The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice, led Sunday's Downing Street press conference alongside the National Medical Director for England, Stephen Powis.
- Focusing primarily on those issues specific to his department, in particular the security of the UK food supply chain, Mr Eustice reported that consumer stockpiling and panic-buying has by-and-large subsided, and food availability in shops had returned to normal levels.
- Emphasising the success that supermarkets had had in increasing the resilience of its logistics and implementing measures to protect their workforce, Mr Eustice stated that staff absence levels have fallen from an average of 20 per cent a few weeks ago, to just 10 per cent in the past week.
- On Government measures to ensure food supply to the clinically vulnerable, the Environment Secretary stated that 500,000 food parcels have been delivered to persons identified within the 'shielded group' – individuals who have been instructed to stay at home due to a clinical condition that increases their susceptibility to, or risk from, COVID-19.

- Mr Eustice praised supermarkets for prioritising delivery slots for these individuals and for others who may be less able to shop for themselves or rely on a local support network. On this, the Government has been working with local authorities to allocate a volunteer shopper who will be able to ensure their food needs are met.
- More generally, Mr Eustice reported that the data indicates that the UK is beginning to show signs of progress in overcoming the crisis. However, he reiterated the First Secretary of States earlier remarks that the Government's five measures must be met before any lockdown rules can be eased, including ensuring there is no risk of a second peak of infections.

Government Daily Covid-19 Press Conference - Saturday

- Saturday's Downing Street press conference was led by the Home Secretary, Priti Patel. Alongside her was Director General of the National Crime Agency (NCA), Lynne Owens and National Medical Director of NHS England, Professor Stephen Powis.
- Ms Patel reported a fall in overall crime during the crisis, including car crime, burglary and shoplifting. While there is concern that the "most sophisticated criminals" are adapting to the crisis, the Home Secretary reassured the public that law enforcement is also adapting to combat them.
- She repeated that all of the Government's 'five tests' must be satisfied before social distancing measures can be eased. These are: that NHS capacity will not be overwhelmed; that there is a "sustained and consistent" fall in the daily death rate; that the rate of infection is decreasing to "manageable levels"; that there is a sufficient supply of tests and PPE for future demand; and that adjustments would not risk a second peak.
- Ms Owens began her operational update by indicating that there has been no increase in serious or organised crime, but that offenders are exploiting the crisis.
- She assured the public that police and law enforcement were moving to ensure that there is "no safe space" for such criminals.
- Fraudsters have adapted to the crisis, selling fake PPE and treatment kits, as well as deploying malware and stealing personal details. She outlined the precautions that the public can take and said that novel cases of fraud should be referred to the National Fraud Service.
- Professor Powis addressed the concern that those with health problems other than the virus are avoiding going to hospital. He said that health services will treat such cases normally and that people should get in contact with the emergency services and go to hospital if required.
- Hospital cases of COVID-19 are seeing a sustained reduction. This is particularly the case in London and other parts of country are beginning to follow suit. There has been a decline in critical care cases and deaths although there is a natural lag for hospital admissions.
- In response to a question on the Government's exit strategy, Ms Patel emphasised that the UK "is not yet out of the woods", and that the five tests must first be met.

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 wavered 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.”

Contact matt.arnold@heartoflondonbid.co.uk should you have any queries.