

COVID-19 – Weekly Round-up

Friday 18 December 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

- London and surrounding areas moved to Tier 3
- Furlough scheme extended until April
- Confusion over Christmas restrictions
- Staggered return for schools in England after Christmas
- Vaccine rollout continues as NAO looks into contracts

London and surrounding areas moved to Tier 3

14th December: On Monday, Health Secretary Matt Hancock [announced](#) that, due to an exponential rise in confirmed COVID-19 cases, London and parts of Essex and Hertfordshire would be upgraded from Tier 2 to Tier 3 from Wednesday 16th December. While the latest review of tiers was not scheduled to take place until Wednesday, the Government and local authorities agreed on the need for urgent action in light of new evidence. The London weekly case rate is currently the highest regional rate in the country, with 225 cases per 100,000 people. As a result, the capital and much of the surrounding area change tier level three days before the wider review.

In making the announcement, the Government also stated that Public Health England (PHE) is [investigating](#) a novel strain of COVID-19 which has been identified across the South East of England which might be contributing to the growth in transmission rates. As of 13th December, 1,108 cases with the new strain had

been identified in areas with the highest increase in infection rate, although PHE is still attempting to understand whether there is a link between the new variant and the explosion of cases.

Government announces outcome of latest tier review

17th December: On Thursday, the Health Secretary [revealed](#) the outcome of the Government's planned review of current tier restrictions. Following the end of the nationwide lockdown at the beginning of December, case rates were falling across the country, however the the Health Secretary stated that the latest data reveals cases are plateauing and even increasing in certain areas. The South East and East of England [suffered](#) the biggest blow, with six areas upgraded to Tier 3 due to an increase in infection rates. Despite significant efforts by local authorities to suppress the virus in the hard-hit North East of England, the area is to remain in Tier 3, as the Government concluded that case rates were not falling at a great enough rate to justify downgrading the region to Tier 2. Both Bristol and North Somerset were downgraded from Tier 3 to Tier 2, and Herefordshire was downgraded from Tier 2 to Tier 1 following a significant decrease in cases.

Furlough scheme extended until April

17th December: Chancellor Rishi Sunak [announced](#) on Thursday that the Treasury will extend the Job Retention Scheme until 30th April 2021, which will keep the furlough scheme in place for a month longer than previously planned. The Government hopes this will provide certainty for jobs and businesses as the crisis looks set to persist into 2021. Sunak confirmed he will also be extending the Government-guaranteed COVID-19 business loan schemes beyond January until the end of March. During his statement it was established that the Budget will take place on 3rd March 2021, when the the Chancellor will outline the next phase of economic measures to tackle the virus and protect jobs.

Confusion over Christmas restrictions

16th December: Following significant speculation over whether the Government and devolved administrations would move to tighten the rules, the Prime Minister [stated](#) there was "unanimous agreement" between the UK's four nations on the five day relaxation over the Christmas period. Questions around the current plan arose after scientists and MPs warned that the relaxed rules would cause a surge in coronavirus infections at a time when pressures on the NHS were already high. Cabinet Office Minister

Michael Gove held a call with the leaders of the devolved nations regarding concerns, following which it was agreed to continue with the current plan to allow upto three households to mix over the five-day period.

However, The Prime Minister's claims of unanimity have been questioned after both Wales and [Scotland](#) introduced their own caveats to the guidance, [advising](#) that Christmas bubbles should be limited to just two households. Northern Ireland will also enter a six week lockdown on Boxing Day.

The Prime Minister's more lenient approach has been justified by concerns that harsh restrictions would largely be ignored, fuelling fears that a one time "break of the rules" could encourage people to continue to do so in the future. While Johnson has been keen to stress unanimity, he will face significant scrutiny from the Labour opposition for his notably less stringent approach to Christmas should cases increase in the new year.

Staggered return for schools in England after Christmas

17th December: Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has [announced](#) that secondary schools and colleges in England will operate a staggered return in order to help roll out a round of free coronavirus testing from the first week of January. All non-exam year groups will be offered full-time remote education during the first week of term, with face-to-face teaching resuming from 11th January. It is hoped this will help slow the virus spread in the wider community as students return to school after the holidays.

Vaccine rollout continues as NAO looks into contracts

17th December: Over 137,000 people in the UK have [received](#) a dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in its first week, as the Government rolled out the largest vaccination programme in British history. The majority of vaccines have been administered to priority groups including the over 80s, care home workers and NHS staff and GP-led centres have been vaccinating patients in England this week.

However, The National Audit Office (NAO) has estimated that the UK has already spent £11.7bn in securing and administering coronavirus vaccines so far. The figure does not cover the costs of any future multi year programmes, and the report showed that many drugmakers had requested, and been granted, immunity in the event of legal action – meaning that the taxpayer could be liable in the event of a successful

claim. The Public Accounts Committee stated that the Government was right to back a number of vaccine candidates, but that the accountability arrangements were “highly unusual”.

Devolved Nations

- **16th December:** Wales will **move** to alert level 4, the highest level of its traffic light system, with all non-essential retail to close at the end of trading on Christmas Eve. All hospitality premises will close from 6pm on Christmas Day and there will be tighter restrictions on household mixing from 28th December, after the five-day period of relaxed restrictions.
- **17th December:** Northern Ireland will **enter** a six-week lockdown from 26th December, with non-essential shops due to close at the end of trading. The first week of the lockdown will see severe restrictions with essential shops forced to close by 8pm each day. The measures will be reviewed by ministers after four weeks.

Other News

- **11th December:** As of Monday 14th December, people who come into contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19 are only **required** to self-isolate for 10 days, compared to the previous 14-day quarantine. This also applies to travellers returning to the UK from territories which are not included on the UK’s travel corridor list.
- **17th December:** The Government has **updated** the UK travel corridor list to include Namibia, Uruguay and the US Virgin Islands. On 10th December it added Botswana and Saudi Arabia and removed the Canary Islands.

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