

COVID-19 – Weekly Round-up

Monday 04 January 2021

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

- MHRA approves Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine
- 80% of England under Tier 4 restrictions
- Government delays school return

MHRA approves Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine

Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) [authorised](#) the Oxford University/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine for use in the UK. This vaccine is the second to be given regulatory approval in the UK, and follows the nationwide rollout of the Pfizer/BioNtech vaccine earlier in the month. Over a million people have now received their first dose.

The approval of a second, UK-manufactured, vaccine is seen by the Government as a milestone in accelerating the country's vaccination programme. Significantly cheaper to manufacture and logistically easier to roll out, the UK has pre-ordered 100 million doses of the Oxford vaccine, which will allow the NHS to significantly ramp up the vaccination programme. The first inoculations have been administered by the NHS this morning. 530,000 doses are set to be available this week alone, with the ambition of ramping up production to a rate of 2 million doses each week.

Government defends plan to delay second vaccine doses

To accelerate vaccination coverage, the Government has made the decision to [delay](#) second 'booster' doses of the Pfizer/BioNtech vaccine, prioritising the administration of first doses to the maximum number of patients. Second

doses will now take place within 12 weeks of the first injection rather than within the 21 days recommended by the manufacturer. A similar policy will apply to second doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.

There has been criticism of the strategy; Dr Anthony Fauci, the US's Infectious Disease expert [stated](#) he “would not be in favour” of the plans for application in the USA, as it was advisable to stick to timings proven most effective by the clinical trials. However, Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, the Government's Deputy Chief Medical officer, argued that data showed patients got “almost complete protection” from their first dose, and that the policy would allow the UK to maximise protection in the shortest possible timeframe.

80% of England under Tier 4 restrictions

30th December: On Wednesday, Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced a tightening of tiering restrictions across England. Areas escalated to Tier 4 on 31st January included large parts of the Midlands, North East, parts of the North West and parts of the South West. As a result of the changes, eight in ten people in England are now resident under the toughest Tier 4 restrictions. This requires non-essential shops, leisure and entertainment venues to close, and meetings are only permitted with one person outside of your household in an outdoor public space. Other parts of England, including Liverpool City region, York and north Yorkshire and Cornwall and Devon were also moved up to Tier 3 restrictions.

These most recent changes followed the Boxing Day extension of Tier 4 restrictions to regions including Sussex, Oxfordshire, East Anglia; Tier 3 extended to regions including Bristol, Somerset and Northamptonshire, and Cornwall and Herefordshire move from Tier 1 to Tier 2.

The rapid return of severe lockdown restrictions is a response to COVID-19 transmission rates continuing to accelerate, with over 50,000 positive tests reported on six consecutive days last week, attributed to the new, more transmissible virus variant. The Prime Minister stated that the new variant was “surging across the country”, with weekly infection rates doubling in the lead up to Christmas.

Pressure grows on NHS

As a result of the rise in COVID-19 cases, NHS trusts around England are struggling to cope with additional patient numbers at what is already the busiest time of the year for hospitals. Essex Resilience Forum declared a “major incident” amid fears the number of Covid-19 cases could overwhelm the county's health services, and NHS England has warned that the entire health service will have to stay on its highest state of alert until at least the end of March.

Furthermore, medical professionals have [warned](#) of a “slow motion car crash” as 29 of 39 NHS trusts announce they have paused all operations and procedures (apart from cancer operations and emergencies) to cope with the demand from COVID-19 patients. London's Nightingale hospital, based at the Excel Centre, is also expected to reopen within days.

Further lockdown restrictions expected

In order to combat the virus' rapid spread, [speculation](#) is increasing that an even tighter "Tier 5" category of restrictions will be imposed. This could see restrictions reimposed similar to the Spring lockdown. Yesterday, Labour leader Kier Starmer [called](#) on the Government to impose a national lockdown with immediate effect. However, despite admitting that further restrictions were likely, the Government continues to weigh the balance of trying to minimise impact on the economy, education and people's livelihoods.

Scotland expected to enter national lockdown

In response to rising COVID-19 cases in the country, it has been [reported](#) that First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon will today announce the imposition of a national lockdown across Scotland, that will last until Spring. The Scottish Cabinet will meet today to discuss possible further steps, and the Scottish Parliament has been recalled. Sturgeon is also [reported](#) to be considering the introduction of a "stay-at-home" order, that would make a strict lockdown legally enforceable.

Government delays school return

30th December: In line with the imposition of greater restrictions, on Wednesday, the government [delayed](#) the return of students to all secondary schools in England, as well as some primary schools in south-east England and all in London. Secondary schools will instead stagger the return to class in the first two weeks of January, prioritising vulnerable students and those in exam years. The current advice stipulates a return of all students by 18th January, apart from those in the areas of highest infection.

The decision represents a significant U-turn for the Government; Education Secretary Gavin Williamson stated in mid-December that all primary schools would return as normal in January. However, over the weekend resistance was growing to the Government's determination to open the remaining primary schools in England. One of the largest teacher's bodies, the National Union of Education, released a statement [advising](#) members that it is unsafe to return to work in Primary Schools.

Some local councils are also issuing independent advice. Birmingham City Council has accused the Government of "dithering" on the issue, and will leave the decision to individual headteachers. In response, Prime Minister Boris Johnson maintained that he has "no doubt" that "schools are safe", although as the virus cases grow, it is likely further restrictions will come into force in the coming days.

Other News

- **4th January 2021:** The Ministry of Defence [announced](#) that 5,000 Armed Forces personnel are currently deployed to support the pandemic response across the UK in the biggest homeland operation in peacetime, working on 70 different tasks ranging from schools testing to the rollout of vaccines.
- **23rd December 2020:** The British Government has [banned](#) arrivals from South Africa, with the exception of British nationals, residents and visa holders, following the detection of a new COVID-19 variant originating in the country. Any arrivals must observe a 10-day self-isolation along with their households
- **23rd December 2020:** Rapid testing [will](#) be deployed in care homes in England with an additional £149m in funding to support that effort. All care-home workers will receive two rapid tests a week in addition to weekly PCR tests.

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