

## COVID-19 – Weekly Round-up

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### Friday 16 April 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.

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### Restrictions lifted across England

**12<sup>th</sup> April:** On Monday, England's streets filled with revelers, shoppers and those in search of some alfresco dining as stage two of the country's lockdown easing went ahead as planned. With shops, hairdressers, gyms and outdoor hospitality allowed to open after many months of closed doors, businesses welcomed the confirmation of much-anticipated pent up demand from the UK public.

The continued reopening comes as Covid-19 positive tests are down 34% this week. Despite this and the success of the vaccine rollout, the government has repeatedly warned the nation to expect an uptick in the infection rate as social contact increases. In a Covid-19 briefing from Downing Street on Tuesday, a freshly trimmed Prime Minister reiterated a familiar mantra that 'lockdowns not vaccinations' had done the bulk of the work on bringing the UK's Covid-19 cases down from a peak of 68,000 in January to under 4,000 each day so far this month.

The Prime Minister's calls for caution are understandable in the context of rising cases on the continent as the WHO announced that over one million Covid-19 deaths had been reported in the European region. However, the call will frustrate the 70-strong COVID Recovery Group sat on Johnson's own backbenches. This informal group of Conservative MPs has consistently criticized the overly cautious approach to lockdown easing and suggested that the Prime Minister is giving undue priority to virus suppression to the detriment of the UK economy. While this remains manageable for the time being, it remains to be seen what reaction there would be if there were any hint of decelerating the 'road map.'

With much at stake, government scientists will be keeping a very close eye on trends as the lockdown easing marches towards its next deadline in May.

### *Surge testing for variants of concern*

Despite the good cheer with the lockdown easing, there is some cause for concern. Surge testing is currently taking place in part of London and the West Midlands following detection of the [South African variant](#), amid fears that it could prove more resistant to current vaccines. Professor John Edmunds, epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, told ITV's Peston Show this week that if surge testing fails to halt the spread of the variant, local restrictions may still be on the cards.

In more [positive news](#), Moderna has announced that a new experimental vaccine intended to target the South African variant of the virus has successfully produced antibodies in mice for the first time in pre-clinical trials. As the UK continues to unlock, the stage could be set for a future showdown between vaccinations and variants.

### ***Easing accelerates in Scotland and Northern Ireland***

**15<sup>th</sup> April:** Northern Ireland First Minister Arlene Foster hailed “brighter and better times” as she announced the acceleration of lockdown restrictions easing. Pubs and cafes in Northern Ireland will be able to open from 30<sup>th</sup> April, following the reopening of hairdressers and beauty salons on 23<sup>rd</sup> April. The Stormont Executive’s [announcement](#) will align Northern Ireland with England’s relaxation of restrictions as Economy Minister Diane Dodds called for an accelerated reopening to help the recovery of the Northern Irish economy. She said growing the economy would help to mitigate the fallout from the pandemic, including a potentially huge spike in unemployment.

**13<sup>th</sup> April:** More good news in Scotland this week as the [First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced](#) an acceleration of the easing of certain Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Scots will be able to meet up in groups of six and travel for leisure purposes within Scotland from today with retail and outdoor hospitality opening from 26<sup>th</sup> April. Covid-19 case rates in all local authorities in Scotland have fallen in the last couple of months, but there are still significant differences between areas. The Scottish government will no doubt be keeping a close eye on this variation in rates, in order to avoid unwelcome news ahead of elections on 6<sup>th</sup> May.

### **Government beats target on vaccinations**

**13<sup>th</sup> April:** The UK’s vaccine rollout hit its latest target this week as the government [invited those aged between 45 and 50](#) to get their first jab. Everybody in priority target groups 1 to 9, including those aged 50 and over, the clinically vulnerable and health and social care workers, has been offered a vaccine, meeting the government’s 15<sup>th</sup> April target ahead of time.

The Prime Minister praised the “[precious protection](#)” offered by jabs in the same week as the US, South Africa and the EU temporarily suspended the Johnson & Johnson vaccine after reports of rare blood clotting. Whilst the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is not yet in use in the UK, the government has pre-ordered 30 million doses and will no doubt be hoping this does not impact on the future programme of vaccinations. There is concern that medical regulators’ ‘abundance of caution’ around rare side effects of both the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, as well as of concerns around the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, could increase vaccine scepticism. However, on Tuesday over 765,000 vaccinations were administered in the UK, one of the highest numbers in the rollout so far.

## Other News

- **13<sup>th</sup> April:** The UK Government has [confirmed](#) that all students who have not yet been able to do so will be permitted to return to in-person teaching under Step 3 of the UK's roadmap out of Covid-19 restrictions, therefore "no earlier than 17<sup>th</sup> May."
- **9<sup>th</sup> April:** The UK Government has launched a [public information campaign](#) to encourage all individuals in England to now sign up to receive two free Covid-19 lateral flow tests per week after the scheme became available on 9<sup>th</sup> April.
- **14<sup>th</sup> April:** A major trial currently assessing if Covid-19 vaccines can be mixed between a person's first and second jab is to be expanded. Adults over 50 years old who have received a first dose of the Pfizer or AstraZeneca vaccines can now apply .

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