

COVID-19: MPs' Q&A PACK

Friday 27 March

This update is for Members of Parliament who took part in the morning call with the Paymaster General. It seeks to provide responses to the questions that MPs raised.

We are actively seeking responses to some of the more specific and technical questions and hope to provide answers to these shortly.

This document will be made available to all MPs via the Parliamentary intranet and updated daily.

Key issues and updated guidance

Tax, finance and benefits issues

Issue: Support for Self Employed

Question: Why will the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme only be available from the beginning of June?

- The June introduction date is necessary to ensure that the scheme is both deliverable and fair.
- HMRC is working urgently to develop the scheme and estimates that the first payments will be made towards the beginning of June 2020.
- In the interim, the self-employed will still be eligible for other government support, including more generous universal credit and business continuity loans.

Issue: Support for Self Employed

Question: Will the self-employed be able to take on other work while in receipt of this grant?

- Yes, the self-employed will be able to take on other work during this time. In doing so, they should still obey the government's general instructions for working during the outbreak.
- This grant aims to support lost income and to allow those in self-employment to continue their trades once this crisis has passed.

Issue: Support for Employees

Question: What guidance is available for the furlough scheme?

- If your employer chooses to place you on furlough, you will need to remain on furlough for a minimum of three weeks. However, your employer can place you on furlough more than once, and one period can follow straight after an

existing furlough period, while the scheme is open. The scheme will be open for at least three months.

- Guidance is available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

Issue: Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) phone lines

Question: Why are many people waiting for hours and what is being done to address concerns over receiving payments?

- The system is under unprecedented demand. DWP will be boosting staff numbers and redeploying existing staff to deal with the sustained high volume of claims.
- Around 10,000 existing staff are being moved to process new claims, with 1,000 already in place. In addition, DWP is expecting to recruit 1,500 extra people to aid the effort.

Impact of social distancing guidelines

Issue: Foreign travel

Question: What is being done to get British citizens abroad home and, where necessary, address their medical needs?

- The UK Government is in close contact with the other country authorities dealing with COVID-19 cases. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been in touch with British nationals abroad and are providing support to the British people affected.
- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office teams around the world are working urgently to ensure that governments have sensible plans to enable the return of British and other travellers, and, crucially, to keep borders open for a sufficient period of time to enable returns to take place on commercial flights, wherever possible.
- As countries respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including travel and border restrictions, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises British nationals against all but essential international travel. Any country or area may restrict travel without notice.

Issue: Driving

Question: How can motorists who need to extend their MOT do so before the March 30th deadline when many garages are closed?

- Guidance is available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-mots-for-cars-vans-and-motorcycles-due-from-30-march-2020>

Issue: Moving house

Question: What is the latest advice on whether completions and rental agreements can continue to take place?

- Home buyers and renters should, as far as possible, delay moving to a new house while emergency measures are in place to fight coronavirus.
- If moving is unavoidable for contractual reasons, people must follow advice on social distancing to minimise the spread of the virus.
- Anyone who is experiencing symptoms, self-isolating or shielding from the virus should not consider moving house, unless there are exceptional health and safety circumstances.

NHS and public services

Issue: PPE

Question: Shortage of supplies reaching GP practices

- The government has central stockpiles of a range of medical products and is working closely with industry, the NHS and others in the supply chain to ensure these are delivered to the frontline, including the social care sector. No wholesaler has been asked to prioritise NHS provision over the care sector nor should they be doing so.
- New figures show the scale of the operation to ensure steady supply in the coming weeks and months:
- On 19 March, 2.6 million face masks and 10,000 sanitisers went to trusts in London.
- Over the course of three days, between 20 March and 23 March, more than 200 organisations, including all NHS hospitals, received further facemasks and PPE along with ambulance trusts and other NHS organisations.
- This week (w/c 23 March) supplies of the 'FFP3' sterile facemasks are being delivered to NHS Trusts, including ambulance trusts.
- Home care providers, care homes, and hospices are receiving deliveries with every provider receiving at least 300 facemasks.
- Every GP practice, dental practice and community pharmacy has now had a PPE delivery.

Issue: Local Resilience Forums

Question: What are you doing to support Local Resilience Forums?

- We have launched a new taskforce to strengthen local plans to help tackle the outbreak of coronavirus.
- The taskforce will bring together senior experts from across key sectors – including resilience, local government, public health and adult social care fields – who will assess Local Resilience Forum (LRF) plans and provide support and advice to ensure they are robust.

Responses to specific questions

Tax, finance and benefits issues

Issue: Council tax payments

Question: Can councils move the 'holiday month' in council tax payments, or is legislation needed to do this?

- Councils are able to move the 'holiday month' and additional legislation is not required.

Issue: Business rates

Question: Can opticians and estate agents be included in the business rates scheme?

- Yes - updated guidance is available here:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/875613/Expanded_Retail_Discount_Guidance_25.03.20.doc.pdf

Issue: Supply of hand sanitiser

Question: Can exemptions be made to duties to allow distilleries to switch production to hand sanitiser?

- HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) has produced guidance on temporary changes to the use and supply of denatured alcohol and duty-free spirits, to help businesses who produce hand sanitiser and gel. All guidance on the production and supply of hand sanitiser can be found here:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/producing-hand-sanitiser-and-gel-for-coronaviruses-covid-19>
- HMRC are seeking to establish whether further guidance on any plans for exemptions will be issued.

Issue: Pensions

Question: What do people do to get their pension if they are used to collecting it in person?

- The government is urgently looking into ways to provide payments to those at home without access to mainstream banking during these unprecedented times and is working tirelessly to find solutions.

Impact of social distancing guidelines

Issue: Vulnerable people

Question: As hotels are closing people are being evicted from temporary accommodation. What should hotels be doing?

- Local Government and Homelessness Minister Luke Hall has written to the CEOs of major hotel chains to clarify this. Guidance shows that hotels can stay open for vulnerable people and key workers.
- Where hotels, hostels, and B&Bs are providing rooms to support homeless people, through arrangements with local authorities and other public bodies, they should remain open. Guidance is available here:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-hotel-accommodation-to-support-key-workers-and-vulnerable-people?utm_source=432f0b46-f852-4d8c-b597-69a7ad38227d&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate

Issue: Food and drink

Question: How can farmers address surplus milk issues?

- The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) is aware that the current crisis has led to an imbalance in the dairy market and challenges for some producers in finding an outlet for their supply.
- Defra is in discussions with organisations across the sector to understand the technical issues involved, and to consider with them possible remedies including the redirection of produce from the hospitality market to the retail market.
- Defra is working at pace on relaxing certain elements of competition law to enable collaboration between retailers and suppliers to ensure that food supply is maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the national interest.
- The legislation to bring in this change will have retrospective effect.

Issue: Local communities

Question: Can rental cottages, Airbnbs and other 'self catering' holiday homes be added to the list of businesses which should shut?

- The government does not name specific companies in GOV.UK guidelines as a matter of policy. The regulations state that the mentioned premises must close during the emergency period.
- However, they may continue to carry on their business and keep any premises used in that business open if they are providing rooms to support homeless and other vulnerable people such as those who cannot safely stay in their home, through arrangements with local authorities and other public bodies, they may remain open.
- These businesses may also remain open to host blood donations and to provide accommodation to someone who needs somewhere to stay while moving house or attending a funeral.

Issue: Driving vehicles

Question: Working Time Directive rules have been relaxed for drivers, so should the rules allowing the time it takes to prep their vehicle also be relaxed?

- The Department for Transport has authorised a general temporary relaxation of the enforcement of both the EU and GB domestic drivers' hours rules, for drivers undertaking carriage of goods by road in England. It is intended to keep supply chains in general going and is not limited to specific sectors or journeys. The relaxation allows, amongst other things, drivers in scope of the EU drivers' hours rules to reduce their daily rest period from 11 hours to 9 hours in a 24 hour period; which gives them an extra two hours of duty time a day to either drive or do other work; including preparing their vehicle. More detail is available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/temporary-relaxation-of-the-enforcement-of-the-drivers-hours-rules-all-sectors-carriage-of-goods-by-road>
- Where drivers are also doing other work (such as making fuel deliveries), some of the extra time allowances in the drivers hours relaxation can be used to allow them to do other work.
- There are provisions related to specific emergencies which may be relevant in some cases to allowing extra working time (in addition to driving time).

Issue: Dentists

Question: What guidance is available for the dental profession on issues like financial support and whether routine appointments should continue to be met?

- Further information can be found on the British Dental Association website:
<https://bda.org/advice/Coronavirus/>

Issue: Driving Vehicles

Question: Hauliers are reporting they cannot get access to toilets and showers because cafes etc are shut?

- The Secretary of State has written to the major Motorway (MSA) and Trunk Road Service Area operators to encourage them to keep as many facilities as possible open. In this unprecedented time, the government regards motorway services as an essential service and their staff as key workers. By ensuring motorway services can stay open they sustain the movement of people, food, medicine and other essential goods.
- Government is working with Highways England and operators to ensure that all MSAs remain open, and that in addition to fuel and rest areas a catering offer including hot and cold food and drinks as well as toilet and shower facilities remain open. Much of the MSAs catering offer is provided under high street brands (e.g. Starbucks and McDonalds). These brands have taken the business decision to close all outlets. This has limited the amount of choice on offer. Government is supporting the MSAs in encouraging these brands to

reopen their MSA outlets, but ultimately that is a business decision for them, which is in part linked to their ability to supply.

- MSA operators have taken measures, following the Public Health England (PHE) guidance, to ensure that road users can visit their sites safely, particularly in regard to ensuring social distancing.

Issue: Animal Care

Question: Can vets postpone statutory activities such as TB testing?

- Further information for vets can be found on the British Veterinary Association website:
<https://www.bva.co.uk/news-and-blog/news-article/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-updates-for-the-veterinary-profession/>

Issue: Vulnerable people

Question: Is it right that local police are stopping newspaper deliveries, given the impact this has on older people?

- National guidance is being issued by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) to all forces to make clear that people are allowed to travel to work if they cannot work from home.

Issue: Exercise

Question: What is the advice on whether it is acceptable to travel to exercise?

- Stay local and use open spaces near to your home where possible – do not travel unnecessarily.
- Further guidance is available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-guidance-on-access-to-green-spaces>

Issue: Universities

Question: What guidance is available for students travelling over the Easter holidays?

- You should avoid non-essential use of public transport where possible. If you do have to use public transport, vary your travel times to avoid rush hour and follow public health advice e.g. washing your hands and catching coughs and sneezes.
- A Department for Education helpline is available for education leaders and staff, students and parents to ask any questions about COVID-19 and education.
- Phone: 0800 046 8687
- Opening hours: 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday and 10am to 4pm Saturday and Sunday

- The helpline complements the advice being provided by Public Health England and the regular updates the government have been sending to all educational settings since the start of February.

NHS and public services

Issue: NHS Volunteer Scheme

Question: Does this also apply to Wales?

- No - the NHS volunteer scheme is specific to NHS England.

Responses to outstanding questions

MPs raised a number of more specific or technical questions for which we need to seek answers from relevant departments.

Please keep checking future editions of this document for daily updates on progress.