

# Public Health England response to Sunday Telegraph coverage

News story

Public Health England's (PHE's) response to coverage and a leader column in the Sunday Telegraph on 31 May 2020.



Duncan Selbie, PHE Chief Executive said:

Articles published in the Sunday Telegraph (31 May 2020) and Telegraph website on the test and trace system are both factually incorrect and misleading

The print articles confuse testing for coronavirus with contact tracing throughout. These are 2 very different public health interventions.

It is wholly inaccurate to say that PHE stopped testing for coronavirus in March, or that capacity wasn't there to test more than 5 cases per week.

**“The article claims: routine testing and tracing of contacts was stopped because Public Health England's systems were struggling to deal with a handful of cases.”**

The minutes from a meeting of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Emergencies (SAGE) held on 18 February make clear that at that point, PHE could deal with 5 new cases a week and the associated isolation of 800 contacts – which was sufficient capacity at the time – and modelling suggested it had the capacity to scale up significantly as needed. Widespread contact tracing was stopped because increased community transmission meant it was no longer the most useful strategy.

## **“The article claims that contact tracing was abandoned”**

Again, this is not the case. Once there was clear evidence of widespread, sustained community transmission and the Prime Minister announced the move to delay phase, contact tracing was unlikely to control the outbreak alone. At this point contact tracing was targeted where it could be most effective during this phase – focusing on the most vulnerable, for instance, carrying out contact tracing in care homes, hospitals and institutional environments.

## **“The paper also claims there was ‘a desperate initial shortage of capacity’ to test and trace.”**

This is not accurate – there was no shortage of contact tracers by the time of sustained community transmission and PHE contacted over 5,000 people as part of its contact tracing during the containment phase. We believe that this activity delayed the peak of the pandemic by around a month and enabled the NHS to prepare more fully.

Published 31 May 2020

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## **[Communities Secretary’s statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 31 May 2020](#)**

As Communities Secretary, I will be updating you on our support for the most vulnerable people in society, I’ll be updating you on how we’re shielding people from coronavirus in England, and the next steps in our programme of support for rough sleepers during this pandemic.

But first, I want to update you on the latest data on the coronavirus response.

- 4,285,738 tests for coronavirus have now been carried out in the UK, including 115,725 tests carried out yesterday
- 274,762 people have tested positive, that’s an increase of 1,936 cases since yesterday
- 7,639 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus, down 15 % from 8,945 this time last week
- And sadly, of those tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, 38,489 have now died. That’s an increase of 113 fatalities since yesterday.

Behind each of those deaths is a mourning family, and heartbroken friends and

loved ones. Our thoughts and prayers, as ever, are with all of them.

At the start of this pandemic, we advised Clinically Extremely Vulnerable people to shield until the 30 June. These are individuals who are most at risk of severe illness if they contract the virus – so protecting them has been especially important during the pandemic.

I think it's important to explain who is shielding.

They are not exclusively older people. Over half are under 70. Over 90,000 of them are actually children and they sadly will not be able to return to school tomorrow if their year group is. And hundreds of thousands of those shielding are – or were – at work before the pandemic. Many of these people are working from home, but where this is not possible, they are unable to do the jobs I am sure they would wish to be doing.

The one thing they all have in common is that they have made a huge sacrifice. I would like to echo the Prime Minister in recognising the resilience of people shielding across the country and express our admiration for their ongoing efforts.

We know that they often live with other people, so this has had profound impact on their lives as well – and family members have often had to sacrifice a lot to protect the people they love the most. And I know that a significant number of those shielding haven't left the house at all for 9 or 10 weeks – that is quite an extraordinary restriction on their lives.

For those who were advised to shield, we set up the National Shielding Service, a huge logistical exercise, unprecedented since the Second World War.

This has included delivering over two and half million free food boxes, securing priority supermarket delivery services, ensuring people could get medicines delivered to their doorstep, and working closely in partnership with local government and our fantastic NHS volunteer responders helping people in a myriad of other ways, be that delivering shopping, calling people for a 'check in and chat' or providing essential care.

Over 350,000 who are shielding have registered for some support from government, like food, like medicine deliveries. But more than half of those shielding have also said to us they want someone to talk to over the phone – so none of us should forget the emotional burden isolation places upon people, and the effects on mental health and general wellbeing.

For anyone, shielding or not, it's important you seek the help you need. And it is available despite the restrictions. So please, if this is you go to [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) or the [Every Mind Matters website](https://www.everymindmatters.org/) for advice and practical steps as to what you can do and the support that's available for your wellbeing during this time.

I am immensely grateful to all of those in the NHS who have and continue to go above and beyond to support those most at risk during the virus.

We also recognise the role of local councils and parish councils, who have supported their residents with great effect.

When we announced a gradual relaxation of restrictions in the last week, I know that many people who are shielding will have been asking: what about me?

Today we are setting out the next steps for the shielded.

Now that we've passed the peak and the prevalence of COVID-19 in the community has reduced significantly, we believe that the risk to those shielding is lower, as it is proportionately for the general population.

As with the guidance for shielded people more generally, we want to give people the information and advice they need to make the best decisions for them. This is, as always advisory, for the shielded.

So, as a first step, I can announce today that we have updated the shielding guidance so that from tomorrow, Monday the 1st of June, people will be advised that they can take initial steps to safely spend time outdoors. This guidance is for England only but we are working very closely with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who will issue their own guidance in due course.

Those shielding will be able to spend time outdoors with members of their own household or, if they live alone, with one person from another household.

This reflects a lower risk of transmission outdoors, as well as the significantly reduced prevalence of COVID-19 in the community. The full guidance will be uploaded to GOV.UK later today.

You must still follow social distancing guidelines and remain at a 2 metre distance from others.

This will enable those shielding to see loved ones, like children and grandchildren.

Something many I know, are aching to do.

Having spent many weeks indoors, some will understandably be very cautious and concerned about going outdoors. You should only do what you are comfortable with.

In our road map we set out, while the shielding guidance is currently in place until the end of June, it may need to be extended beyond that point. Our guidance to those who are shielding will always be advisory, but it is also critical that it is based on the most up to date evidence and data.

So today, I can say that as part of each review for the social distancing measures for the wider population, we will also review the risks for the clinically extremely vulnerable and assess whether, as we currently believe, the shielding period needs to be extended, and whether it is possible for the shielding guidance to be eased further.

We will base each assessment on clinical advice from our medical experts, and the best data available about the prevalence of COVID-19 within the community.

The next review of shielding measures will take place the week commencing 15 June and will consider the next steps for the programme more generally beyond 30 June.

Following that review, the NHS will also write to all individuals on the shielding patient list with information about next steps on shielding advice and the support that will be available to them.

If the conditions become less favourable, our advice to those being asked to shield will unfortunately need to be tightened.

The Government will continue to ensure that support is available to those who need it for as long as possible and for as long as people are advised to follow shielding guidance.

Once again, can I thank all those shielding for your patience and fortitude thus far. Everyone in the country appreciates the unique challenges you face, and we want to continue to do all we can to ensure that whilst you may be at home, shielding, you are not alone.

Secondly, I wanted to provide an update on our work on rough sleeping. And I'm joined by the Prime Minister's advisor on rough sleeping, Dame Louise Casey.

From the start of this pandemic, we believed we had a special duty to protect the most vulnerable people in our society. And this was especially necessary for those people sleeping rough on our streets.

Working hand-in-hand with charities and local councils, we have offered accommodation to over 90% of rough sleepers known to us at the start in order to help them stay safe during the pandemic.

I want to thank everyone who has been involved in this huge national effort. Thousands of lives have been protected as a result of your work.

We've ensured councils in England have the funding to help continue housing rough sleepers in emergency accommodation as part of the £3.8 billion we've provided them in the last 2 months. And we will continue to fund this essential work to get the job done.

But, as we enter the next phase in our fight against coronavirus, it is right that we start to look ahead.

Our goal has always been that as few people as possible return to the streets. But words and promises are not enough.

Because of the action we have already taken, for the first time, in my lifetime, we know who the vast majority of rough sleepers are and where they are living.

That means we can assess each individual's needs and tailor the support we provide next. Some people will need help to return to the private rental sector, but others will need accommodation to be provided so they can start to rebuild their lives.

That is why 6,000 new supported homes will be made available for rough sleepers, providing safe accommodation for people we have helped off the streets during the pandemic.

The government is backing this effort with £433 million to fast-track the safe accommodation desperately needed to ensure as few rough sleepers as possible return to the streets.

3,300 of these new homes will become available in the next 12 months, and £160 million will be spent this year to deliver that.

But rough sleeping is as much a health issue as it is a housing issue – it is a crisis of addiction and mental health as well.

So we will provide specialist support staff for rough sleepers in this new accommodation to ensure they can continue to receive the health support they will need to transform their lives and fulfil their potential.

These homes will be a springboard to better things. And they will serve as a new national asset and be a symbol of hope and our belief that no one's path is predetermined.

I'm now going to pass over to Dame Louise Casey.

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## [Chief Scientific Adviser's Sunday Telegraph article: 31 May 2020](#)

Debate and challenge is at the very heart of how scientific advances are made and new knowledge is gained. By definition we often don't know the answers to the questions we ask.

And right now, during a global pandemic, people are understandably concerned and worried about what the future holds and are looking to the science for answers.

As we wrestle with this disease, I want to explain a bit about the scientific advice being given to the Government about coronavirus and the people working morning, noon and night to help us navigate this new disease. Perhaps now is a good time to clarify exactly what Sage is, and what it is not.

Sage stood up for Government emergencies at the request of Cobr (the civil contingencies committee), and when the emergency is a health one it is co-

chaired by the Government Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer. It is made up of scientists with diverse relevant expertise, who for this emergency have since January been crunching data, analysing information and giving frank and objective advice. The participants vary depending on the topic and the expertise needed, but there has been a core of scientists who have attended most meetings. For Covid it has included academics, clinicians, departmental chief scientific advisers and scientists from the NHS, Public Health England and other governmental bodies including the devolved administrations.

Good science involves sharing findings and interpretations for others to challenge, build on and replicate. Scientists publish their models, methods and results and subject them to review by their peers, for critique and reuse by others. If you sign up to science, you sign up to the idea that others should review your work. We learn from each other and we learn from mistakes. This week we have published a further batch of papers from Sage to show some of the evidence behind the advice that has gone to ministers. Clearly it is right that ministers see the advice first and that they have a chance to consider it as part of their overall decision making, but I believe it is also right that the evidence base should become open for others to see too, so they can provide challenge and form new and important observations.

Science advice to Cobr and to ministers needs to be direct and given without fear or favour. But it is advice. Ministers must decide and have to take many other factors into consideration. In a democracy, that is the only way it should be. The science advice needs to be independent of politics.

In the past, evidence from Sage has been published at the end of the particular crisis it was called for. In the days before Sage existed science advice to government was often not published at all. When it comes to this crisis it is clear we must get the information out as soon as possible, and in my opinion, as close to real time as is feasible and compatible with allowing ministers the time they need.

As the Sage papers become available it is possible to track the evolution of thinking. It is possible to see how unknowns became known and where significant gaps in knowledge still exist. The papers also provide a chance to correct some of the misconceptions that have taken hold. Allowing many people to catch Covid to create widespread immunity was never an aim and never could have been with a committee comprised of many doctors who have spent their lives dedicated to improving health. Immunity on the other hand is something that prevents transmission and we all hope that a vaccine to induce immunity will become available.

Sage is not an infallible body of experts and nor is there cosy group think. There is a range of opinions in all of discussions and there is wide reading of the latest research, but what Sage endeavours to do is come down to a position or a range of positions, to provide options ministers could consider and explain the uncertainties and assumptions inherent in that science and evidence. Sage is not a body that has any accountability for operational aspects whether that be testing, PPE or NHS delivery.

Is the evidence usually crystal clear? No. And you only need to pick up a newspaper or watch the TV to see how strongly different scientists have presented diametrically opposed ideas, and how some have flipped from certainty to uncertainty and back again. Will the advice from Sage always be right? No. Will the science change as we learn more? Of course, and we learn from scientists across the world. But the evidence we present to ministers will always be based on a careful analysis of the science available at the time, in line with both the Nolan principles and the Civil Service Code.

As a civil servant and the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, I am very aware of the responsibility and trust invested in me and the army of scientists and experts during this crisis. In the years to come, when this awful disease is no longer shaping all of our lives, I know I will look back with gratitude and admiration for what these individual scientists did to help understanding and provide advice in the face of uncertainty. I also know that we will have learned a lot, including how to do it better next time. That is science.

First published in the Sunday Telegraph.

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## [Prime Minister hails resilience of shielders as restrictions set to ease](#)

- 2.2 million people shielding in England to be able to spend time outdoors from tomorrow (Monday 1 June)
- Guidance to be updated to allow interaction outside with their household from tomorrow
- Unprecedented package of support for those shielding from coronavirus is also set to continue

Extremely vulnerable people who have been "shielding" in England can now safely spend time outdoors, the Communities Secretary will confirm today (Sunday 31 May).

The 2.2 million clinically extremely vulnerable people will be able to go outside with members of their household, while continuing to follow social distancing guidelines.

Those who live alone can meet outside with one other person from another household.



The updated guidance provides a much-needed boost to those most at risk who have been staying inside their homes to protect themselves and the NHS.

This includes many who have not had any face-to-face contact since they were first advised to shield.

The government's unprecedented package of support for those shielding from coronavirus is also set to continue, including the delivery of food or medicines, phone calls and support from volunteers.

Speaking at the government's daily press conference later today, the Communities Secretary is expected to set out a plan to review shielding guidance at regular points in the coming weeks.

At each review point for the social distancing measures, we will also assess whether it is possible for the shielding guidance to be eased further, based on the latest scientific advice. The next review will take place later this month.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

I want to thank everyone who has followed the shielding guidance – it is because of your patience and sacrifice that thousands of lives have been saved.

I do not underestimate just how difficult it has been for you, staying at home for the last 10 weeks, and I want to pay tribute to your resilience.

I also want to recognise the hundreds of thousands of extraordinary volunteers who have supported you in shielding.

Whether through delivering medicines and shopping, or simply by checking in on those isolating, they should feel deeply proud of the part they have played in this collective effort.

We have been looking at how we can make life easier for our most vulnerable, so today I am happy to confirm that those who are shielding will be able to spend time outside with someone else, observing social distance guidelines.

I will do what I can, in line with the scientific advice, to continue making life easier for you over the coming weeks and months.

Communities Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

Those shielding from coronavirus have made huge sacrifices over recent months to protect both themselves and the NHS – they deserve our thanks and our support for their efforts.

Incidence rates of coronavirus are now significantly lower than before these measures were put in place. That's why we are focused on finding the right balance between continuing to protect those at the greatest clinical risk, whilst easing restrictions on their daily lives to make the difficult situation more bearable – particularly enabling the contact with loved ones they and we all seek.

We will now be providing regular updates to the shielded to guide them through the next phase and we hope, to better and less restrictive times. In the meantime we will continue to provide the support that the shielded in our communities need.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

The resilience and commitment people have shown throughout this unprecedented period has been nothing short of phenomenal, and none more so than those who have shielded in their homes.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the NHS, GPs, all those who volunteered, community pharmacists and all those involved in providing much-needed support and guidance for patients required to shield over the past 10 weeks.

Thanks to the sacrifices made across the country, which have protected the NHS and saved lives, it's now time to begin lifting restrictions, step by step, and while we must all stay alert, we can now start to resume a sense of normality.

To date support for those being shielded includes:

- Over 2.25 million boxes of essential food have now been delivered by wholesalers to those at highest risk across England, with more than 300,000 boxes being distributed every week.
- Up to 200,000 calls a day have been made to the shielded to confirm their support needs, and councils are helping to support them in other ways – including organising regular calls from volunteers to those isolated.
- In addition to those delivered by volunteers, there have been over 400,000 free medicine deliveries provided by community pharmacies in April to those who have been advised to shield.
- Support from an army of over 500,000 NHS volunteers have helped support those shielding as well as others with telephone calls to individuals who are at risk of loneliness as a consequence of self-isolation.

As the government moves to the next phase of its response to the coronavirus crisis, the latest clinical advice shows a much lower incidence rate in the general population.

This means the average chance of catching the virus is now down from 1/40 to 1/1000, delivering greater reassurance that it is safe to cautiously reflect this in the guidance for those who have been advised to shield.

The importance of following social distancing guidelines for anyone shielding is still paramount, and therefore while outside people who are shielding should remain at a 2-metre distance from others.

Those being shielded still remain at risk and are advised to only leave the house once a day. They should not go to work or the shops and should avoid crowded places where they can't social distance.

The updated guidance for those who are shielding will be published on Sunday afternoon in advance of the measures coming into force from Monday.

There are around 2.2 million people in England with underlying severe health conditions who must be protected and have been asked to stay at home. These are people of all ages – with specific medical conditions identified by the NHS – who are less able to fight off the virus. (See the [full list of conditions.](#))

There are a number of ways that those who are shielding can access food and other essentials:

- Make use of the supermarket priority delivery slots that are available for this group. When a clinically extremely vulnerable person registers online as needing support with food, their data is shared with supermarkets. This means if they make an online order with a supermarket (as both a new or existing customer), they will be eligible for a priority slot.
- If a person meets the criteria to get support from the NHS Volunteer Responders programme, they can call 0808 196 3646 to be linked with a volunteer who can do a food shop for them. A carer or family member can also do this on their behalf.
- If you need urgent help and have no other means of support, [contact your local authority](#) to find out what support services are available in their area.
- Use the many commercial options now available for accessing food, including telephone ordering, food box delivery, prepared meal delivery and other non-supermarket food delivery providers. [A list has been shared with local authorities and charities.](#)

If someone who is shielding doesn't need the free government food box anymore, including because they have started to get online supermarket deliveries, they should re-register through the gov.uk website as no longer needing a food delivery. Alternatively, they can inform their delivery driver at the door that you no longer require these food parcels.

People in the shielding group should continue to access the NHS services they need during this time. This may be delivered in a different way or in a different place than they are used to, for example via an online consultation, but if they do need to go to hospital or attend another health facility for planned care, extra planning and protection will be put in place.

An NHS Medicine Delivery Service is available from community pharmacies and dispensing doctors. It ensures the delivery of medicines to shielded patients where family, friends or volunteers cannot collect them.

If a person meets the criteria to get support from the NHS Volunteer Responders programme, they can call 0808 196 3646 to be linked with a volunteer who can help them in a range of different ways. A carer or family member can also call the programme on their behalf.

## **Mental health support**

Follow the advice that works for you in the guidance on [how to look after your mental health and wellbeing during coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

The [Every Mind Matters page on anxiety](#) and [NHS mental wellbeing audio guides](#) provide further information on how to manage anxiety.

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## **Government gives green light to resumption of competitive sport behind closed doors**

- Guidance permits return to domestic competition from 1 June 2020
- First major sporting event expected to be 2000 Guineas Stakes at Newmarket Racecourse on 6 June
- Follows guidance supporting the return to training for elite and professional sport

The Culture Secretary has outlined the strict conditions for elite athletes and professional sportsmen and women to resume competitive sport safely behind closed doors in England from 1 June 2020, paving the way for the first domestic live action in almost three months.

The [‘stage three’ guidance](#), published today (30 May) by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), has been developed in close consultation with the Deputy Chief Medical Officers of England, Public Health England and medical representatives across Olympic, Paralympic and professional sports governing bodies.

The guidance, designed for competition delivery partners and elite sport organisations, outlines the facilities and processes that will need to be in place, including that there will be no spectators at events.

Providing its conditions are met, one of the first major sporting events is expected to be the 2000 Guineas Stakes race meeting, which would take place at Newmarket Racecourse on 6 June and be broadcast on free to air television.

Following detailed discussions with DCMS, the Deputy Chief Medical Officers and Public Health England, preparations are also being finalised for the Premier League and EFL football to resume later in June. This will be subject to a successful vote from their clubs and approval by safety advisory groups including police.

Further announcements are expected to be made by other sporting governing bodies in due course.

In light of the Government making clear that the Premier League should widen access for fans to view live coverage during the remainder of the season in light of ongoing social distancing measures, the Premier League has this week reached an agreement with its broadcast partners to televise a significant proportion of its remaining matches on free-to-air platforms, including Sky’s ‘Pick’ TV, that is available on Freeview, and for the first time in Premier League history, the BBC.

Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Oliver Dowden, said:

The wait is over. Live British sport will shortly be back on in safe and carefully controlled environments.

This guidance provides the safe framework for sports to resume competitions behind closed doors. It is now up to individual sports to confirm they can meet these protocols and decide when it’s right for them to restart.

This is a significant moment for British sport. By working with clinicians every step of the way, we are creating the safest possible environments for everyone involved.

The stage three guidance makes clear that the following conditions should be met for the staging of competitive sporting events until further notice:

- All competition delivery partners and user groups involved, from the teams and athletes, to the support staff, officials and media, must

- travel individually and by private transport where possible;
- Prior to entering the competition venue, they are expected to carry out a screening process for coronavirus symptoms. Anyone with known or suspected Covid-19 will not be permitted to enter and should be placed, or remain, in isolation and follow the latest Government guidelines;
  - A one-way system for the movement of people and vehicles should be established around the competition venue;
  - Social distancing should be maintained by all groups where possible. This includes the competing athletes and support staff on the bench and field of play, such as during any disputes between players and referees, or scoring celebrations;
  - Where social distancing cannot be maintained, sports governing bodies, clubs and teams should implement a rigorous regime to monitor for symptoms;
  - Dressing room usage should be minimised, however showers can be used in line with Government guidelines;
  - All non-essential activities, such as catering, should be limited;
  - Team / athlete medical staff must ensure they adhere to the latest Public Health England advice, such as through the use of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment. Physiotherapy treatment should be limited to an essential need only;
  - Competition delivery partners and elite sports organisations should appoint a named COVID-19 Officer to be responsible for oversight of all planning and communications, and a named COVID-19 Medical Officer to have oversight of and manage any individuals with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases, to ensure necessary standards are met;
  - Other restrictions applying to the general population must be adhered to outside of competition venues and official elite training venues.

It is expected that the guidelines will be considered by competition delivery partners (such as the organiser and venue operator) and elite sport organisations (such as the national governing bodies, professional leagues and clubs), and applied to their individual competitions. They will have the responsibility to decide when it is safe and appropriate to move to stage three and resume competition when they have their own protocols in place.

They must also ensure all competition delivery partners and user groups involved in staging a competitive sporting event, from the teams and athletes, to the support staff, officials and media, are fully briefed to ensure they have understood the specific risks and mitigations, and be clear that they must actively 'opt in'.

It follows ['stage two' guidance published on 25 May](#) making clear that elite athletes could resume competitive, close contact training at official elite training venues, so that players can get match fit under carefully controlled medical conditions. However it made clear that time spent within a two metre distance should be kept to a minimum, equipment sharing should be avoided, and communal areas, such as changing rooms, cafes, team rooms and recovery spaces, should remain closed where possible.

['Stage one' guidance](#) was published earlier this month, outlining conditions for a return to individual performance training at official elite training

venues while maintaining social distancing from teammates and other people outside their households. This included safeguards such as the deep cleaning of facilities and the screening of athletes and staff for coronavirus symptoms before they can enter the training venue by an appropriately trained healthcare professional.

All relevant standards defined in stages one and two for a return to training must continue to apply, and must be satisfied before a sport or sporting event can progress to stage three.

The elite sport return to training guidance intends to minimise the risk to the elite sports community, while also minimising any pressure elite sport places on healthcare workers and the wider community. Like all changes to current measures it will be kept under review in accordance with the Government's Covid alert system.

- [Read and watch Oliver Dowden's statement](#)
- The guidance follows the Government's publication of its [COVID-19 recovery strategy](#), as it takes forward the next phase of its response to the virus. This outlined that a return of elite sport would not happen before 1 June and would be dependent on whether the risk assessment posed by coronavirus allows the country to move onto the second step of the Government's recovery strategy.
- In addition to guidance for elite athletes, DCMS has published [guidance for the general public](#) on the phased return of outdoor sport and recreation.