

Cash shortages

Many self employed are worried that their business has dried up, removing their income. Many small companies are concerned that they have been closed down temporarily for an unspecified time period but still have to pay rent, other overheads and employees pay. They welcomed the government pledge to pay 80% of the wage bill up to a ceiling, but still have to wait for the scheme to deliver them some cash.

So what do they do? They will turn to the banks. On Wednesday the Chancellor and Governor of the Bank of England wrote to all the banks, reminding them of the various schemes set out to allow more lending to business. They told them to "take all action necessary to ensure the benefits of these measures outlined above are passed through to business and consumers".

That's fine advice, but the banks have to operate within the rules of the schemes and within the confines of the Regulatory system that governs them. As the lending to business schemes offer a government guarantee of 80% of the loan, the banks still need to take care with the 20% they could lose. As the scheme says the banks need to reclaim personal guarantees and cash in collateral assets before claiming losses under the scheme, banks will obviously feel the need to apply some criteria about collateral and future cashflow projections when making the loans.

There will be difficult judgements for banks to make. How much of a business case can they expect from a company that has lost all its turnover and does not know when it will trade again? How much of a personal guarantee or pledged asset can they require, when this lending is for an extraordinary purpose, a temporary collapse of revenue, which is not about to be reinstated but will be permanently lost?

Banks still have to keep capital buffers and ensure the future solvency of their businesses, so have to keep an eye on the possible loss rate on this type of lending. Meanwhile the companies suffering from the shock of no money coming in are not that keen on a loan as they wish to avoid becoming heavily indebted for past losses that cannot be easily replaced.

The self employed need the money they would be earning to pay their domestic bills as well as meet their business commitments. The scheme outlined yesterday helps a bit, but leaves higher earners very short of cash though they may well have commitments commensurate with their normal earnings level. All this points to one inescapable conclusion. If this cessation of activity continues for too long there will be a lot of lost businesses and considerable longer term economic damage. In the short term the government has not done enough to avoid redundancies and the loss of some small businesses.

Further businesses and premises to close

I have just received the enclosed update from the Government:

As a country, we all need to do what we can to reduce the spread of coronavirus.

That is why the government has given clear guidance on self-isolation, staying at home and away from others, and asked that schools only remain open for those children who absolutely need to attend.

On 23 March the government stepped up measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus and save lives. All businesses and premises outlined in the table below must now close. Takeaway and delivery services may remain open and operational in line with guidance on Friday 20 March. Online retail is still open and encouraged and postal and delivery service will run as normal.

Employers who have people in their offices or onsite should ensure that employees are able to follow Public Health England guidelines including, where possible, maintaining a two metre distance from others, and washing their hands with soap and water often, for at least 20 seconds (or using hand sanitiser gel if soap and water is not available).

Parks will remain open but only for individuals and households to exercise once a day. Communal spaces within parks such as playgrounds and football pitches will be closed.

The following businesses and premises must remain closed:

1. Food and drink

Restaurants and public houses, wine bars or other drinking establishments, or other food and drink establishments including within hotels and members' clubs.

Exemptions: Food delivery and takeaway can remain operational and can be a new activity supported by the new permitted development right. This covers the provision of hot or cold food that has been prepared for consumers for collection or delivery to be consumed, reheated or cooked by consumers off the premises.

2. Cafés and canteens

Exemptions: Food delivery and takeaway can remain operational (and as above).

Cafés and canteens at hospitals, police and fire service places of work, care homes or schools; prison and military canteens; services providing food or drink to the homeless.

Where there are no practical alternatives, other workplace canteens can remain open to provide food for their staff and/or provide a space for breaks. However, where possible, staff should be encouraged to bring their own food, and distributors should move to takeaway. Measures should be taken to minimise the number of people in the canteen / break space at any one given time, for example by using a rota.

3. Retail

Hairdressers, barbers, beauty and nail salons, including piercing and tattoo parlours All retail with notable exceptions.

Exemptions:

- Supermarkets and other food shops
- Medical services (such as dental surgeries, opticians and audiology clinics, physiotherapy clinics, chiropractic and podiatry clinics, and other professional vocational medical services)
- Pharmacies and chemists, including non-dispensing pharmacies
- Petrol stations
- Bicycle shops
- Hardware shops and equipment, plant and tool hire
- Veterinary surgeries and pet shops
- Corner shops and newsagents
- Off-licences and licenced shops selling alcohol, including those within breweries
- Laundrettes and dry cleaners
- Post Offices
- Vehicle rental services
- Car garages and repair shops
- Car parks
- High street banks, building societies, short-term loan providers, credit unions and cash points
- Storage and distribution facilities, including delivery drop off points
- Public toilets
- Shopping centres should stay open if they contain units which are not required to close

4. Outdoor and indoor markets

Exemptions: Market stalls which offer essential retail, such as grocery and food.

5. Hotels

Hotels, hostels, B&Bs, campsites and boarding houses for commercial use

Exemptions: Where people live in these as interim abodes whilst their primary residence is unavailable, or they live in them in permanently they may continue to do so.

Key workers and non-UK residents who are unable to travel to their country of residence during this period can continue to stay in hotels or similar where required.

People who are unable to move into a new home due to the current restrictions can also stay at hotels.

Where hotels, hostels, and B&Bs 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.

Those attending a funeral will be able to use hotels when returning home would be impractical.

Hotels are allowed to host blood donation sessions.

6. Caravan parks/sites for commercial uses

Exemptions: Where people live permanently in caravan parks or are staying in caravan parks as interim abodes where their primary residence is not available, they may continue to do so.

7. Libraries

Exemptions: Digital library services and no-contact Home Library Services should continue.

8. Community centres, youth centres and similar

Exemptions: For the purpose of hosting essential voluntary or public services, such as food banks, homeless services, and blood donation sessions.

Public venues that host blood donation sessions can continue to open temporarily for these services only.

9. Places of worship

Exemptions: Funerals in places of worship and crematorium, where the congregation is immediate family (with provision for a carer, if required) or a friend – in the case that no family members are attending. A distance of

two metres is to be maintained between every household group, as per Public Health England guidelines.

A minister of religion, to go to their place of worship may broadcast an act of worship, whether over the internet or otherwise.

For the purpose of hosting essential voluntary or public service, such as food banks, homeless services, and blood donation sessions.

10. Museums and galleries

Exemptions: None.

11. Nightclubs

Exemptions: None.

12. Cinemas, theatres and concert halls

Exemptions: Small group performances for the purposes of live streaming could be permissible where Public Health England guidelines are observed and no audience attend the venue.

13. Bingo halls, casinos and betting shops

Exemptions: None.

14. Spas and massage parlours

Exemptions: None.

15. Skating rinks

Exemptions: None.

16. Fitness studios, gyms, swimming pools or other indoor leisure centres

Exemptions: Leisure centres may stay open for blood donation sessions.

17. Arcades, bowling alleys, soft play centres and similar

Exemptions: None.

18. Funfairs

Exemptions: None.

19. Playgrounds, sports courts and pitches, and outdoor gyms or similar

Exemptions: None.

These premises and other venues must close as they involve prolonged close social contact, which increases the chances of infection spreading.

Providers of funeral services such as funeral directors and funeral homes

conducting funerals may remain open, subject to Public Health England guidelines as mentioned in the table above.

Work carried out in people's homes

Work carried out in people's homes, for example by tradespeople carrying out repairs and maintenance, can continue, provided that the tradesperson is well and has no symptoms. Again, it will be important to ensure that Public Health England guidelines, including maintaining a two-metre distance from any household occupants, are followed to ensure everyone's safety.

No work should be carried out in any household which is isolating or where an individual is being shielded, unless it is to remedy a direct risk to the safety of the household, such as emergency plumbing or repairs, and where the tradesperson is willing to do so. In such cases, Public Health England can provide advice to tradespeople and households.

No work should be carried out by a tradesperson who has coronavirus symptoms, however mild.

Takeaway and delivery facilities should remain open and operational

This means people can continue to enter premises to access takeaway services, including delivery drivers. Businesses are encouraged to take orders online or by telephone, and businesses should not provide seating areas, indoors and outdoors, for customers to consume food and drink on. Ordering in advance is strongly encouraged to avoid waiting in, as per Public Health England guidelines.

Planning regulation has been changed to enable restaurants, cafés and pubs which do not currently offer delivery and hot food takeaway to do so. The legislation can be accessed online. People must not consume food or drinks on site at restaurants, cafés or pubs whilst waiting for takeaway food. Those venues offering takeaway or delivery service must not include alcoholic beverages in this list if their license does not already permit.

Length of closure

We are asking the businesses and premises and other venues outlined above not to open for trade from close of trade 23 March 2020.

The first point of review for these measures will be in three weeks. This review will consider their necessity and effectiveness in light of changing circumstances.

Compliance

Everyone is instructed to comply with the rules issued by the government in relation to coronavirus, in order to protect both themselves and others.

As of 2pm on 21 March 2020, closures on the original list from 20th March are now enforceable by law in England and Wales due to the threat to public health. The government will extend the law and enforcement powers to include

the new list of premises for closure. Further measures on enforcement could be taken following the passage of the Coronavirus Bill through parliament.

A business operating in contravention of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Business Closures) Regulations 2020 will be committing an offence. As agreed with the devolved administrations these measures will be extended to Scotland and Northern Ireland by Ministerial Direction once the Coronavirus Bill is in force.

Environmental Health and Trading Standards officers will monitor compliance with these regulations, with police support provided if appropriate. Businesses and premises that breach them will be subject to prohibition notices, and potentially unlimited fines.

Financial Support

Her Majesty's Treasury also announced on 20 March 2020 a comprehensive series of measures supporting wages, cash-flow for businesses, and the welfare system.

Business support

In England, under the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant (RHLG) announced on Monday March 16, businesses and premises in England in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors will be eligible for cash grants of up to £25,000 per property.

Eligible businesses in these sectors with a property that has a rateable value of up to £15,000 will receive a grant of £10,000. Eligible businesses and premises in these sectors with a property that has a rateable value of between £15,001 and £51,000 will receive a grant of £25,000. Businesses with a rateable value of over £51,000 are not included in this scheme. For more information please visit gov.uk.

Business rates

In England, as announced on Monday 16 March, the government will provide a business rates holiday for businesses and premises in the retail, hospitality and/or leisure sector. This includes the businesses and premises in scope for closure listed above. This will apply automatically to your next business rates bill in April 2020.

Further information

This guidance will be updated regularly as the situation develops. For information about support for business, please go to the Government's Business Support webpage or visit gov.uk.

Devolved Administrations may issue further guidance on these matters within their nations.

Commonsense and rules

MPs and the government are flooded with calls wanting detailed answers to how people can live their lives under the new rules laid out in Parliament this week. This is understandable given the magnitude of the changes required.

The rules themselves are fairly general and broad. The aim of cutting back sharply on person to person contact is very clear. People should stay at home unless they need to go out to carry out important work that cannot be done from home, or to collect food and medicines or to undergo health care. There are not always detailed answers to what this means for any individual's life and circumstances. People are allowed to go out, and need to exercise their judgement of whether this should be done. If so they should do it in a way which minimises risks to themselves and others.

The police now have powers to require people to return home where they do not have a good reason, and to fine for non compliance. The police are keen to carry out their duties by consent, and would like us all to seek to implement the spirit of the rules without needing a strict fine and compliance approach by them. When I am asked difficult questions about what individuals should do I advise them to apply commonsense, to think whether the neighbours would agree they have a need to be out and about.

There are issues about what constitutes a family, what living together as a family means, and what to do about family members who have been travelling and staying away from home for a period. Many of these matters are judgements, where in a free society we look to the adults in the community to come to sensible decision for themselves in the light of the threat and the general requirements of society. The government does not have ready made answers to all the detailed questions because it has never drawn up a blueprint to tell everyone where they have to live, whether they may travel and whose work is essential. It sought to get people to make a big reduction in personal contact by advice, and has had to move to legal requirements as a large number of people ignored the advice. Let us hope now people respond well, to avoid the need for a tougher approach to policing and punishing offenders.

Meanwhile I have renewed my proposals to

1. Get income into the hands of the self employed who cannot now work
2. Get more home deliveries scheduled by food shops
3. Have more national and local government support for volunteering to help those in need of assistance thanks to their need to self isolate for 12 weeks.
4. Get faster and more helpful assistance with the employee cost scheme and the loan schemes for busienss.

The timing of these severe measures

The health policy says close more things down and stop people getting about unless it is essential to the NHS, basic utilities and the food supply that they do so. Keep them closed until the disease is tamed enough. The economic policy says close less down, re-open as quickly as possible, try to limit the economic damage.

Judging when to lift the new restrictions becomes the crucial decision. Do it too soon and the disease presumably leaps up again. Leave it too long and big swathes of the UK private sector will be excessively debt ridden or bankrupt.

So it would be good to have a bit more explanation from the epidemiologists how accurate their models are and when they judge it might be safe to reverse these measures. Learning from overseas countries ahead of us on the upwards curve of this disease is a good idea, but we need to understand the different bases of their figures and the big imperfections in them.

Some countries concentrate on testing after death. This can give a high death rate, as many people who get the disease and recover are never tested and counted, whilst many people who may die of something else can have death attributed to the virus they were carrying. There may also be false positives in the tests.

Some countries concentrate on testing those who declare symptoms, who mainly go on to recover. This may well produce a lower death rate, though the figures may still be way out as many people with symptoms or with the mild version of the disease may never report or seek a test. Some countries test key workers and patients at risk, yet another different set of figures.

It would be good to see test results based on a proper sample of the population to know how many already have it, compared to full testing on all those who have died from symptoms like the virus. It is still a medical judgement if the virus killed them. It will also be better when the new test to find those who have recovered from it and now have antibodies against it is available.

In the meantime government faces a difficult dilemma. Which of the many reports of various death rates and rates of new infection does it believe or does it think we are most likely to follow? At what point would it be safe to reverse these measures? When will we have in place sufficient tests to make the numbers more reliable than many of those from around the world using selective testing? People's lives depend on these numbers. Millions of people's livelihoods also depend on them, so they better be available soon and they better be reasonably accurate. The only justification for the economic misery is that the measures save lives. Giving businesses a better idea of how long it may take would also assist their plans and their financings.

Letter to the Leader of Wokingham Borough Council proposing more volunteering

Whilst the reason for the immediate increase in funding is not one we welcome, the government has made £1.6bn available to Councils to handle the virus and boost social care, and a further £1.3bn to free hospital beds . I have been pressing for more social care funding for sometime, and trust Wokingham's share of this will help.

One thing the Council could assist with, given this extra cash, is the promotion and organisation of Volunteer efforts to help in the current crisis. Volunteers could be recruited to help the elderly and vulnerable with their daily shopping when they are protecting themselves by staying at home. Volunteers can also help combat loneliness for those who are isolated, through telephone and internet communications to keep them in touch. I would be grateful if the Council could assist by co-ordinating volunteer responses.

Please let me know how Council organisation is getting on with these challenges. Freeing hospital beds is particularly important and strengthening social care is a good in itself.