

Government agrees measures with telecoms companies to support vulnerable consumers through COVID-19

Following constructive discussions with the Digital Secretary and Ofcom, the UK's major telecommunications providers have today agreed a set of important commitments to support and protect vulnerable consumers and those who may become vulnerable due to circumstances arising from Covid-19.

The UK's major internet service and mobile providers, namely BT/EE, Openreach, Virgin Media, Sky, TalkTalk, O2, Vodafone, Three, Hyperoptic, Gigaclear, and KCOM have all agreed the following commitments, effective immediately:

- All providers have committed to working with customers who find it difficult to pay their bill as a result of Covid-19 to ensure that they are treated fairly and appropriately supported.
- All providers will remove all data allowance caps on all current fixed broadband services.
- All providers have agreed to offer some new, generous mobile and landline packages to ensure people are connected and the most vulnerable continue to be supported. For example, some of these packages include data boosts at low prices and free calls from their landline or mobile.
- All providers will ensure that vulnerable customers or those self-isolating receive alternative methods of communication wherever possible if priority repairs to fixed broadband and landlines cannot be carried out.

These commitments are in addition to a range of supportive measures offered by the individual providers to their customers affected by circumstances arising from Covid-19.

Digital Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

It's fantastic to see mobile and broadband providers pulling together to do their bit for the national effort by helping customers, particularly the most vulnerable, who may be struggling with bills at this difficult time.

It is essential that people stay at home to protect the NHS and

save lives. This package helps people to stay connected whilst they stay home.

Melanie Dawes, CEO of Ofcom said:

We recognise providers are dealing with unprecedented challenges at the moment. So we welcome them stepping up to protect vulnerable customers, at a time when keeping in touch with our friends and families has never been more important. We'll continue to work with Government and industry to help make sure people stay connected.

Marc Allera, CEO of BT's Consumer division said:

The service and connectivity that BT provides are more critical today than they ever have been in our lifetime. During this national and global crisis, our priorities are the safety of our colleagues and ensuring that our customers, particularly those that are vulnerable, stay connected. Within the last week or so we focused on implementing a range of initiatives and additional services for our most vulnerable customers and we are pleased to support these sector-wide commitments.

None of this happens without the dedication of our brilliant teams. I'm particularly grateful to our committed contact centre colleagues who are fielding unprecedented call volumes and helping our customers stay connected.

Clive Selley, CEO of Openreach said:

With connections to more than 24 million customer premises across the UK, we know our network is critical. We'll do everything we can to keep people connected while prioritising our support for critical public services, vulnerable customers and those without a working line.

Thankfully a large amount of the work we do – including fixing faults, adding capacity and building faster, more reliable full fibre networks – can be completed outside, so you'll still see Openreach engineers working to maintain service across the UK.

Lutz Schüler, CEO of Virgin Media said:

In these unprecedented times we know how important connectivity is to people's lives. Alongside the many other steps we're already

taking, we're committed to helping our most vulnerable customers and ensuring they are supported as much as possible as we work tirelessly to keep the country connected.

Stephen van Rooyen, EVP & CEO, U.K. & Europe, Sky, said:

There has never been a more important time for people to stay connected. We will play our part to help everyone stay in contact with their loved ones and to ensure vulnerable people can access the help and information they need.

Tristia Harrison, CEO of TalkTalk, said:

At this time of uncertainty across the country, nobody should have to worry about connection to friends and loved ones. That's why TalkTalk is dedicated to treating customers – whether consumers or businesses – with fairness and compassion, so they don't fear losing service if current circumstances mean they're struggling financially. We have also established a priority contact line for vulnerable customers, so they can reach us when they need.

At a time where other bills may be going up, TalkTalk will not be adding inflation to standard bills from 1st April. And while people may need to use more landline calls, they will never pay over our low and fixed price package so that there are no nasty surprises.

It's more important than ever that we all work together to keep Britain connected, and TalkTalk is proud to play our part as a provider of this critical national service.

Mark Evans, CEO of Telefonica UK (O2), said:

I'm delighted to see the industry and government working together to help the UK at this critical time. At O2 we have long-established policies in place to support our customers, and right now, digital connectivity is more important than ever as we connect our customers to vital services and their loved ones.

Nick Jeffery, CEO of Vodafone UK said:

Whether you are at home, working from home or a key worker, Vodafone is committed to keeping the UK connected. We know that our technology is making a real difference in helping people through this health crisis. We are committed to supporting those customers vulnerable to COVID-19, enabling them to keep in contact with friends and family and live their lives as best as possible. We are

here for them.

Robert Finnegan, CEO of Three said:

We take our responsibility to keep our customers connected during this time very seriously and are providing the government with our full support where possible. I am committed to ensuring that all of our customers are treated fairly and that they are supported by Three.

Dana Tobak CBE, CEO of Hyperoptic said:

Staying connected in these unprecedented times is of crucial importance to society. Our engineers are showing great commitment to provide an essential service to society and value the support and understanding they are receiving from members of the public. We are pleased to commit to these measures to help support the most vulnerable members of society, who must of course take priority in these circumstances.

Gareth Williams, CEO of Gigaclear said:

Gigaclear are proud to be playing a vital role in building and maintaining the UK's digital infrastructure. We are working with our industry partners to support both our residential and business customers who are relying on our service now more than ever. In addition to the measures set out here, we are increasing the speeds of our customers currently on 30mbps products, as well as prioritising vulnerable customers who make themselves known to us.

Dale Raneberg, CEO of KCOM said:

As a provider of services people are relying on now more than ever, we are committed to keeping our customers connected throughout Covid-19 and determined in particular to support and protect vulnerable consumers and those who may become vulnerable as a result of it.

We acted quickly to lift data caps and to provide reassurance that we will assist customers facing financial pressure over the period ahead to ensure they continue to have access to essential communications services.

We are pleased to join with industry colleagues in putting in place the additional measures announced today and to back the Government's wider efforts to address this issue we now all face.

PM letter to nation on coronavirus

Published 28 March 2020

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1. 6 April 2020

Addition of Bengali translation.

2. 6 April 2020

Somali translation of PM's letter to the nation added.

3. 3 April 2020

Addition of large print version.

4. 3 April 2020

Addition of Gujarati, Polish, Punjabi, Romani, Roumanian, Russian, Urdu and Welsh translations.

5. 28 March 2020

First published.

Regulations temporarily suspended to fast-track supplies of PPE to NHS staff and protect companies hit by COVID-19

On 14 May, the government announced:

- the temporary suspension of wrongful trading liability will now continue until 30 June
- temporary measures to give companies and other bodies flexibility around Annual General Meetings (AGMs) and other meetings will be made retrospective to 26 March

This page was updated on 14 May to reflect these changes.

- Business Secretary eases requirements to ensure hand sanitiser and personal protective equipment reaches NHS staff more quickly
- by cutting red tape, new companies will be able to produce and distribute safe hand sanitiser within a matter of days
- government also announces it will amend insolvency law to give companies breathing space and keep trading while they explore options for rescue

New measures announced today will give vital support to frontline NHS staff battling COVID-19 and support businesses under pressure as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

To help get personal protective equipment (PPE) and hand sanitiser to NHS staff as quickly as possible, Business Secretary Alok Sharma is easing administrative requirements and barriers to imports of these essential tools, without compromising on their safety.

By reducing the amount of red tape, new suppliers and businesses that produce ingredients for safe hand sanitiser and PPE will be able to bring their products to market in a matter of days.

Companies including Brewdog and Ineos have already stepped forward to offer their services in creating hand sanitiser. This week HMRC confirmed manufacturers of hand sanitisers and gels will have their applications for denatured alcohol fast-tracked.

Efforts to boost availability of essential supplies involve temporary measures including:

- asking the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Local Authorities to fast-track PPE through the product safety assessment process and prioritise this activity over other market surveillance activity
- allowing PPE equipment providing protection against COVID-19 which lack the CE mark onto the market provided products meet essential safety requirements
- providing new guidance for local authorities and ports and borders enforcement officers on the import and safety testing of hand sanitiser

The Business Secretary has also announced he will make changes to enable UK companies undergoing a rescue or restructure process to continue trading, giving them breathing space that could help them avoid insolvency.

This will also include enabling companies to continue buying much-needed supplies, such as energy, raw materials or broadband, while attempting a rescue, and temporarily suspending wrongful trading provisions retrospectively from 1 March 2020 for three months for company directors so they can keep their businesses going without the threat of personal liability.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

The government is doing everything in its power to save lives and protect livelihoods during these unprecedented times.

Applying a common-sense approach to regulation will ensure products are safe and reach the market without any unnecessary delay, getting vital protective equipment such as face masks to frontline staff as quickly as possible.

Today's measures will also reduce the burden on business, giving bosses much-needed breathing space to keep their workers employed and their companies going.

Commenting on the new PPE rules, James Watt, Co-Founder of BrewDog said:

We started making hand sanitiser at our distillery in Ellon, Aberdeenshire in response to the national shortage and are providing it free to charities and frontline workers.

We really welcome the government's announcements today, which will mean that making this crucial product will become a much faster and easier process.

The government's flexibility in these unprecedented times allows us to do even more to help those most in need.

Commenting on the new PPE rules Sir Jim Ratcliffe INEOS Chairman said:

We welcome today's announcement. These measures will help INEOS as we build two factories in the UK and Germany in under 10 days, to produce and supply substantial quantities of hand sanitiser gel to the NHS for free.

INEOS is a company with enormous resources and manufacturing skills. If we can find other ways to help in the Coronavirus battle, we are absolutely committed to playing our part.

Speaking about the reforms to insolvency law, Matthew Fell, Chief UK Policy Director, Confederation of British Industry, said:

The CBI welcomes these interventions at a critical time for business. The temporary suspension of wrongful trading provisions, along with other measures, will give much needed headroom for company directors to enable otherwise viable businesses to use the government's support package and weather this crisis.

The Business Secretary also announced that the government will introduce legislation to ensure those companies required by law to hold Annual General

Meetings (AGMs) will be able to do so safely, consistent with the restrictions on movement and gatherings introduced to address the spread of coronavirus.

Companies will temporarily be extended greater flexibilities, including holding AGMs online or postponing the meetings. These temporary measures will apply retrospectively from 26 March, subject to successful passage of the upcoming Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill.

This measure follows an announcement earlier this week that companies would automatically and immediately be granted a three-month extension to the filing of their accounts following a fast-track online process.

Over 10,000 businesses have already successfully applied for the extension.

Notes to editors

The Office for Product Safety and Standards, part of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, is the government regulator responsible for the safety of consumer products in the UK. It has written to Local Authorities and HSE to ask them to prioritise equipment which is essential to the NHS.

The government previously consulted on changes to the corporate insolvency regime and [announced plans to introduce new insolvency restructuring procedures in August 2018](#). The new legislation will implement these plans, including a short moratorium or 'breathing space' that will give companies in difficulty time to explore options for rescue.

Current insolvency rules stipulate that directors of limited liability companies can become personally liable for business debts if they continue to trade when uncertain about whether their businesses can continue to meet their debts. Relaxation of these wrongful trading rules will reassure directors that the difficult decisions they have to make about the future viability of their business will not have to be unduly influenced by the exceptional circumstances which are entirely beyond their control.

Legislation to introduce these changes will be introduced in Parliament at the earliest opportunity. Provisions will be included to enable the changes to be extended if necessary.

HMRC relaxed rules on alcohol duty

[HMRC announced on 18 March](#) that manufacturers of hand sanitisers and gels will have their applications for denatured alcohol fast-tracked during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Under new measures, HMRC is fast-tracking applications so that manufacturers wanting to produce hand sanitising products can be quickly authorised.

Additional information on changes to insolvency laws:

Under the plans, the UK's Insolvency Framework will add new restructuring tools including:

- a moratorium for companies giving them breathing space for from creditors enforcing their debts for a period of time whilst they seek a rescue or restructure;
- protection of their supplies to enable them to continue trading during the moratorium; and;
- a new restructuring plan, binding creditors to that plan

The proposals will include key safeguards for creditors and suppliers to ensure they are paid while a solution is sought.

The government will also temporarily suspend the wrongful trading provisions to give company directors greater confidence to use their best endeavours to continue to trade during this pandemic emergency, without the threat of personal liability should the company ultimately fall into insolvency. This suspension will be retrospective to 1 March and will now continue until 30 June, subject to passage of the upcoming Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill.

Existing laws for fraudulent trading and the threat of director disqualification will continue to act as an effective deterrent against director misconduct.

Additional quotes:

Jennifer Marshall, president of the Insolvency Lawyers Association and chair of the City of London Law Society Insolvency Sub-Committee said:

We welcome and support these proposals. Suspending wrongful trading, in particular, will assist directors in accessing Government or bank funding without concerns regarding personal liability.

The insolvency profession in the UK is hugely talented and these reforms, together with existing rescue tools such as administration, could really assist in saving livelihoods.

Norman Tenray, CEO of Obas UK and Non-Executive Director of North and Western Lancashire Chamber of Commerce said:

I am delighted that the Business Secretary and UK Government has today taken hugely positive action in suspending the regulations for the importing of much needed PPE equipment.

This will help me to do more to protect our hard-working Doctors and Nurses at this extremely challenging time.

I am aware of a number of overseas manufacturers who have NHS standard protective products and equipment ready and waiting for dispatch which could reach our shores even more quickly now as a result of the government's excellent announcements today.

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): letter from the Secretary of State to the social care workforce](#)

- Only go outside for food, health reasons or work (but only if you cannot work from home)
- If you go out, stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people at all times
- Wash your hands as soon as you get home

Do not meet others, even friends or family.

You can spread the virus even if you don't have symptoms.

[Response to the Financial Times article on ventilators](#)

The 28/03/20 edition of FT Weekend contains a number of inaccurate claims about the UK's efforts to procure and manufacture ventilators in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

To date, there are more than 8,000 ventilators available to NHS patients, with another 8,000 expected from existing international manufacturers in the coming weeks. We have also been clear that the UK must step up production of ventilators even further to support the UK's response to the virus and save lives.

The government has partnered with a number of the UK's leading technology and engineering firms with smaller manufacturers to rapidly build existing, modified or newly designed ventilators at speed, with seven priority projects underway. They are working to improve the speed at which current UK ventilator manufacturers can produce their devices, with larger companies changing their existing operations to help provide the UK with the equipment and personnel it needs for this effort. Many other UK manufacturers are

building, designing and developing new effective, safe and easy-to-build ventilators – all orders from the government will be subject to them passing stringent safety tests.

The government's overriding aim is to protect the NHS and save lives.

Claim:

Several companies have complained that offers were not taken up to provide some of the additional machines needed to save the lives of people with acute respiratory difficulties caused by Covid-19.

Response:

The response we've had from British industry has been nothing short of incredible, with an overwhelming response from companies offering help including designing and building new devices, manufacturing components or transporting them to NHS hospitals. To say we have ignored suppliers is wrong – we have responded to all companies that contacted us with offers of help. We are working with a number of firms to scale up production of existing UK ventilator manufacturers, as well as designing and manufacturing new products from scratch, and procuring thousands more machines from overseas.

Claim:

The Government should have been in touch with companies sooner and has now missed out.

Response:

We would expect suppliers of ventilator parts, like MEC Medical, to receive orders from companies for some of the components needed to scale up production of UK ventilator manufacturers.

Claim:

The Government doesn't follow through with their promises that they'll buy any new ventilators.

Response:

This is untrue. We have over 8,000 machines arriving in the coming weeks and we are working to procure more everyday. We are also working alongside industry to scale up existing UK manufacturing and, simultaneously, design and manufacture new products. Of course, any new orders are all dependent on machines passing regulatory tests. We are rapidly ramping up ventilator production in response to this crisis.

Anyone who has existing ventilator stock and can support should [email here](#) and if you want to offer wider support visit [this page](#).

Claim:

The Government didn't get in touch quickly and now the lead in times for ventilators from abroad are months away.

Response:

Many distributors are offering us plans for future supply from overseas, but unfortunately many of these simply did not stand up to due diligence, where safety of our citizens is of paramount importance. However, the government has been successful in recent days buying directly from factories. Indeed we took a delivery from a manufacturer in an EU member state just this week. Of course we have bought from agents where that is not possible.

We are doing whatever it takes to protect the NHS and save lives.