

Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced further restrictions in England in response to the rising number of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases. The key changes for employers to be aware of are:

Working From Home

Despite efforts by the government earlier this month to encourage people to return to the office, it has now said that office workers who **can** work from home should do so over the winter. It has not gone so far as to say that people “must” work from home, as was the case back in the spring. In key public services – and in all professions where homeworking is not possible, such as retail – people are being told to continue to attend their workplaces. See our [blog](#) for further discussion on the issues raised by this latest announcement.

According to recent surveys, it would seem that many businesses have continued to allow their staff to work from home anyway, but there are clearly some businesses that (in line with the government’s previous advice about “getting people back to work”) had started to encourage/require their staff to return to the office. In light of this latest announcement, such businesses should now review their stance on working from home and communicate any changes in approach to affected staff.

Hospitality

From tomorrow (24 September), all hospitality venues will have to close at 10 p.m. All pubs, bars and restaurants must operate table-service only, except for takeaways. These latest restrictions on the hospitality sector will clearly have a significant impact. On Tuesday 29 September 2020, we will be hosting a webinar on the new and changing restrictions in the UK hospitality sector. You can sign up [here](#) to attend.

Face Coverings

The requirement to wear face coverings will be extended to include staff in retail (from 24 September); all users of taxis and private vehicles (from today); and staff and customers in indoor hospitality, except when seated at a table to eat or drink (from 24 September). The guidance stating that face coverings and visors should be worn in close contact services (e.g. hairdressing and beauticians) will become law (from 24 September). People who are already exempt from the existing face covering obligations, e.g. because of an underlying health condition, will continue to be exempt from these obligations. It is still the case that there is no general requirement for staff working in offices to wear face coverings, but employers should not usually stop their staff wearing face coverings if they wish to do so.

Fines for Breaches

Businesses will face stricter rules to make their premises COVID-19-secure (from 28 September). According to the [statement](#) issued by the Cabinet Office after the Prime Minister’s announcement yesterday, a wider range of leisure and entertainment venues, services provided in community centres and close contact services will be subject to the COVID-19 secure requirements in law and will face fines of up to £10,000 for repeated breaches.

Further Reopenings

The government had hoped to be able to allow business conferences, exhibition halls and large sporting events to reopen from 1 October, but these proposals have now been put on hold.

Shielding

The government has said that these new restrictions do not mean that individuals who were shielding early in the pandemic now need to start shielding again – except for those in local lockdown areas, but this is being kept under constant review.

Earlier in the week, Matt Hancock announced that the government is also introducing a new £500 Isolation Support Payment for people on low incomes who have tested positive for COVID-19 or have been asked to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace and are unable to work from home and lose income as a result. According to the [press release](#), it will be available for those individuals who are required to self-isolate from 28 September, although it seems that payments are unlikely to be made until 12 October, as the schemes are currently being set up by local authorities. There will also be increased fines for breaching the self-isolation rules, which could also apparently include businesses that, for example, threaten staff with dismissal if they do not come to work.

All of the above restrictions are likely to remain in place until March 2021. They apply to England, with slightly different restrictions being introduced in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, there may be different rules in place in those areas that are under local lockdown. We anticipate that the “[Working safely during coronavirus](#)” guidance covering the practical steps that different businesses should take to be “COVID-19-secure” will be updated to reflect these latest changes so employers should keep an eye out for this.

Support for Businesses

The key question that is on many businesses' lips, namely what is going to happen to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) – is it going to be extended?/is it going to be replaced?/is there going to be sector specific support?, etc. was not addressed. To date, the Chancellor has been adamant that the CJRS will close at the end of October 2020, but there is increasing pressure on the government to announce further financial support for businesses, especially in the badly affected hospitality and leisure sectors. We will, of course, keep you posted. We are expecting further guidance this month on the Job Retention Bonus Scheme that will be available to businesses that retain previously furloughed employees until the end of January 2021. In the meantime, the government has launched its [Kickstart Scheme](#), in an attempt to create new six-month job placements for young people who are currently on Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment.

Managing Redundancies

Many businesses are considering making redundancies and/or changes to terms and conditions in the current climate. We have produced a number of resources to assist employers during these challenging times. Included here are links to our recent webinars on [managing collective redundancies](#) and [changing terms and conditions](#), just in case you missed them.

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