

Last night, the Prime Minister announced that England should finally move to Step 4 in the government’s roadmap, the lifting of all COVID-19 restrictions, on 19 July. A final decision will be taken next week (12 July) after a review of the latest data. The plan apparently is to “move away from legal restrictions and allow people to make their own informed decisions about how to manage the virus.” So, more guidance, less law. Needless to say, the Prime Minister’s statement has already received a mixed reaction, with some commentators saying “about time” and others concerned that things are changing too quickly in light of rapidly increasing delta variant COVID-19 cases.

To coincide with the Prime Minister’s announcement, the government has published its “[COVID-19 Response: Summer 2021](#),” outlining this next phase in the government’s efforts to manage the risks posed by COVID-19.

Key changes from 19 July that employers need to be aware of include:

- **All businesses will be allowed to reopen** – Large events will also be able to resume without any limits on attendance or social distancing requirements.
- **Workers will be allowed to return to the office** – The current guidance is to “work from home if you can” and this will remain the case until 19 July, but from then, workers will be allowed to return to the office even if they are able to do their jobs from home. This means that unless an employer has already agreed to remote working (whether part time or full time) then their proper place of work becomes their physical workplace again and remaining away from it after that date requires their employer’s consent. In practice, adopting a gradual return to the workplace taking into account personal circumstances is likely to be the most appropriate approach. One thing that is also clear is that employers should not assume that office life will be back to normal from 19 July. As the Prime Minister was keen to emphasise in his press conference yesterday, the pandemic is not over and businesses should expect further disruption to the economy and people’s lives. Individuals, for example, will still be required to self-isolate in certain circumstances (although the government’s approach on this is currently being reviewed and further announcements are expected) and if, for example, school life continues to be disrupted, then parents may well still be looking to work from home or take time off work on an intermittent basis. Employers should, therefore, still have contingency plans in place, especially as we approach the end of the year when it seems almost inevitable that there will be a further resurgence of COVID-19 cases alongside other seasonal respiratory diseases and possibly new variants that are vaccine-resistant to some degree.

- **The “1 metre + rule” on social distancing will, to all extents, be scrapped** – So far, there has been no information published on what this means precisely for workplaces, but the government’s Workplace Guidelines (which set out how businesses can make their workplace COVID-19-secure) will be updated shortly, so that employers can be clear about what they can and cannot do. Employers should take into account any updated guidance in reviewing and updating their risk assessments. The government will also be publishing guidance on how businesses can reduce unnecessary contact in the workplace, where it is practicable.
- **Face coverings will no longer be required in any setting** – At the moment, face coverings are required by law in most indoor public settings and for staff in some workplaces (e.g. retail and hospitality staff working in indoor areas that are open to the public), but these requirements will also be scrapped. The legal obligation to wear a face covering will be replaced by guidance setting out when people may wish to wear one, e.g. on obviously crowded public transport or in busy public spaces.
- **Self-isolation** – There will be changes to the rules governing self-isolation, in particular for those who are fully vaccinated and a contact of a positive case. Further details from the government to follow.
- **Mandatory vaccination** – There will be a future consultation on whether vaccination should be made compulsory in the healthcare sector and further social care settings – the government is already committed to making vaccination a condition of deployment for staff working in care homes.



The government has also today published various reports that were promised in its "COVID-19 Spring Response", in particular its review of [social distancing, guidance on face covering and working from home](#). The outcome of this review has informed the government's approach in England, as set out above.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be setting out their own plans for lifting any remaining restrictions in their particular jurisdictions.



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