

Furlough scheme update

The BVRLA has written to the Chancellor ahead of next week's Budget, urging the Government to extend the furlough scheme until the end of national restrictions. The Scheme is currently due to end on 30 April 2021.

The association has also asked for business rates relief to be extended by another year, and for an extension to the deadlines for repaying deferred VAT. These are the three support measures that members have stated are most useful to their business.

According to the latest Office for National Statistics [latest indicators for the UK economy](#), 20% of businesses' workforce were on furlough leave in early February, up from 18% in mid-January 2021.

[Official statistics](#) published on 25 February show that the number of jobs furloughed on 31 December was 4 million. Provisional estimates show a further increase in January to 4.7 million and cumulatively, 11.2 million jobs have been supported by the CJRS since the start of the scheme.

The Government has updated its [guidance](#) on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to include that claims for furlough days in February 2021 must be made by 15 March 2021.

VAT deferment payment scheme now open

The [VAT deferral new payment scheme](#) opened on 23 February 2021 and is due to be available up to and including 21 June 2021.

If you're on the VAT Annual Accounting Scheme or the VAT Payment on Account Scheme, you'll be invited to join the new payment scheme later in March 2021. The new scheme lets you:

- pay your deferred VAT in equal instalments, interest free
- choose the number of instalments, from 2 to 11 (depending on when you join)

Those who join the scheme can still have a Time to Pay arrangement for other HMRC debts and outstanding tax.

Levelling Up Fund boosted to £4.8 billion

The UK Government has [added a further £800 million](#) to make the Levelling Up Fund, announced at the Spending Review, available to all parts of the UK.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will now all benefit from the fund for town centre and high street regeneration, local transport, cultural and heritage projects. The Fund aims to support every region of the UK as it 'Builds Back Better' from Covid.

Latest data on local authority funding for businesses

The Government has published its latest round of [business grants data](#) showing the government funding delivered to each council in England to support their local businesses.

Since August last year, the Government has provided councils with £7.8 billion for businesses who have needed support the most, through Local Restrictions Support Grants, Christmas Support Payments and Additional Restrictions Grants.

[Guidance for Local Authorities](#) has been updated to include details of the next payment cycle covering the period 16 February to 31 March.

Research assesses confidence in using public transport

The Department for Transport has [published a report](#) produced by Ipsos MORI on the Government's behalf, which shares findings from research carried out to look at confidence in using transport during the pandemic.

The research includes an assessment of peoples' attitudes to returning to flying, which will be of particular interest to members with operations and branches at airports.

The DfT has also [published a study](#) into the travel behaviour of people during and following the coronavirus pandemic.

Vehicle rental firms amongst other essential workers to be prioritised for testing

The Government has [published guidance](#) listing the essential workers that will be prioritised for [Covid-19 testing](#). Vehicle rental operators are classed as essential by the Government as this vital sector supports the operation of critical transport through which supply chains pass.

Businesses invited to order free workplace testing kits

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has [written a letter](#) to all businesses registered in England about free Covid-19 tests for staff who cannot work from home.

The letter from the Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng encourages businesses to test their staff for Covid-19 by [registering for free testing kits](#) provided by the government. The test kits are entirely free of charge until 30 June 2021 for firms that have registered by 31 March.

Roadmap out of lockdown

On 22 February the [Prime Minister announced](#) a four-step process to ease restrictions across England, outlining the [roadmap out of lockdown](#). Guidance has been published detailing the steps to [reopening businesses and venues](#) in England.

With infection rates falling, the UK [Covid-19 Alert Level](#) has been downgraded from level 5 to level 4, however people are being asked to remain vigilant and continue to follow the guidelines.

The Department for Health & Social Care has launched a [campaign](#) to remind people of the importance of staying at home, encouraging people to 'keep going' to stop the spread of the virus.

Phase 2 of vaccine rollout to cover all adults by July

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation ([JCVI](#)) [has published advise](#) recommending that the phase 2 of the vaccination programme be age-based starting with the oldest adults first and proceeding in the following order:

- all those aged 40 to 49 years
- all those aged 30 to 39 years
- all those aged 18 to 29 years

The [Government has confirmed](#) that all four devolved nations will follow the recommended approach and aims to complete phase 2 of the vaccination programme by the end of July 2021.

[JCVI concluded](#) that delivery of a programme targeting occupational groups would be operationally complex and a simple, age-based programme starting with those aged 40 to 49 years is the optimal way to protect individuals.

Phase 1, which began rollout in the UK from 8 December 2020, saw the vaccination of nine key priority groups covering all adults aged 50 years and over, and younger adults with underlying health conditions that put them at specific risk from Covid-19.

Those who are vaccinated will still need to follow government advice on social distancing.

Infection rates across England

[Weekly data](#) of Covid-19 cases per local authority shows that in the past week 35 areas reported an increase in the number of cases per 100,000 population, whilst three areas remain unchanged, and 276 areas saw a decrease in case rates.