

## CLAS CIRCULAR 2021/06 (24 February 2021)

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It would be very helpful if members could let us know of anything that appears to indicate developments of policy or practice on the part of Government or other matters of general concern that should be pursued.

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## CORONAVIRUS LOCKDOWN CHANGES

### COVID-19: The path out of lockdown in England

For information and possibly for action

On 22 February, the Prime Minister made a [statement](#) to the Commons and appeared subsequently at a press conference to outline the Government's plans for a staged easing of the lockdown in England. In brief, according to the subsequent [press release](#):

- From **8 March**, all pupils in England's schools are expected to return to class, with mass testing and wider use of facemasks in secondary schools and care home residents will be allowed one regular visitor provided that he or she is tested and wears PPE. The "Stay at Home" requirement will remain, but people will be able to leave home for recreation outdoors, such as a coffee or picnic with their household or support.
- From **29 March**, groups of up to six people or two households will be allowed to gather in parks and gardens. The "Stay at Home" requirement will end, but many lockdown restrictions will remain (for example, people should continue to work from home where possible, and overseas travel will remain banned other than for a small number of reasons).
- From **12 April**, shops, hairdressers, gyms, *outdoor* hospitality and self-contained holiday accommodation may be able to reopen. There will be no need for customers to order a "substantial meal" (even a Scotch egg) with alcohol, though customers must order, eat and drink while seated. Funerals can continue with up to 30 people, and the numbers able to attend weddings, receptions and commemorative events such as wakes will rise to 15 (from 6).
- From **17 May**, two households or a group of six may be able to meet indoors in a pub or other hospitality venue and cinemas, museums, hotels, performances and sporting events will also reopen. Most social contact rules will be lifted, though *gatherings of over 30 people will remain illegal*. As well as funerals, up to 30 people will be able to attend weddings, receptions and wakes. Other life events that will be permitted include *bar mitzvot* and baptisms.
- From **21 June** it is hoped that all legal limits on social contact will be removed, with the final closed sectors of the economy, such as nightclubs, reopened. The Government states that 'This will also guide decisions on whether all limits can be removed on weddings and other life events.'

The full accompanying document, [COVID-19 Response – Spring 2021](#), made it clear, however, that easing the lockdown was conditional upon a number of factors and that, before proceeding to the next step, the Government would examine the data to assess the impact of the previous one, based on four tests:

- a. The vaccine deployment programme continues successfully.

- b. Evidence shows vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths in those vaccinated.
- c. Infection rates do not risk a surge in hospitalisations which would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS.
- d. Our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new Variants of Concern.'

There will be a minimum of five weeks between each step: four weeks for the data to reflect changes in restrictions followed by seven days' notice of the restrictions to be eased.

As to the likely impact on places of worship, the progression appears to be like this:

- **Weddings** may currently only take place in an emergency. The expectation is that from 8 March, six people will be able to attend a wedding and it will not need to be an emergency, from 12 April fifteen people will be able to attend a wedding and a reception afterwards, from 17 May that figure will increase to thirty and (at least in principle), from 21 June all attendance restrictions will be lifted. There is currently no change in the requirement for those attending a wedding to wear face coverings and maintain social distancing.
- Attendance at **funerals** will continue to be limited to thirty until the end of restrictions.

Following the Prime Minister's statement to Parliament, the Bishop of London, who chairs the Church of England's Coronavirus Recovery Group, [commented](#) that the Church would study the details of the statement and, 'working with Government Departments, refine our own advice for local churches in the weeks ahead. We all look forward to being able to meet in larger groups again later this year and today's announcement will be especially encouraging for couples planning weddings, among others'.

[Source: 10 Downing Street, 22 February]

### COVID-19: The path out of lockdown in Scotland

**For information and possibly for action**

The First Minister announced a phased ending to lockdown in Scotland:

- In Phase 1 (yesterday) early learning and childcare and schools reopened for Primary 1-3 pupils and senior phase pupils for essential practical work. There was limited increase in the provision for vulnerable children. Care homes were opening to facilitate meaningful contact between relatives/ friends and residents.
- In Phase 2 (unlikely before **15 March**) there would be more school reopening and non-contact outdoor group sports would be permitted for 12-17 year olds. Socialising rules would be eased to allow outdoor meetings of four people from two households.
- In Phase 3 – (at least three weeks later - possibly **5 April**) the "Stay-at-Home" requirement would be removed, with a third and final phase of schools reopening if required. Places of

worship would be able open with restricted number. The essential retailers list would expanded slightly and click-and-collect resumed for non-essential retail.

- In Phase 4 – possibly **26 April**) there would be limited other easing within Level 4, including permitting non-essential work in people's homes, and a return to a variable Levels approach, to enable the graduated opening up of economic and social activity.

The First Minister told the Scottish Parliament that "Stay at Home" restrictions would be eased on 5 April, but that Easter and Passover would be taken into account during the decision-making process and churches could potentially be permitted to reopen for communal worship a few days earlier with numbers restricted to 20. Her statement was [welcomed](#) by the Moderator of the General Assembly, but Dr Fair said that, while the announcement was a good beginning to a return to normality, 'individual congregations will proceed cautiously according to their own circumstances and will only re-open buildings when it's safe for them to do so.'

[Source: *BBC News*, 23 February]

### Welsh First Minister announces tweaks to lockdown rules

**For information and possibly for action**

The Welsh First Minister [announced](#) a few small tweaks to Welsh social distancing rules. From 22 February, children aged three to seven will begin returning to schools in a phased way, while some vocational learners on courses that require practical learning, will return to college.

Following the latest review of coronavirus restrictions, the Welsh Government also announced some minor changes to the current rules:

- From Saturday 20 February, four people from two different households will be able to meet outdoors for socially distanced local exercise. This does not apply to private gardens.
- From March 1, the law will be changed to allow licensed wedding venues, such as visitor attractions and hotels, to reopen, but only to perform wedding and civil partnership ceremonies.
- Sport Wales will make arrangements for more talented athletes to resume training and playing.
- With more people living and working in older people's care homes being vaccinated, the Welsh Government will look again at its guidance for care home visiting.

[Source: Welsh Government, 19 February]

## TAXATION

### VAT Deferral New Payment Scheme

For information **and possibly for action**

HMRC has announced that organisations that deferred VAT payments last year can now join the new [VAT Deferral Payment Scheme](#) to pay it in smaller monthly instalments. The scheme is open to organisations that deferred VAT due from 20 March to 30 June 2020 (under the VAT Payment Deferral Scheme) and still have payments to make. They can:

- Pay the deferred VAT in full, on or before 31 March 2021
- Opt-in to the VAT Deferral New Payment Scheme online between 23 February and 21 June 2021
- Contact HMRC by 30 June 2021 if they need to agree extra help to pay.

More information is available [here](#).

[Source: HMRC, 23 February]

## WALES

### The Renting Homes (Amendment) (Wales) Bill

For information **and possibly for action**

The Senedd has [passed](#) the Renting Homes (Amendment) (Wales) Bill which, it claims, will give tenants more protection, stability and security in their homes. The changes mean that from spring 2022, rental contracts in Wales will change so that:

- Tenants will have a minimum of a 12-month contract
- Minimum notice periods will be extended from two to six months in the case of “no fault evictions” – with landlords only able to serve notice six months after tenants have moved in
- Rental contracts will be simplified and standardised with model contracts available
- Although the notice period that landlords have to give will be longer, they will still be able to seek to repossess their property if a tenant is in breach of contract.

[Source: Welsh Government, 23 February]