Living with COVID-19: The New Norm

Where we are, where we were and where we are going.

The COVID-19 outbreak has forced countries across the world to drastically rethink many aspects of normal, day-to-day life. How we work is certainly one of these. As we adapt to the pandemic and how coronavirus has changed our lives, we begin to consider the current situation as the ‘new normal’. But what does the ‘new normal’ mean in terms of the impact it will have in the short, medium, and long term?

**Where are we now?**

**From 5th November:**

**The UK Government introduce a four-week, nationwide, lockdown.**

The lockdown will start on the 5th November and last until the 2nd December. Despite this second lockdown, the Prime Minister urged that construction sites will be able to stay open during this new lockdown.

As a result of the second lockdown, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has been extended across the UK until March. Details can be found [here.](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/furlough-scheme-extended-and-further-economic-support-announced)

**October:**

Build UK has issued a [template letter](file:///C:\Users\chloe\Downloads\Worker-Authorisation-Letter-October-2020.docx) for construction workers in Wales to carry in case they are pulled over by police during the nation’s two-week ‘firebreak’ lockdown that begins on Friday.

FMB Cymru director Ifan Glyn said: “COVID-19 continues to present the business community with unprecedented challenges. As we enter a second national lockdown, it is imperative that builders are given clear guidance on the type of projects that need to stop, and the ones that can safely continue.” The Welsh Government said that it would publish a full list of businesses that are required to close temporarily “shortly”.

**From 23rd October:**

Wales to go into national two-week 'firebreak' Covid lockdown to give the NHS a breather. In Wales, businesses including pubs, hotels, gyms, hairdressers and non-essential shops will have to close from Friday evening and will remain shut until 9 November.

**From 20th October:**

The Site Operating Procedures have been updated to reflect recent changes in Government guidance. Whilst there are no significant changes to social distancing requirements on sites, the Construction Leadership Council (CLC) has taken the opportunity to streamline the Site Operating Procedures whilst maintaining the familiar format.

Changes to the Site Operating Procedures ‐ Version 6 include:

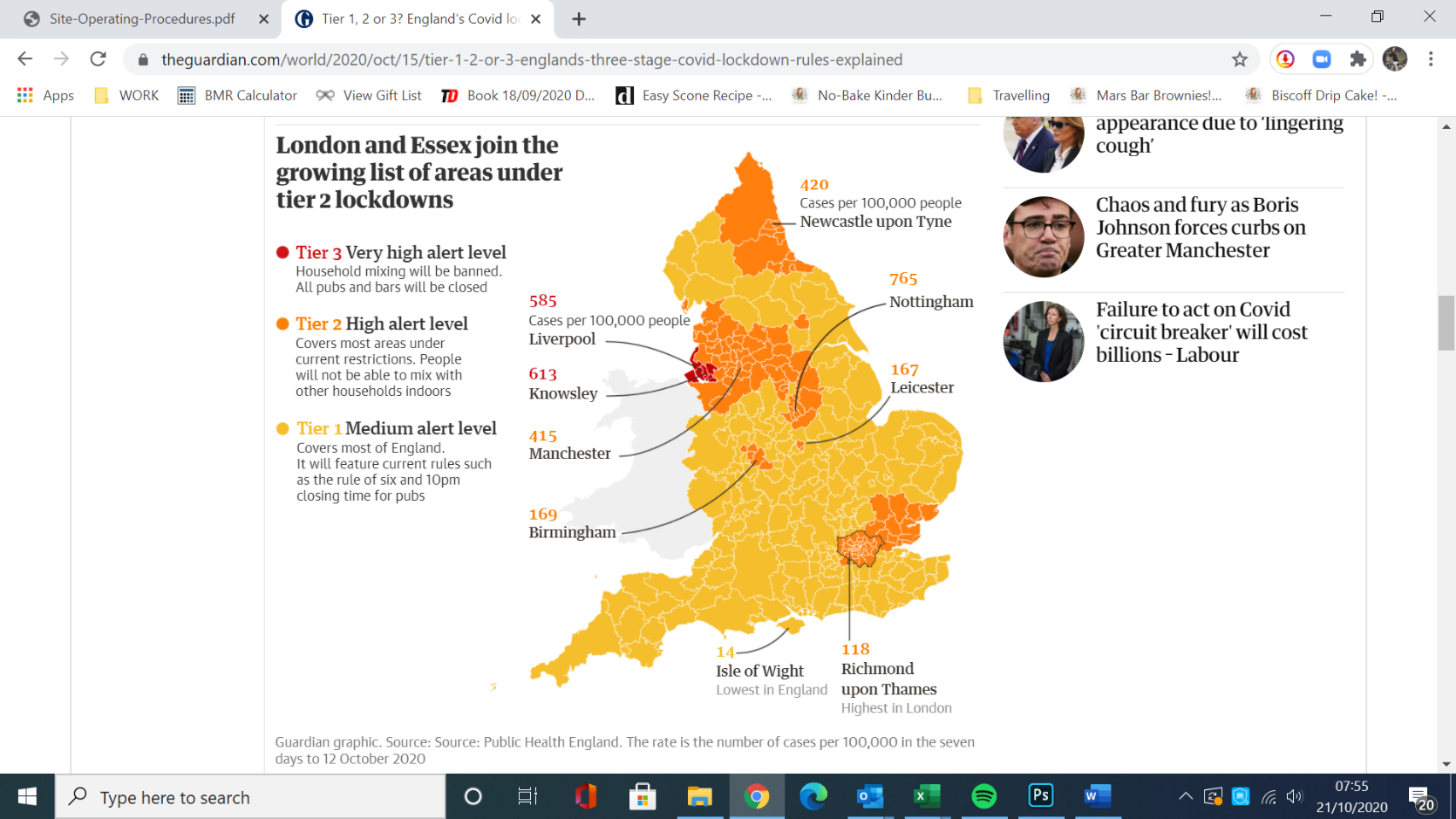
• Current requirements such as social distancing is referenced to on page 1 making it easier to update in future

• The CLC statement on The Use of Face Coverings is included

• Updated guidance on shielding, self‐isolation, testing and what to do if a worker develops COVID‐19 symptoms or has to self‐isolate, including a link to Build UK’s flowchart

• Confirmation that canteens serving food must display an NHS QR Code

• The wording has been reviewed throughout to reflect the fact that social distancing is no longer exceptional, and that in some key areas Government has published more detailedguidance or updated terminology.

**From October 15th:**

The Government has introduced a three-tiered system, depending on the alert level of the area.

Tier 1 (medium) -

* The “rule of six” applies, meaning socialising in groups larger than six people is prohibited whether indoors or outdoors.
* Tradespeople can continue to go into a household for work and are not counted as being part of the six-person limit.
* Businesses and venues can continue to operate but pubs and restaurants must ensure customers only consume food and drink while seated, and close between 10pm and 5am.
* Takeaway food can continue to be sold after 10pm if ordered by phone or online.
* Schools and universities remain open.
* Places of worship remain open, but people must not mingle in a group of more than six.
* Weddings and funerals can go ahead with restrictions on the number of people who can attend (15 and 30 respectively).
* Exercise classes and organised sport can continue to take place outdoors, and – if the rule of six is followed – indoors.

**Tier 2 (high)**

* People are prohibited from socialising with anybody outside their household or support bubble in any indoor setting.
* Tradespeople can continue to go into a household for work.
* The rule of six continues to apply for socialising outdoors, for instance in a garden or public space like a park or beach.
* Businesses and venues can continue to operate but pubs and restaurants must ensure customers only consume food and drink while seated, and close between 10pm and 5am.
* Takeaway food can continue to be sold after 10pm if ordered online or by phone.
* Schools and universities remain open.
* Places of worship remain open but people must not mingle in a group of more than six.
* Weddings and funerals can go ahead with restrictions on the number of people who can attend (15 and 30 respectively).
* Exercise classes and organised sport can continue to take place outdoors but will only be permitted indoors if it is possible for people to avoid mixing with those they do not live with (or share a support bubble with), or for youth or disability sport.
* Travel is permitted to amenities that are open, for work or to access education, but people are advised to reduce the number of journeys where possible.

**Tier 3 (very high)**

* People are prohibited from socialising with anybody they do not live with, or have not formed a support bubble with, in any indoor setting, private garden or at most outdoor hospitality venues and ticketed events.
* Tradespeople can continue to go into a household for work.
* The rule of six continues to apply to outdoor public spaces, such as parks, beaches, public gardens or sports venues.
* Pubs and bars are only permitted to remain open to operate as restaurants, in which case alcohol can only be served as part of a substantial meal.
* Schools and universities remain open.
* Places of worship remain open but household mixing is not permitted.
* Weddings and funerals can go ahead with restrictions on the number of people attending (15 and 30 respectively) but wedding receptions are not allowed.
* The rules for exercise classes and organised sport are the same as in tier 2. They can continue to take place outdoors but will only be permitted indoors if it is possible for people to avoid mixing with people they do not live with (or share a support bubble with), or for youth or disability sport. However, in Merseyside, gyms were ordered to close when it entered tier 3.
* Travelling outside a very high alert level area or entering a very high alert level area should be avoided other than for things such as work, education or youth services, to meet caring responsibilities or if travelling through as part of a longer journey.
* Residents of a tier 3 area should avoid staying overnight in another part of the UK, while people who live in a tier 1 or tier 2 area should avoid staying overnight in a very high alert level area.

**From 24th September:**

All pubs, bars, cafes, and restaurants in England are to shut no later than 22:00 BST each evening.

The [Winter Economy Plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-outlines-winter-economy-plan) is announced, detailing how it will protect jobs and support businesses.

The [NHS COVID-19 app](https://covid19.nhs.uk/) is available to download to help protect yourself and others.

**From 14th September:**

People must not meet in groups larger than 6 in England. There are [exceptions to this ‘rule of 6’](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-meeting-with-others-safely-social-distancing/coronavirus-covid-19-meeting-with-others-safely-social-distancing#seeing-friends-and-family)

**From 24th July:**

In order to help contain the spread of the virus as we open up more premises, face coverings will be required in shops and supermarkets - in addition to public transport where they are already required.

**Where were we?**

**January 2020:**

The first UK case of COVID-19 was announced.

**February 2020:**

The first transmission of Covid-19 within the UK is confirmed. The Government decides not to follow Italy and China in imposing a lockdown and restriction on movement. The term “social distancing” is introduced and people are advised to self-isolate should they be symptomatic.

***What Is Social Distancing?***

The UK government is advising that everyone practices social distancing to reduce the transmission of coronavirus (Covid-19). These measures, to reduce the social interaction between people, involve:

* Avoiding contact with someone who is displaying symptoms of coronavirus (Covid-19)
* Avoid non-essential use of public transport, varying your travel times to avoid rush hour, when possible
* Work from home, where possible. Your employer should support you to do this.
* Avoid large gatherings, and gatherings in smaller public spaces such as pubs, cinemas, restaurants, theatres, bars, clubs
* Avoid gatherings with friends and family. Keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media

**March 2020:**

**16 March 2020:**

The Prime Minister advised against “non-essential” travel and contact with others and suggests people should avoid pubs, clubs, theatres and work from home, where possible.

**20 March 2020:**

The Chancellor announced a package of “temporary, timely and targeted measures to support public services, people and businesses through this period of disruption caused by COVID-19”.

These measures included:

* [Job Retention Scheme](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/financial-support-for-businesses-during-coronavirus-covid-19)
* The Job Retention Scheme will pay 80% of all employee’ wages, up to a cap of £2,500 per month.
* [Statutory Sick Pay](https://www.gov.uk/statutory-sick-pay/how-to-claim)
* [Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme](https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/ourpartners/coronavirus-business-interruption-loan-scheme-cbils-2/)
* [Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ (HMRC) Time to Pay service](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tax-helpline-to-support-businesses-affected-by-coronavirus-covid-19)
* [Employment and Support Allowance](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-style-employment-and-support-allowance)
* [Universal Credit (UC)](https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit)

**23 March 2020:**

The prime minister announces a nationwide lockdown – an official restriction on movement.

The exceptions for leaving your house are as follows:

* Shopping for necessities like food and medicine
* Taking exercise – but only once a day
* For medical reasons, to provide care or help to vulnerable persons
* For essential work, and non-essential work where working from home is not possible.

With the announcement of the lockdown, came confusion on who was classed as an essential worker, especially in the construction industry.

Following the lockdown, Build UK released an update on how to keep sites operational, which included the first publication of the site operating procedures. [Version one](https://builduk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Site-Operating-Procedures-23-March-2020.pdf) of the Site Operating Procedures (SOP), issued by the CLC, stated that contractors should do their best to observe the two-metre rule, but did not outright condemn works carrying on if they could not observe these rules. The Government gave [further guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others) on the guidelines for construction sites to remain open.

There continued to be confusion and further closures of sites as it became clear that social distancing presented many problems in continuing work on construction sites, such as travelling to site, health and safety of workers and accommodation.

In response to these difficulties many contractors, manufacturers and suppliers found it increasingly difficult to keep sites open. Amidst health and safety concerns, HSE announced a ‘whistleblower’ page where companies could anonymously alert them of sites which were operating unsafely. <https://www.hse.gov.uk/contact/concerns.htm>

There were also growing concerns from companies who were being ‘bullied’ into continuing works on site due to contractual agreements, with some being threatened should they choose to pull employees off site. Build UK updated its members with a way of anonymously disclosing information, so that Build UK could compile a list of companies who were threatening to invoke penalty over contractual clauses.

In early April, the CLC published a second version of the Site Operating Procedures. [Version 2](https://www.constructionleadershipcouncil.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Site-Operating-Procedures-02-April-2020-v2.pdf), which included a crucial extra sentence, stating “in these situations, work should not be carried out.” V2 also included a request from Transport for London, for workers to avoid using the tube network during peak times. Despite issuing seemingly stricter guidelines in this version, the CLC was forced just hours after publication to retract it, quoting “significant feedback” as the reason. Whilst this feedback was reviewed, Version 1 was to be reverted back to. [Version 3](https://www.constructionleadershipcouncil.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Site-Operating-Procedures-Version-3.pdf) was then released, which noted some key changes:

* Confirmation that the HSE is the enforcing authority for PHE guidelines
* The need for sites to monitor the implementation of the procedures
* Further details on who should not travel to work
* Guidance for those who have no option but to share transport to work
* Information on the hierarchy of controls which should be implemented to reduce the risk of transmission where social distancing of 2 metres cannot be achieved
* Information on first aid and emergency service response.

Please note, the SOP was update further (as of the 18th May 2020), details of which are outlined above.

At first, the site operating procedures were certainly a source of confusion and the industry was divided with many wanting to work whilst others believed it to be unsafe. The decision to shut sites was a difficult one faced by many site owners and contractors. Either way, the very real commercial, legal and practical implications for all parties concerned was clear, with ambiguous guidance from the Government. As the dust began to settle after the third version of site operating procedures was released, and companies began to adopt the new norm of working in a social distancing era, many sites began to re-open. The reopening of sites was helped further with the announcement that construction workers may also be tested for COVID-19 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-getting-tested>, the guidance for eligibility was updated to state, “anyone who goes into work because they cannot work from home and has symptoms” would be eligible. Thus, including construction workers. Build UK repurposed their open doors website to help source accommodation for essential workers, including construction workers <https://opendoors.construction/>. The trade body said it has identified 10,500 beds at 140 accommodation providers across the UK as part of work it has carried out with UK Hospitality, which represents the hotel sector. Facilities on the website include hotels, guest houses and private lets.

**27th April**

The Chancellor announced the [Bounce Back Loan Scheme (BBLS)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/small-businesses-boosted-by-bounce-back-loans) to support loans of up to £50,000 to small businesses with a 100% government-backed guarantee for lenders.

The Government has also produced a [Business Support Finder](https://www.gov.uk/business-coronavirus-support-finder) to help users to discover what support is available for them and their business.

**4th May:**

Following the announcement from the Chancellor, the BBLS scheme went live. You can apply [here](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-for-a-coronavirus-bounce-back-loan).

**1st June:**

Construction leaders have drawn up a fast-track, three-phase plan to rebuild the industry and help steer the economy back into recovery called the Roadmap to Recovery.

In summary, the Roadmap to Recovery is a strategy to drive the recovery of the construction and built environment sectors, and through them the wider UK economy, following the Covid19 pandemic and economic downturn.

There are 3 phases to the plan, to be delivered over two years:

• Restart: increase output, maximise employment and minimise disruption (0-3 months);

• Reset: drive demand, increase productivity, strengthen capability in the supply chain (3-12 months); and

• Reinvent: transform the industry, deliver better value, collaboration, and partnership (12-24 months).

Read the full road to recovery document [here](https://www.constructionleadershipcouncil.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CLC-Roadmap-to-Recovery-01.06.20.pdf).

**10th May:**

On the 10th May, Boris Johnson delivered the highly anticipated three-step plan to begin easing lockdown restrictions.

In step one, Johnson said that those who cannot work from home, such as construction workers, “should be actively encouraged to go to work” from Monday 11th May.

In step two, the government hopes that by 1st June it may be able to begin the phased reopening of shops as well as partially reopening primary schools – starting with reception, Year 1 and Year 6.

In step three, Johnson hopes that “at least some of the hospitality industry and other public places,” will be able to reopen by July at the earliest.

Johnson also confirmed that anyone flying into the country will now have to be quarantined for 14 days.

There is a degree of confusion from the Prime Minister’s announcement. Many trade unions feel there should be no return to work until they feel it is safe to do so. Scotland and Wales, in opposition to the PM’s announcement, continue to use the message “Stay safe, stay home” and condemn the new ‘mantra’ of “stay alert” as confusing.

Whilst the rules surrounding the lockdown after the announcement remain slightly blurred, the emphasis shifts seemingly to how we can learn to adapt and restart.

**Where are we going?**

As we draw in on the end of the year, it is apparent that restrictions will be with us as we ring in 2021. With more information becoming available about vaccines, it is likely that in the Spring of 2021, we will be able to vaccinate against the virus. Until then, we will continue to live with the restrictions put on our lives to protect the NHS and the most vulnerable in our society.

In the long term, social distancing looks like it is set to stay until the end of 2020. With the construction industry a crucial part of the economy, it is essential that sites remain open, and find a way to continue to work under the social distancing rules. For the most part, the construction industry has adapted well but continuing to do so is crucial to see the industry, restart, reset and thrive again.

There is discussion around the use of face masks and whether they should be implemented in the workplace. We know that the virus is spread by droplets that spray into the air when those who are infected talk, cough or sneeze. The guidance for frequently washing hands with soap and water for 20 seconds and social distancing are key and must still stand, as the use of masks is not a substitute for these measures, but, it is theorised that they may reduce the risk of transmission by infected individuals in situations where social distancing is not possible.

Construction sites can now apply to stay open until at least 9pm in order to keep building during the pandemic, with the government suggesting some jobs could switch to 24-hour working in order to make up for lost time during the lockdown and to help workers follow social distancing protocols.

Away from the construction sites, it has been recognised and accepted that most of the work can be done remotely. Meetings can be moved online easily, using platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. As social distancing remains, so too will remote working for admin, financial and other such office-based roles.

The Job retention scheme has now been [extended to October](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-extends-furlough-scheme-until-october), enabling employers to plan for the future.

The pandemic could also see a bright future for technology, such as drone tech, communication tools, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), building information modelling (BIM) and much more as we further embrace technology to allow us to conform to social distancing rules.

As we move forward, a positive can be found in the spotlight the pandemic placed on the health, safety and cleanliness of sites. Where before these things may have been overlooked, they simply cannot go unnoticed now.

As health and safety cannot be overlooked, neither can training. E-learning has been adopted by many as an easy way to continue the learning process in the social distancing era.

ATAS UK, an independent auditing, training and assessment services provider, are launching an e-learning platform. The launch of which, will be supported by an essential e-learning for home workers pack designed specifically for those that are, or will be, working from home. The pack will also include a free Coronavirus Safety module.

What does this pack include?

* Module 1 - Home Office Set Up - how to set up the home office demonstrates simple ergonomic adjustments that can be made in any home office to work more comfortably.
* Module 2 - Mental Health Awareness - This is a highly engaging e-learning programme that explains the nature of mental health. Aimed at remote workers, it will be of particular help by assisting them to identify issues and seek help.
* Module 3 - Corona Virus Awareness - A very simple and straight forward introduction on how to stay safe providing essential facts and how the virus spreads.
* Similarly, the pandemic has placed a spotlight on Mental Health Awareness and the importance of looking after your mental health, a subject which is often overlooked in the Construction industry.

For more information on the e-learning pack, please visit: <https://atas-uk.com/training-offers>

Mental health is a ‘silent crisis’ which affects many construction workers’ day-to-day lives, especially now more than ever, with people experiencing increasing levels of stress and anxiety.

Training courses can help us to understand this topic and our own mental well-being by improving awareness and providing specialist support services.

A half-day Mental Health First Aid course, aimed at supervisors, managers and directors, is soon to be available through ATAS UK, with a full 2-day first aid course to follow.

Courses will be available from June 2020 and at a very cost-effective rate of £95 per delegate.

For more information, please visit: <https://atas-uk.com/f/mental-health-awareness-remote-on-line-training>

A positive from these difficult and testing times, is that we have seen the construction industry come together like never before, something that will need to remain as we continue to work together in order to restart the industry and help it thrive once again.