

# COVID-19 UPDATE



## We're here to help you in this time of crisis

Updates on what the government and other bodies are doing to tackle COVID-19

Coronavirus and Covid-19: two names that will remain in the memory for a long time to come, for sure. As everyone is getting used to lockdowns and daily updates from our government the one thing that is certain is that the communication gap is widening. We seem to have far more questions than answers, which I can definitely attest to as I've been taking all incoming calls



to the ICPA from members and the public alike. Mindful of the constantly changing information, we have put together this update with as many useful links as possible, and those links will refresh every time you use them. We've also some articles which we hope you will find useful.

We will do our very best for our members as they grapple with their clients' issues, as well as their own. Just remember: the ICPA is here for you in these troubled times.

**Tony Margaritelli, Chairman, ICPA**

## Where to get help for your business

Here's our selection of websites that are well worth seeking out. Some of the issues are covered in this e-magazine

### GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR BUSINESS

- A range of measures are set out here, including:
    - the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.
    - deferring VAT and Income Tax payments.
    - a Statutory Sick Pay relief package for small and medium sized businesses (SMEs).
    - a 12-month business rates holiday for all retail, hospitality, leisure and nursery businesses in England.
    - small business grant funding of £10,000 for all business in receipt of small business rate relief or rural rate relief.
    - grant funding of £25,000 for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses with property with a rateable value between £15,000 and £51,000.
    - the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme offering loans of up to £5 million for SMEs through the British Business Bank.
    - a new lending facility from the Bank of England to help support liquidity among larger firms, helping them bridge coronavirus disruption to their cash flows through loans.
    - the HMRC Time To Pay Scheme.
- <https://tinyurl.com/tsqcpo>  
For Qta's take on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme:  
<https://tinyurl.com/rp3tep3>



For the latest from gov.uk go to:

<https://tinyurl.com/uz9t46u>

See also YouTube video on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme:

<https://tinyurl.com/sxtxnex>

### SELF-EMPLOYED: KNOW WHERE YOU STAND

- ICPA blog for people working for themselves.

<https://tinyurl.com/so4lrz4>

### TAX HELPLINE NUMBER FOR BUSINESSES

- New HMRC helpline launched to help businesses concerned about paying their tax due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

<https://tinyurl.com/rsy9xl8>

### ADVICE FROM THE LOW INCOME TAX REFORM GROUP

- A comprehensive tax and benefits guide.

<https://tinyurl.com/tlslk7o>

### WORKING FROM HOME

- Work effectively at home.

<https://tinyurl.com/u3jlfbr>

### WORLD TURNS TO VAT CUTS ON CORONAVIRUS COVID-19 THREAT

- Insight from Avalara.

<https://tinyurl.com/t4omzfe>

This e-magazine will be updated. All information believed correct at the time of publication, 9am on 25 March 2020. See Disclaimer, page 2

# HMRC's Time to Pay service

ALL BUSINESSES AND self-employed people in financial distress, and with outstanding tax liabilities, may be eligible to receive support with their tax affairs through HMRC's Time To Pay (TTP) service. These arrangements are agreed on a case-by-case basis and are tailored to individual circumstances and liabilities. If you are concerned about being able to pay your tax due to COVID-19, we strongly recommend contacting HMRC at the earliest opportunity by calling HMRC's dedicated helpline on 0800 0159 559.

**Opening times**

Monday to Friday: 8am to 8pm

Saturday: 8am to 4pm

When calling HMRC, please make sure to have on hand:

- Your reference number on hand (10-digit Unique Taxpayer Reference Number or 9 digit VAT reference number).
- How much tax you owe and why you are finding it difficult to pay.
- How much you may be able to pay immediately and details of how long you may require to pay the rest.
- Your bank account details.

If successful, the most likely outcome will be the option to pay your bill in instalments by direct debit or an extension on the time to pay your liability by.

Ultimately, HMRC will decide the terms on which they believe you will be able to repay your tax based on your individual circumstances and they may ask in depth questions relating to your income and assets (including savings).

In addition, HMRC may waive late payment penalties and interest where businesses experience administrative difficulties contacting HMRC or paying taxes due to COVID-19.

**Please note:**

The dedicated helpline can't cope with current demand, therefore we suggest some alternative actions and steps to take and protect your position:

- Call the regular HMRC TTP number, which is 0300 200 3853.
- As authorised agent we can discuss your debts with HMRC if we are provided with all the details (Agent only line).
- Call HMRC's Business payment Support Services on 0300 200 3835. They are open 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday, and from 8am to 4pm at weekends.
- You can send a letter to HMRC detailing the request and payment plan and ask that it is forwarded to the TTP unit.
- Make a written dated and timed record of every attempted call to HMRC including precisely what the purpose of the call was.

*This text was taken from HMRC's website*

## A business survival guide

### So how can your business cope from the imminent financial impact of this coronavirus?

TALK TO YOUR business support network:

- Your business insurance might provide the cover you need if your business has to stop trading indefinitely. Check your policy wording as you might have Business Interruption cover in your commercial insurance policy – speak to your insurer if you're not sure. Once you have confirmed that you have Business Interruption cover, you will need to check whether you have an extension for 'notifiable diseases'.
- Talk to your bank about possible emergency finance options. The British Business Bank is in the process of setting up the Coronavirus Business Interruption Lending Scheme, which will provide your lender with a government-backed 80% guarantee against the outstanding facility balance – so the finance should be attainable for all businesses.
- Ask your customers – particularly larger companies – to pay your

outstanding invoices. Morrisons supermarket have led the way with this by paying 3,000 suppliers instantly, regardless of payment period. Small businesses or the self-employed with invoices issued should use this moment to chase for instant payment.

- Talk to the government through their business support helplines, of which some are dedicated to coronavirus. They are designed to help small businesses with advice on how to minimise/cope with the impacts of coronavirus. The phone number is different depending on your business location:

England: 0300 456 3565

Scotland: 0300 303 0660

Wales: 0300 060 3000

Northern Ireland: 0800 181 4422

- Ask your landlord for some breathing space if you're experiencing a drop in trade which is impacting on your ability to pay the rent. Landlords might take a generous approach in these extenuating circumstances by providing rent breaks and/or payment discounts.
- This is an extract from Begbies Traynor's website*

**Disclaimer** The information contained in this publication is for general guidance only. You should neither act, nor refrain from acting, on the basis of any such information. Professional advice should be taken based on particular circumstances, as the application of laws and regulations will vary. Please be aware that laws and regulations are also subject to frequent change. While every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this publication is correct, neither the author nor his firm shall be liable in damages (including, without limitation, damages for loss of business or loss of profits) arising in contract, tort or otherwise from any information contained in it, or from any action or decision taken as a result of using any such information.

# Extra protection for businesses, with ban on evictions for commercial tenants who miss rent payments

## Commercial tenants who cannot pay their rent because of coronavirus will be protected from eviction.

COMMERCIAL TENANTS WHO cannot pay their rent because of coronavirus will be protected from eviction, the government has announced.

Many landlords and tenants are already having conversations and reaching voluntary arrangements about rental payments due shortly but the government recognises businesses struggling with their cashflow due to coronavirus remain worried about eviction.

These measures, included in the emergency Coronavirus Bill currently going through Parliament, will mean no business will be forced out of their premises if they miss a payment in the next 3 months.

This builds on the unprecedented package of support announced for businesses who are affected by coronavirus.

As commercial tenants will still be liable for the rent after this period, the government is also actively monitoring the impact on commercial landlords' cash flow and continues to be in dialogue with them.

Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick said: "We are protecting both people and their businesses by providing the urgent support they need. We know many commercial landlords are already setting a great example by working closely with tenants and offering rent deferrals or holidays.

"However, these new measures will provide reassurance to businesses struggling with cashflows and ensure no commercial tenant is evicted if they cannot pay their rent because of coronavirus over the next three months."

Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak said: "We are taking unprecedented action and doing so at unprecedented speed, because we know that businesses and their employees need help now.

"That is why we are taking steps to change the law so that no company can be forced out of its premises due to loss of income. Alongside our support for workers and £330 billion of business loans and guarantees, this will help make a real difference to firms

across the country trying to protect jobs."

And Mike Cherry, Federation of Small Businesses National Chairman, said: "Small businesses will wholeheartedly welcome the decision to ban evictions for commercial tenants for 3 months.

"This will give piece of mind to millions of small businesses who are desperately struggling with their cash flow.

"We know sensible conversations between landlords and commercial tenants are taking place – but having this legislative backstop to prevent evictions during the worst of the crisis will provide much needed peace of mind for many small businesses."

The Coronavirus Bill also includes new measures to ensure that Business Improvement Districts (BID) are equipped to continue their vital role in managing the impact of the crisis on local economies and helping town centres and high streets recover.

To ensure no area loses its Business Improvement District at this critical time, emergency legislation will allow a delay to ballots between now and 31 December 2020 until March 2021. This will ensure that they are conducted in a safe and effective way.

Simon Quin, High Streets Task Force Executive Director, said: "These are important steps that will strengthen town centres and commercial areas as they prepare for the future.

"They will encourage retention of occupancy and ensure Business Improvement Districts can focus on support for their local areas through the emergency and into recovery. This will make places more resilient."

### Further information

The amendment to the Coronavirus Bill on commercial leases will apply to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It applied to all commercial tenants.

We will, of course, be working with the Devolved Administrations, including Scotland, across our coronavirus response.

The change will come into force when the Coronavirus Bill receives Royal Assent. It will last until 30 June, with an option for the government to extend if needed.

The new business information campaign has gone live with updated information available.

*This text was taken from HMRC's website*

## VAT payments deferred for three months

CHANCELLOR RISHI SUNAK has deferred all VAT payments due between now and the end of June.

As part of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, no VAT registered business will have to make a VAT payment normally due with their VAT return to HMRC in that period. Income tax payments due in July 2020 under the Self Assessment system will be deferred to January 2021.

Sunak said: "To help businesses pay people and keep them in work, I am deferring the next quarter of VAT payments.



"That means no business will pay any from now until the end of June; and you will have until the end of the financial year to repay those bills."

The VAT deferral will apply from 20 March 2020 until 30 June 2020, and will happen automatically, with no application process. Taxpayers will be given until the end of the 2020 to 2021 tax year to pay any liabilities that accumulate during the deferral period.

VAT refunds and reclaims will be paid by the government as normal.

COVID-19 Update was produced for the ICPA by Armstrong Media (07970 426789).

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Thanks to xxxxxxxxxxxx for their contributions

As the impact of Covid-19 rapidly affects our everyday activities, Vantage provides some guidance on HR/employment matters that is current as at 22 March 2020

## Temporary changes to SSP rules

The government has announced significant changes to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) arrangements in relation to the recent coronavirus outbreak.

Normal rules on SSP entitlement for an employee working five days or more, is to allow three unpaid waiting days i.e. qualifying days that employee is expected to work but is off sick and the fourth and fifth day would be paid at a daily rate. However, on Wednesday 4 March Prime Minister Boris Johnson highlighted that as a result of the impact of coronavirus, SSP will be paid effective from day one of absence so that no employee suffers a financial detriment. Thus the employee would get the full SSP rate of £94.25 in week one if the employee meets the other eligibility criteria for SSP – i.e. earning over the lower earnings limit and will be backdated from 13 March 2020.

To bring the above into statutory footing on 12 March 2020, the government made the Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) Regulations 2020, which provides that qualifying employees who isolate themselves on the basis of advice published by Public Health England or the devolved health authorities will be entitled to SSP. See government website that states: "If you are staying at home because of COVID-19 you can now claim SSP. This includes individuals who are caring for people in the same household and therefore have been advised to do a household quarantine." See <https://tinyurl.com/t33qdwk>

The government currently advises that anyone who shows symptoms of coronavirus infection however mild, should self-isolate for seven days. In addition, it advises that whole households should self-isolate for 14 days and this will be on SSP (where they

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cannot work from home) and at the end of 14 days' self-isolation period, where no family member has not become unwell, then self-isolation ends – as does SSP. But any person with new symptoms would need to stay at home for a further seven days. See <https://tinyurl.com/sdoyyrw>

Furthermore, on 16 March, the Prime Minister announced that those with serious health conditions will be advised to "largely

## Retired clinicians back on frontline

Philip Redhead explains the financial implications for retired health workers returning to the NHS

During these difficult times, when the NHS needs all the help it can muster, retired doctors, nurses and other clinicians who are desperately needed are being asked to return to the frontline in the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak. To reassure these selfless clinicians I have prepared an edition of my Healthcare Accountancy blog focusing on the effect of returning to work after taking NHS pensions benefits.

Firstly, and most importantly, only very few NHS pensioners returning to work will see any effect on their pensions.

Since the regulations were changed back in 2008 any NHS pensioners returning to work who have reached their normal pension age will see no effect on their NHS Pensions, the normal retirement ages are:

1995 Section members – 60 years

2008 Section members – 65 years

2015 Section members – state pension age or 65 years if later.

NHS pensioners who retired early will only see any effect on their pensions in rare circumstances.

The situation that could affect an NHS pension is if the

pensioner retired early, they are still below their normal retirement age, and there was no adjustment to their pension at the time of retirement to allow for early retirement. In this rare case, the abatement rules may apply, reducing your NHS pension benefits. However, this would still depend on their earnings in the re-employment, when they retired and the benefits they received.

I have contacted the NHS to enquire if there will be any relaxation to the abatement rules in the few cases that it may apply but, understandably, I have not had a reply.

### PENSION TAX ISSUES

**Lifetime allowance:** For senior clinicians who during their careers made a Lifetime Allowance 'Fixed Protection' Election it is very important that they do not re-join any pension scheme either NHS (if this is possible) or an auto-enrolment pension (if they are below normal state retirement age). Joining any such scheme would invalidate their protection and could result in a tax raid on their pensions. If they find that they have been auto enrolled in a pension scheme they MUST immediately withdraw from it.

I hope this blog will reassure clinicians who are NHS pensioners considering returning to work during this unprecedented time when their skills and dedication are so desperately needed.

If you have any questions feel free to contact the author Philip Redhead at [philip.redhead@hotmail.com](mailto:philip.redhead@hotmail.com)

# to tackle COVID-19



shield [themselves] from social contact for around 12 weeks.” That extends to those over 70 and pregnant individuals, and where employees fall in such categories and are not able to work from home, then under the Statutory Sick Pay General Coronavirus Amendment No 2 Regulations 2020 this will be on SSP if based upon advice by Public Health England to self-isolate.

The Government has provided online guidance for employers and employees that explains that where evidence is required to cover self-isolation or household isolation beyond the first seven days of absence, then employees can get an isolation note (as from 20 March) from NHS 111 online by completing online application that can be obtained by going to [111.nhs.uk/isolation-note](https://111.nhs.uk/isolation-note). See also <https://tinyurl.com/sdxoqu>

Furthermore, the Government website guidance states that if you are a small- or medium-sized business you may be entitled to reclaim the costs of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) for sickness absence due to COVID-19:

- This refund will cover up to two weeks’ SSP per eligible employee who are either ill or been told to self-isolate because of COVID-19. This is in line with the recommended isolation period. Guidance on self-isolation can be found here: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19).
- Employers with fewer than 250 employees will be eligible. The size of an employer will be determined by the number of people they employed as of 28 February 2020.
- Employers will be able to reclaim expenditure for any employee who has claimed SSP (according to the new eligibility criteria) as a result of COVID-19.
- Employers should maintain records of staff absences, but employees will not need to provide a GP fit note.
- The eligible period for the scheme began on 13 March.
- The government will work with employers over the coming months to set up the repayment mechanism for employers as soon as possible. Existing systems are not designed to facilitate employer refunds for SSP – see <https://tinyurl.com/usublx6>

Where an employee is unhappy about the outcome on SSP assessment, the employer can contact the HMRC statutory payment disputes team for an informal opinion on the matter by ringing telephone 03000 560 630.

For staff who earn below the lower earnings limit (casual, terms,

zero hours, part time), there is universal credit and contributory employment and support allowance. Information can be obtained from [gov.uk/universal-credit](https://gov.uk/universal-credit).

Employers are urged to check their employees’ contractual rights as contractual sick pay is likely to apply to staff absence related to coronavirus especially where full sick pay includes SSP – i.e. is topped up to full sick pay. Also, ACAS have indicated that “it is good practice to pay contractual sick pay as the employer has deterred the employee from coming into work”.

As the risk of coronavirus increases day by day, best practice is to provide all employees with written guidance/policy as to what to do in such situations and sign posting to the relevant government information on the web.

Employers need to be vigilant and act with due diligence; they have a duty of care to ensure no one is at risk, so should complete health and safety risk assessments and to promote good hygiene practices (i.e. washing hands frequently with soap, especially before eating or handling food, after toilet visits, or when hands are contaminated by respiratory secretions after coughing or sneezing).

Also, this is a good opportunity to update employee’s emergency details.

Please note that SSP will change and increase to £95.85 on 6th April 2020.

## Home working – risk assessment

Last week the Health Safety Executive (HSE) published its updated guidance on ‘Protecting lone workers: How to manage the risks of working alone’ (INDG73 (rev4)).

With the current situation with the Coronavirus, the guidance provides useful advice on managing risks and the factors to be considered when assessing risk of lone workers in particular those with pre-existing medical conditions, those whose first language is not English and others who may be affected by their work situation.

There is no legal requirement to conduct a separate specific risk assessment for lone workers. Hence a general risk assessment can be undertaken that must identify any potential hazards, whether they are low, medium and high risks and what steps to be taken to remove the hazard by putting in place control measures.

Together with risk assessments, the employer should agree how to keep in touch with lone workers with the level of supervision needed being a management decision.

Also, under the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, employers have a duty to protect employees from the health risks of working with display screen equipment, such as laptops. Thus businesses should give consideration to providing employees with training and information to allow them to work from home safely like instructions on how to set up a laptop correctly at home to avoid muscular pain.

Those who can access our online health safety library, we do have a risk assessment template and guidance notes on home working.

## School closures

Employers must be prepared to take a more relaxed approach to homeworking and allow employees to work around their childcare responsibilities. The alternative is to encourage staff to use statutory rights for time off to care for dependents, like annual leave or unpaid parental leave (if been in employment with the organization for more than a year). There is also the option to consider flexible working request were the employee has worked for the employer for at least 26 weeks or more and not made any other flexible →

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working request in the last 12 months. Also, an employee is allowed short-term unpaid time off to deal with an emergency involving a dependant who could be a spouse, partner, child, grandchild, parent, or someone who depends on the employee for their care.

## **Volunteering – health and social care**

Volunteers play a 'critical role' in the delivery of health and social care services, especially in the care of the most vulnerable in society, such as the elderly, those with multiple long-term conditions, and those suffering from mental health conditions. Thus on 8 March 2020, Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced measures to make it easier for existing volunteers in the health and social care system to support the fight against COVID-19 where such employees and workers will be able to take Emergency Volunteer Leave in blocks of two, three or four weeks' statutory unpaid leave to support the medical effort.

A UK-wide compensation fund will be established to compensate for loss of earnings and expenses incurred at a flat rate for those who volunteer through an appropriate authority with the likelihood of employers having to keep the volunteers' jobs open for them to return to for a period of four weeks, but we await further clarity from the Government on this.

## **Lay-off/short time**

Section 147 (1) Employment Rights Act (ERA) 1996 defines lay-off as where an employee is "not entitled to any remuneration under the contract in respect of the week because the employer does not provide such work for him". But for the employer to impose lay-off or short-time working there must be such a clause in the employment contract signed by the employee or in the company handbook (where the company handbook forms part of the employment contract). Where there is no such provision, to introduce lay-offs or short-term working unilaterally, without the employee's consent, the employee with over two years' service could resign on constructive dismissal, and if successful seek financial compensation award from the employment tribunal. The employer would need to defend the claim that they properly consulted with all staff affected, there were no other options – like home working, unpaid time off and thus on genuine business reasons they were not in substantial and fundamental breach of contract.

Apart from constructive dismissal, an employee could claim for unlawful deduction from wages where pay is reduced or withheld altogether and in some cases compensation for further financial loss. There is a three-month time limit, less a day, for bringing a claim, but this runs from the last in a series of deductions.

Employers are also reminded that where the unilateral change involves dismissing and re-engaging more than 20 employees in a 90-day period then under s. 188 Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 TULR(C)A 1992 there is a need to go via collective information and consultation procedure – that is, via unions and or appointed staff representatives. Where such procedures are not followed employees may have a potential claim for a protective award of up to 13 weeks' pay.

However, the employer may be able to rely on a 'special circumstances' defence to such a claim where employers complied with what was reasonably practicable in the circumstances. Special circumstances denotes something 'out of the ordinary, something uncommon', 'sudden disaster' and coronavirus is likely to fall within this. But the availability of the defence will turn on the facts of each case and employers must consult as soon as they become aware that lay-off/short time is to apply.



Where employees agree to lay-off/short time, there is no limit on the period of time. However, redundancy pay can be claimed by eligible employees if the period of lay-off or short-time working (or a combination of the two) has lasted four or more consecutive weeks or six weeks (of which no more than three are consecutive) in a 13-week period.

For redundancy pay purposes, an employee is only treated as on short-time working for any week if he is paid less than half of his normal remuneration. To claim a redundancy payment, an employee is required to serve a written notice on the employer of intention to claim. An employer can serve a counter-notice if it is reasonably expected that the employee would be able to return to work within a period of four weeks.

Where the employee is off sick prior to lay-off, and sickness absence is continuing, or goes off sick during lay-off/short time, then if it is genuine sickness absence – in particular related to self-isolation on government advice – then SSP would apply.

Please note that employees' statutory holiday continues to accrue during a lay-off or short-time working period, provided the contract is not broken and as it relates to statutory notice and statutory redundancy where the employee is dismissed or resigns during lay-off /short time working they will usually be entitled to be paid their normal salary during the notice period and paid statutory redundancy based on a 12-week average prior to going on lay-off/short time (section 226(4) Employment Rights Act 1996).

Finally, on lay-off, where an employee have been employed continuously for one month (includes part-time workers) and is available for work but no work is available, then the employee entitled to guarantee pay during lay-off or short-time working. The maximum employee can get is £29 a day for five workless days in any three-month period – i.e. a maximum of £145. But if an employee earns less than £29 a day they get the normal daily rate.

If the employee works part-time, their entitlement to guaranteed pay is worked out proportionally i.e. reduced in proportion to the part-time hours (s. 31 Employment Rights Act 1996). The government plans to avoid lay-off and redundancy with continued

pay.

For those who are on the pay-as-you-earn system in the private sector and are still employed, but do not currently have work – ie who would otherwise be laid-off – the government's plan under the new Coronavirus Job Retention scheme is that they will continue to get 80% of gross wages up to £2,500 a month that be covered by grants from HMRC. Employers will be able to access grants, by the end of April, which will be backdated to 1 March 2020. The scheme will last three months at least so as to prevent mass unemployment and maybe extended. Employers who have placed employees on short-time working may need to renegotiate with their employees as the scheme only applies if employees are not working. For those placed on notice of redundancy it may require mutual agreement to retract the notice as the rationale here is to try to avoid compulsory redundancies. The provision is likely to apply to those on zero hours contract who were in employment on 28 February, but we await further guidance on the matter. Also, what is currently unclear is whether the maximum salary can be £2,500, and employees will receive 80% of that, or whether employees earning up to £3,125 per month will receive 80% of that figure (which is £2,500).

To claim, employees must be made aware of change of status to 'furloughed workers', and the employer must then submit information to HMRC on the matter with their earnings via a new online portal. As yet, the existing HMRC system is not set up to facilitate payments to employers.

#### **Enforced holiday leave**

Where employees who are not sick and refuse to agree to lay-off (where there is no contractual right to impose lay-off), or where the above provision does not apply, then such employees can be instructed to take statutory annual leave by their employer, provided that they are given the required amount of notice contained in the contract of employment. If silent, the default position is that twice as much notice as the period of holiday leave to be taken must be given as per Working Time Regulations 1998 (as amended).

#### **Taking temperature checks of employees**

If there is a medical health check policy that imposes an obligation on employees to undergo drug/alcohol testing by providing a sample, of urine, hair, saliva or blood, etc., then depending on the wording of the clause, taking a temperature might be covered by such a clause. If there is no such policy, such temperature checks cannot be enforced upon employees, who must agree to it. But there would be an implied obligation to co-operate with a reasonable management request and here the employer would have a strong justification defence for requesting the check (on health and safety reasons).

Where consent is refused without just cause, the employer could refuse to allow the employee into work. Although the employee could argue this is a breach of the implied duty of trust and confidence, to resign and take to employment tribunal would be risky for the employee. The situation on coronavirus is unprecedented, and the employer has a duty to protect the whole of its workforce, which may outweigh the breach where temperature checks were reasonable in light of the employee's role and official health advice on precautionary measures at the time and where home working or self-isolation was not possible.

Please note that health data is special category personal data and employers should be mindful not to give information that will readily identify someone who is ill/suspected or having the virus.

This is difficult and uncertain time for both employers and employees with matters changing by the day, but we hope the information in this article helps to reassure businesses the options available to them.

*Thanks to Vantage for this article*

# The Business Interruption Loan Scheme explained



A NEW, TEMPORARY Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, delivered by the British Business Bank, will launch this week to support primarily small and medium-sized businesses to access bank lending and overdrafts.

The government will provide lenders with a guarantee of 80% on each loan (subject to a per-lender cap on claims) to give lenders further confidence in continuing to provide finance to SMEs. The government will not charge businesses or banks for this guarantee, and the scheme will support loans of up to £5 million in value.

Businesses can access the first six months of that finance interest free, as government will cover the first 12 months of interest payments.

#### **Eligibility**

You are eligible for the scheme if:

1. Your business is UK based, with turnover of no more than £41 million per annum.
2. Your business meets the other British Business Bank eligibility criteria.

#### **How to access the scheme**

The full rules of the Scheme and the list of accredited lenders is available on the British Business Bank website. All the major banks will offer the Scheme once it has launched. There are 40 accredited providers in all.

You should talk to your bank or finance provider (not the British Business Bank) as soon as possible and discuss your business plan with them. This will help your finance provider to act quickly once the scheme has launched. If you have an existing loan with monthly repayments, you may want to ask for a repayment holiday to help with cash flow.

The scheme will be available from this week.

# The perfect office at home

**The COVID-19 outbreak is forcing many to convert their home into a professional workspace. Take these steps to ensure it is an opportunity, not a burden, says TaxCalc's Andrew Webb**

THE PERCEPTION OF working from home has changed in recent years. Once shunned by employers on the basis that workers would end up slacking, flexible working policies have since been shown to boost productivity and job satisfaction. Commute time can be reduced or removed altogether, creating more free time and slashing travel expenses. For businesses, operational costs will fall and may even allow for office downsizing.

But with the ongoing effects of COVID-19, working from home may not simply be an option moving forward. In order to limit transmission of the virus, many employees are being encouraged to proactively isolate themselves from the office indefinitely. With a return to the office uncertain, it can be a big step—particularly for those with limited experience of a home-based nine to five. For a business where accounting practices are typically carried out in-house, the transition can be all the more challenging.

## Find a work-life balance—and stick to it

Accountants within any organisation typically have an intense couple of weeks working on their month-end. For example, the first two weeks of April would be spent meticulously compiling figures from March—everything from revenue totals and expenses to analysing the value of fixed assets. This ensures that the books are properly balanced and helps to simplify company tax returns.

During this time, working from home can prove incredibly useful—be it due to a lack of distractions or the opportunity to get a headstart instead of commuting. As a result, management accounts can often be turned over significantly faster. Remote working has been implemented across the board for years;

The flexibility afforded by remote working does offer significant benefits for any computer-centric job, but there are drawbacks to consider. Without the need to return from the office or to 'beat the traffic', working hours always end up longer than intended. Even with an eye on the clock, replying to 'one last email' at the end of a shift can quickly spiral into an evening of unintentional work. It might seem productive initially, but this becomes severely draining over time. Employees should be vigilant with their hours of service to avoid burning out.

Self-enforced lunch breaks are vital. Without the cue of other colleagues stepping away to eat at a regular time, it is not uncommon for the typical 1pm lunch to creep further back in the day. When lunchtime does come, it will often be taken at the desk anyway. As years of working from home can demonstrate, this has long-term side effects; all that extra screen time adds up, and those with perfect vision could soon find themselves booking in with the optician to solve the headaches and dizziness that result.

Set up next to a window if possible — research the '20-20-20' rule to enforce frequent breaks from the screen — and invest in a standalone monitor to avoid working exclusively from a 13" laptop. In some cases this may be funded by the employer, or tax-deductible as a business expense if self-employed.

## Freshen up

It might initially seem counterintuitive, but the home office must be treated like a work environment. Ditch the pyjamas, and wear

shoes, not slippers. Invest in house plants. Spruce up the study if you have one, or create a 'nook' in the corner of a room. If you treat working from home as a lazy day, you can bet that is what it will be. Dressing for work also creates an additional boundary at the end of the day—getting out of 'work clothes' signifies that the job is over, and the home is now a place to relax.

Home workers will spend at least eight hours a day in this space, so it must be inviting. Use a desk if possible to ensure work is not carried out on the sofa; at this point, the only signifier for the end of the day is closing the laptop shut. Don't even consider working in bed. Long-term home workers in a suitable location might even consider bringing a pet into the family for company, providing significant thought has been taken beforehand.

## Keeping up appearances

Even with a vibrant and semi-professional environment at home, the standard of professional and personal communication can still suffer.

With face-to-face interaction no longer an option, it can be



complicated to resolve issues or effectively collaborate on certain tasks via a chat box. Combat the frustration of missed messages by introducing 'digital workspaces' such as Microsoft Teams, Slack or Monday.com to ensure everyone is on the same page. Deadlines, messages and files can be shared to individuals, specific groups or the entire 'office' at once. This not only helps to soothe any social isolation, it also limits the level of disruption that can be experienced when moving out of the office.

It is not only productivity software that should be considered. For any accountant, gaining easy access to secure company documents is vital for business as usual. Taxcalc's award-winning CloudConnect service, for example, can mirror the conventional desktop experience by accessing data that would normally be available only through work computers. In essence, employees can access what they need from their home setup—be that a laptop on the kitchen table, the newly spruced-up home office or anywhere with an internet connection.

## Dealing with uncertainty

At the time of writing, government advice is to avoid physical contact to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Home workers should follow the advice of health professionals as the situation develops over the coming months, but it is also vital to avoid becoming an avatar. Hours behind a screen can lead once close colleagues to become distant and social skills on the whole to deteriorate.

Making the switch from full-time office worker is a big deal, and should not be taken lightly. It is unclear how long office workers may need to set up shop at home, and for many the period ahead will appear daunting.

The transition can be enjoyable, flexible and productive, but only if the right measures are put in place.

*Thanks to TaxCalc for this article*