

New partnership to sequence human genomes in fight against coronavirus

- Genetic susceptibility to coronavirus to be tested in ground-breaking nationwide study
- Genomes of thousands of patients with coronavirus will be sequenced to understand how a person's genetic makeup could influence how they react to the virus
- Genomics England partners with University of Edinburgh to lead research drive to support the search for new treatments

A major new human whole genome sequencing study will take place across the NHS, involving up to 20,000 people currently or previously in an intensive care unit with coronavirus, as well as 15,000 individuals who have mild or moderate symptoms.

Genomics England, is partnering with the GenOMICC consortium, Illumina and the NHS to launch the research drive, which will reach patients in 170 intensive care units throughout the UK.

The project is backed by £28 million from Genomics England, UK Research and Innovation, the Department of Health and Social Care and the National Institute for Health Research. Illumina will sequence all 35,000 genomes and share some of the cost via an in-kind contribution.

The study, facilitated by the University of Edinburgh and multiple NHS hospitals, will explore the varied effects coronavirus has on patients, supporting the search for treatments by identifying those most at risk and helping to fast-track new therapies into clinical trials.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock said:

As each day passes we are learning more about this virus, and understanding how genetic makeup may influence how people react to it is a critical piece of the jigsaw.

This is a ground-breaking and far-reaching study which will harness the UK's world-leading genomics science to improve treatments and ultimately save lives across the world.

Since genetic discoveries need very large numbers of patients, the GenOMICC study ultimately aims to recruit every single COVID-19 patient who is admitted to intensive care in the UK.

Patients will only be enrolled in the study if they, or their next of kin, have given their consent.

As part of this study so far, DNA samples have been collected from almost

2,000 patients.

Chris Wigley, CEO of Genomics England, said:

At Genomics England, we are extremely proud to be working with the NHS and other partners in the fight against COVID-19, to understand why people respond differently to this infection.

Our goal with this study is to help the national response to this terrible pandemic, using the experience we have gained through the 100,000 Genomes Project, and leveraging our ongoing work in genomic research and healthcare.

As with all groundbreaking science, we don't know what the answer is yet – but we are convening the finest minds in academia and industry to try to find out.

Genomics England will read the data from entire genomes – or genetic blueprints – of thousands of people who have been most severely affected by coronavirus and compare them to those who experience only mild symptoms.

Dr Kenneth Baillie, Chief Investigator at the University of Edinburgh, leading this study, said:

Our genes play a role in determining who becomes desperately sick with infections like COVID-19. Understanding these genes will help us to choose treatments for clinical trials.

The GenOMICC study was launched before this outbreak and it is recruiting in more than 160 ICUs across the country with tremendous support from the critical care community. We are excited to work with Genomics England to tackle this new and complex disease.

By combining the genome with rich clinical characteristics and comparing those who become severely ill with those that experience a much milder illness, the consortium hopes to gain new insights into how the virus affects us.

This ground-breaking research may help explain why some patients with coronavirus experience a mild infection, others require intensive care and why some patients die from the disease.

By discovering why some people are predisposed to developing life-threatening symptoms, the consortium will be able to identify treatments which have the best chance of success in clinical trials, and potentially identify people at extreme risk if they develop COVID-19.

This work – sequencing human genomes – complements the UK COVID-19 Viral Sequencing Programme (COG-UK) announced in March and its work already

underway to sequence the genome of the virus itself, led by Public Health England and the Sanger Institute.

Professor Sir Mark Caulfield, Chief Scientist at Genomics England, said:

For the first time in a generation we face a global viral pandemic that is life threatening for some people, yet others have a mild infection. By reading the whole genome we may be able to identify variation that affects response to COVID-19 and discover new therapies that could reduce harm, save lives and even prevent future outbreaks.

Whole genome sequencing will be carried out by Illumina at its laboratories in Cambridge, UK, where they successfully delivered the 100,000 Genomes Project together with Genomics England and the NHS.

Paula Dowdy, General Manager and SVP Illumina, EMEA, said:

We have a long-standing partnership with Genomics England and are proud to support this new genomics initiative from our Cambridge-based lab. The results will establish a unique platform for researchers to understand the human response to coronavirus infection, leading towards new treatments and ways to control infection spread.

Today's announcement demonstrates how different parts of the UK's world-leading genomics community are working together to get a full picture of both the spread and impact of the virus.

Data from the person's own genome can be linked to the virus genome data provided via the previously announced viral sequencing programme by the COVID-19 Genomics UK Consortium (COG-UK), a partnership of NHS organisations, UK public health agencies, the Sanger Institute and UK academic centres.

Professor Sharon Peacock CBE, Director of COG-UK, said:

This study is a fantastic example of how different parts of the UK genomics community are working together to get a full genomic picture of the spread and impact of the virus.

In COG-UK we have already sequenced over 10,000 virus genomes from patients with COVID-19. Linking this data to the patient's own genome data in the Genomics England-GenOMICC study may provide unique insights into how the patient and virus genomes act together to influence the patient's response to the infection and will help inform and improve our response to future outbreaks.

Professor Sir Mark Walport, Chief Executive of UK Research and Innovation

(UKRI), who have given £3 million in funding to the project, said:

The UK is a global leader in the genetic analysis of disease. By applying this expertise to examine the role of genetic factors in COVID-19, including in young severely impacted patients without known underlying health issues, this study could identify important risk factors and disease mechanisms, which may lead to new diagnostic and therapeutic approaches.

Part of the overall genomic study will also focus on children and young adults severely affected by COVID-19.

The NIHR BioResource is partnering with GenOMICC and Genomics England to provide infrastructure, expertise and £1 million funding to investigate this by collecting samples from these young patients and their parents.

Professor John Bradley CBE, Chief Investigator of the NIHR BioResource, said:

The NIHR BioResource is delighted to build on our established partnership with Genomics England and work with GenOMICC to understand in particular why some children and young adults are so severely affected by COVID19.

These initiatives will enable novel insights into the virus, as well as possible human factors that influence the effects of the disease, and whether a combination of both shape outcomes for NHS patients.

Professor Dame Sue Hill, Chief Scientific Officer and SRO for Genomics at NHS England and NHS Improvement said:

This study has the potential to dramatically improve our understanding of COVID-19 – it could help us to identify whether underlying genomic differences play a part in how people react to the virus and why some people have few or no symptoms whilst others can get very ill.

I am very grateful to all the staff, patients and families who are working on and participating in this study, at what is a very challenging time.

The data that is collected during the study will also inform global strategic planning for possible later waves of the pandemic, and for new pandemics in the future.

For now, the prospect of this study's findings should not detract from the fact that we must all continue to follow the government's guidance, which at the moment involves staying home and staying safe.

Since genetic discoveries need very large numbers of patients, patients who have already had COVID-19 and have now recovered are invited to volunteer to take part in the study.

[Find out how to register interest to take part in the GenOMICC study](#)

[New guidance on spending time outdoors](#)

- From today, people are allowed to spend more time outdoors
- They will be able to go to parks and beaches to sunbathe, have a picnic and go fishing
- Outdoor sports courts can reopen, including tennis and basketball courts as well as golf courses
- People will also be able to see one person from another household, as long as they follow social distance guidance
- This follows scientific advice that the risk of infection outside is significantly lower than inside
- All of the new regulations are subject to social distancing rules

From today (13 May 2020) people in England can spend more time outdoors and enjoy a wider range of activities for any length of time, subject to social distancing rules.

People and their households can relax in the park, sunbathe, go for a picnic and go fishing.

They will also be able to spend time with one member of another household, one-on-one, as long as they adhere to strict social distancing guidelines at all times, staying 2 metres apart.

Outdoor sports facilities can reopen including outdoor tennis courts, golf clubs and basketball courts meaning that people can play a greater range of sport. Again, they will be able to do this alone, with their household or one other person, while adhering to social distancing.

Guidance that said people could only go out to exercise once a day have also been removed.

People will also be able to travel further to enjoy their time outside, with no restrictions on how far they can go to get to the countryside, National Parks and beaches in England.

The advice remains that everybody should continue to avoid public transport other than for essential journeys. Therefore, people should only make these journeys by cycling, walking or driving in a private vehicle.

People also should check in advance of visiting places like National Parks

and beaches to make sure they are prepared for visitors.

Today's advice is strictly limited to spending time with your household or with one other person and is subject to social distancing rules.

It remains the case that you cannot gather with more than one member of another household for example to play sports. You also cannot:

- go on holiday
- visit and stay overnight at a holiday home or second home
- visit the homes of friends and family, unless it's to help a vulnerable person, for medical reasons, or to take a child to another household with whom parental responsibilities are shared

More stringent enforcement measures for non-compliance with the new rules have also come into effect today.

Fines have been increased, and will now start at £100, which will be lowered to £50 if paid within 14 days. This will double on each further repeat offence up to £3,200.

This is vital to send a clear message to the small minority who break the law, and to safeguard the country's recovery.

The police will continue to use their common sense, discretion and experience when people are not following the guidelines. As they have throughout, they will engage, explain, encourage and only as a last resort consider enforcement by way of fixed penalty notice.

Communities Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

Spending time outdoors, exercising or just enjoying the countryside is essential for our physical health and wellbeing. The restrictions have impacted everyone, but particularly those without much living space or a garden.

We want to make life as healthy, bearable and social as possible, whilst controlling the virus and saving lives. That is why we have worked to find safe ways to enable more people to spend more time outdoors.

Environment Secretary Rt Hon George Eustice MP said:

We know that spending time outdoors in green spaces and the countryside is important for our physical and mental wellbeing, especially during this challenging period.

Our updated guidance advises how to do this safely and I urge people to follow it, continuing to maintain social distancing in order to protect yourself and others.

Culture Secretary Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP said:

Sport and exercise has huge benefits for our physical and mental health, which is why we need everyone to stay as active as possible.

Allowing unlimited outdoor exercise will be welcome news to many, but it remains absolutely vital that everyone practices strict social distancing whilst playing sport to keep themselves and others safe.

National Police Chiefs' Council Chair Martin Hewitt said:

The efforts of the public mean police officers have rarely had to enforce the government regulations so far. I am confident the vast majority will continue to do their bit and follow guidance in this next stage.

We are all now able to spend much more time outdoors and each of us need to take responsibility for doing that within the social restrictions set out by the government. Our approach will continue use common sense and discretion, and to engage, explain, encourage and, only as a last resort, enforce.

To support this change in advice, the government is also publishing guidance on how to do it safely. This includes [guidance on accessing green spaces](#).

Safer public places during coronavirus in urban centres and green space guidance, also published today, sets out how high streets and areas around transport hubs and parks can be managed and operated safely, giving people confidence to return to public spaces.

This also suggests practical measures owners and operators can take to help people socially distance in public places including making more room for pedestrians and making it easier for people to cycle or walk to work.

Measures suggested in the guidance include:

- introducing new cycle paths or extending existing paths
- making high-streets streets pedestrianised or introducing one-way traffic
- separate entry and exit routes in shops
- changing car parking layouts
- widening footpaths, temporary barriers or spray markings outside shops to support queueing
- signs to encourage people to wait to allow others to pass on footpaths

Developed with local councils and town and city managers as well as landowners, commercial landlords and management companies, the guidance also

sets out measures for land around commercial buildings, transport hubs and green spaces including parks and cemeteries.

The government is also publishing guidance today (13 May 2020) on outdoor sport and recreation, to increase people's access to local, outdoor physical activity.

The guidance details how the public can carry out more regular and diverse exercise, and how outdoor sports courts and facility providers can consider reopening, in line with the government's advice.

The government's [COVID-19 Recovery strategy](#) can be read online.

People in the shielded group with very specific medical conditions who are likely to be at the greatest risk of serious complications from coronavirus, have been advised to continue to shield until the end of June and to do everything they can to stay at home. The government has a support scheme in place to provide help with access to food and basic supplies, care, medicines and social support.

This guidance is for people in England. When visiting Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, you must adhere to the advice of the devolved administrations at all times.

From today, people in England are able to:

- spend time outdoors, including exercise, with one person who is not in your household as long as you stay 2 metres apart
- exercise more than once a day
- go for a picnic, to sunbathe or relax and read a book
- spend time at sports courts, including outdoor tennis, basketball courts and golf courses
- go fishing on their own, with their household, or with one other person while adhering to social distancing rules
- drive to outdoor open spaces irrespective of distance. You can travel to outdoor open spaces, in a private vehicle, alone or with members of your own household
- travel to beaches and beauty spots. But you should check first if facilities, such as car parks, are open to receive visitors
- travel to the countryside – but continue to follow the Countryside Code by respecting the local community and protecting the natural environment
- go swimming in either lakes or the sea as part of daily exercise provided that social distancing guidelines are observed – advice against using public indoor and outdoor pools remains in place.

This new provision enabling increased outdoor activity does not allow people to:

- go on holiday
- visit and stay overnight at a holiday home or second home
- visit the homes of friends and family, unless it's to help a vulnerable person, for medical reasons, or to take a child to another household

with whom parental responsibilities are shared

- gather with more than one member of another household for recreational reasons e.g. to play group sports
- swim in a public pool
- use a playground or outdoor gym
- exercise in an indoor fitness studio, gym, swimming pool, or other indoor leisure centres or facilities
- visit a private or ticketed attraction

The full Safer public places guidance will be published online on Wednesday 13 May.

[Access to green spaces guidance](#) can be read online and will be updated on Wednesday 13 May.

Business like pubs, clubs, restaurants, and theatres will also remain closed.

Owners and operators of public spaces will need to consider the impact of any new measures on people with disabilities and other affected groups and ensure clear information is made available to all users on how they can continue to access public places in a safe way.

The Safer public places guidance also encourages owners and operators of public places to increase cleaning at touch points such as handrails and gates, and to ensure there are facilities available for people to maintain good hygiene.

Suggestions include replacing hand dryers with paper towels, minimising use of portable toilets and increasing rubbish collections in public places.

No impunity for chemical weapons attacks in Syria

The Director-General of the OPCW, Fernando Arias and the Coordinator of the Investigation and Identification Team, Santiago Onate today briefed members of the Security Council on the first report of the IIT into chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Ambassador Jonathan Allen:

Thank you Mr President, and thank you also to Under-Secretary-General Izumi, for her briefing. It's been extremely helpful to hear direct from Director-General Arias and IIT Coordinator Onate and I want to thank them for their work. I know colleagues have quite sensitive questions, which is of course

why we are in a more confidential setting.

Colleagues, as many of us have said, it is vital that investigations into serious allegations such as the use of chemical weapons can stand up to scrutiny. And I therefore very much welcome the meticulous and authoritative nature of the IIT report. It relies on a totality of evidence in combination. It is consistent. It makes efforts to corroborate information with multiple sources. Coordinator Onate has been clear that there was a careful consideration of alternative hypotheses, an appeal to a number of countries to give any evidence that they had, and they used expert analyses to reach conclusions. Mr President, the findings, those clear conclusions, are that units of the Syrian Air Force were responsible for three chemical weapons attacks in Ltamenah in Syria in March 2017. And that adds to the facts collected by two separate previous investigations mandated by this council, which also found that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its own people on at least four separate occasions.

In Security Council Resolution 2118, this council expressed its strong conviction that those individuals responsible for the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic should be held accountable. And in November, colleagues, we reaffirmed that strong conviction and we reiterated any use of chemical weapons was a grave threat to international peace and security. So in light of the findings of the IIT, the Security Council faces a challenge. How does the Security Council uphold its decisions? How does it act decisively to hold Syria accountable for its clearly evidenced use of chemical weapons on multiple occasions? If we do not, colleagues, we will be seen to condone, or at least to be indifferent to, impunity for the use of such weapons, as well as impunity and failure to comply with Council decisions. As others have said, there is an urgent need to hold accountable all those who have used chemical weapons in violation of international law.

It is imperative that the Security Council shows leadership in demonstrating that impunity – and the use of these weapons – will not be tolerated. By using these terrible weapons; by retaining a chemical weapons capability that we hear about month after month, inconsistent with both its initial declaration and its alleged full destruction of its program in 2014; by failing to comply fully with the OPCW, Syria remains in breach of its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and Security Council decisions set out in Resolution 2118.

So we should now take forward discussion on how to address this issue and, more importantly, how to ensure that Syria fulfils its obligations under Security Council Resolution 2118 to declare and destroy all its chemical weapons and to cease all further use of chemical weapons. The necessity for this council to act does not depend on action being taken first in The Hague.

Let me say a couple of words on politicisation, because a number of colleagues have talked about this and have referenced the need, for example, to take the politics out of the situation. First of all, I want to thank the Estonian presidency for calling this meeting and enabling this frank discussion. We went to some lengths, as colleagues know from the various conversations that we had, to try and find a formula that would work for all.

And we are disappointed that some Council members have chosen not to attend or take part in this discussion.

When we talk about politicisation, we are talking about the Syrian regime, which has used chemical weapons on its people a number of times; which has made only a partial declaration of its chemical weapons holdings; which has failed to answer fully and adequately the questions posed to it by the OPCW on a monthly basis.

And we're talking about, I'm afraid, a set of protectors in the form of the Russian Federation who have over the years used a series of incoherent and incompatible reasons to explain away what has happened.

I have sat in this council over the last three years and I have listened to a number of Russian interventions, and in terms of chemical weapons use in Syria I have heard the Russians, first of all, deny that anything happened at all, that there was no attack.

They then denied that the Syrian regime was responsible for the attack; they said it didn't happen.

They then said that the attacks did happen, but they were carried out by terrorists.

Then they said the attacks didn't happen after all, they were, in fact, staged and they blamed the White Helmets.

The Russian Federation has claimed that Russian and Syrian forces mistakenly hit a chemical weapons dump owned by terrorists, inadvertently releasing chemicals.

They've claimed that a chemical weapons attack was staged by unknown agents as a pretext for Western military aggression. And they've also claimed that the West carried out chemical weapons attacks through proxies on the ground in Syria.

They've obviously questioned throughout the independence of any investigative mechanism established by this Council which has produced conclusions which they have disagreed with.

They've questioned the independence of the IIT.

They've questioned the credibility and impartiality of the IIT and the OPCW. They hold in question the most important global body that we have in dealing with chemical weapons.

So when DG Arias talks about efforts to undermine the OPCW, that is what I have in my mind.

Those are the arguments the Russian Federation has made. For our part, we follow just one path. From the moment we saw the incontrovertible evidence of the use of chemical weapons, we have called for the establishment of independent mechanisms to find the truth. And the truth that has been found

by all of those independent mechanism, is that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons.

Colleagues, the United Kingdom's focus will remain resolutely on upholding the norm against chemical weapons use and pursuing accountability for those who seek to undermine that norm.

[Liz Truss kick-starts trade negotiations with Japan](#)

The UK has today (Wednesday 13 May) published its negotiating objectives for a free trade agreement with Japan, with talks beginning shortly.

The agreement will be based on the existing EU-Japan free trade agreement and will aim to secure additional benefits for UK businesses trading with Japan.

More trade is essential in helping the UK overcome the unprecedented economic challenge posed by coronavirus.

We're optimistic that an agreement with Japan can give us security at home and opportunities abroad. It would help improve the resilience of our supply chains through diversity and opening new markets for business, bringing investment, better jobs, higher wages and lower prices, at a time when we need them most.

Manufacturers of textiles and clothing, and professional and financial services providers are among the UK industries expected to be the biggest winners of lowering trade barriers with Japan.

A deal will aim to secure cutting edge provisions on digital trade that in turn maximise trading opportunities across all sectors of the economy, building trust and stability for UK businesses, entrepreneurs and exporters.

These additional provisions, as well as strong copyright provisions, would benefit innovative sectors such as e-commerce and the creative industries. They would also make it easier for the 8,000 small and medium sized businesses exporting goods to Japan.

Government analysis published today shows that the UK economy could benefit from a £1.5 billion boost, as a UK-Japan trade deal could increase trade flows between both countries by £15.2 billion.

UK exporters would benefit from zero or lower tariffs, creating potential savings worth around £33 million per year, while UK workers' wages are expected to increase by £800 million in the long run as a result of the deal.

The agreement would benefit the whole of the United Kingdom, with Scotland,

the East Midlands and London expected to benefit the most.

The first round of talks will start shortly using video conferencing, with negotiations continuing to take place remotely until it is safe to travel.

UK-Japan trade talks are also the first logical step towards our joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), helping diversify UK trade and provide opportunities in the world's fastest growing economies.

The government will set out its negotiating objectives for Australia and New Zealand shortly with the aim of having 80 percent of total UK external trade with countries covered by free trade agreements by 2022.

International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss said:

Japan is one of our largest trading partners and a new trade deal will help to increase trade, boost investment and create more jobs following the economic challenges caused by coronavirus.

Both sides are committed to an ambitious timeline to secure a deal that goes even further than the existing agreement especially in digital and data.

Negotiations with Japan are an important step in CPTPP accession, a key UK priority, which will help us diversify our trade and grow the economy”.

The UK's overall negotiating objectives for a UK-Japan FTA are:

- Agree an ambitious and comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Japan that builds on the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), and secures additional benefits for UK businesses.
- Increase UK GDP and provide new opportunities for UK businesses, including Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and investors, and facilitating greater choice and lower prices for UK producers and consumers.
- Increase the resilience of our supply chains and the security of our whole economy by diversifying our supply chains.
- The Government has been clear that when we are negotiating trade agreements, the National Health Service (NHS) will not be on the table. The price the NHS pays for drugs will not be on the table. The services the NHS provides will not be on the table. The NHS is not, and never will be, for sale to the private sector, whether overseas or domestic.
- Throughout the agreement, ensure high standards and protections for UK consumers and workers and build on our existing international

obligations. This will include not compromising on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards, and ensure both parties meet their commitments on climate change.

- Secure an agreement which works for the whole of the UK and takes appropriate consideration of the UK's constitutional arrangements and obligations.
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Housing Secretary sets out plan to re-start housing market

- Housing Secretary announces plan to enable people to move home safely and to re-start the housing market in line with social distancing advice
- Estate agents' offices can open; viewings are permitted; show homes can open; removal companies and the other essential parts of the sales and letting process are re-started with immediate effect.
- More than 450,000 buyers and renters have been unable to progress their plans to move since March.
- New guidance to allow extended working hours on construction sites and to make the planning system operate remotely again.
- A 'Safe Working Charter' launched by the Government and the Home Builders Federation, enabling home builders to return to work safely.

From today anyone in England can move home if they follow new guidance published by Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick.

Since lockdown restrictions were implemented in March, more than 450,000 people have been unable to progress their plans to move house. All buyers and renters will now be able to complete purchases and view properties in person, while estate agents, conveyancers and removals firms can return to work while following social distancing guidelines.

In another move to unlock the housing market, the Housing Secretary has announced a series of measures to get the country building homes for the future, including:

- Allowing builders to agree more flexible construction site working hours with their local council, such as staggering builders' arrival times, easing pressure on public transport;
- Enabling local councils and developers to publicise planning applications through social media instead of having to rely on posters and leaflets, helping to unblock the service; and

- Support for smaller developers by allowing them to defer payments to local councils, helping those struggling with their cash flow while ensuring communities still receive funding towards local infrastructure in the longer term.

A new Charter has also been launched by the Government and the Home Builders Federation, helping construction sites reopen in line with latest health and safety guidance.

Housing Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

Today I am announcing new guidelines to allow the housing market to resume. Our clear plan will enable people to move home safely, covering each aspect of the sales and letting process from viewings to removals.

Our step by step plan is based on the latest guidance to ensure the safety and protection of everyone involved.

This critical industry can now safely move forward, and those waiting patiently to move can now do so.

Stewart Baseley, Executive Chairman of the Home Builders Federation, said:

Over the past week or so many house builders have commenced a gradual return to work, in a structured way that ensures the safety of its workforce and the general public.

The industry sustains hundreds of thousands of people in numerous roles and associated sectors, boosting local economies across the country. A resumption of work will play a major part in helping the economy recover as well as delivering the homes the country needs.

It should also provide the supply chain with the confidence it needs to accelerate its own restart. The Charter is the public facing evidence which supports the very detailed protocols individual builders now have in place to ensure safe working on sites.

John Newcomb, Chief Executive Office of the Builders Merchants Federation, said:

Safety has the highest priority as the industry returns to work. Over the past three weeks, since the publication of new branch operating guidelines, we have seen increasing numbers of

merchants safely re-opening or expanding operations to support their trade customers.

House builders structured return to site provides even more confidence within the supply chain, and provides further evidence of the construction industry's determination to assist in the recovery of the UK economy.

Guidance from Public Health England must continue to be followed. For example, anyone advised to self-isolate should continue to do so and not move home.

[Government guidance makes clear](#) that tradespeople including fitters can operate in homes, provided they do so in line with health guidance. Show homes can also re-open, following social distancing guidance.

The Safe Working Charter compliments detailed guidance available from the [Construction Leadership Council](#) on further reducing the risk of infection onsite.

The Government continues to listen to all parts of the housing industry to see what further support may be required.

These measures build on action from the Government to support the economy and protect the capacity of the construction sector, including:

- Introducing more than £330 billion of loans and guarantees to help firms continue operating;
- Deferring self-assessment payments until 2021 – crucial for a sector in which many are self-employed; and
- Providing households across the country with reassurance such as three-month mortgage holidays, including for landlords, alongside a three-month ban on tenant evictions.

Further information

The Health Protection Regulations previously prohibited home moves unless “reasonably necessary”.

The Housing Secretary has announced changes to the planning system to help support safe construction, including:

- Allowing builders to agree more flexible construction site working hours with their local council. This will make it easier to follow public health guidance onsite and stagger builders' arrival times, making public transport less busy and so reducing the risk of infection.
- Enabling planning authorities and developers to publicise planning applications through social media instead of having to rely on posters and leaflets, helping unblock the service and allowing it to support new development.
- Providing local councils with more flexibility to support smaller developers by allowing them to defer Community Infrastructure Levy

payments. This will help smaller developers struggling with their cashflow due to the pandemic while ensuring communities still receive funding towards local infrastructure in the longer term.