

# Government Launches Coronavirus Information Service on WhatsApp

The new free to use service aims to provide official, trustworthy and timely information and advice about coronavirus (COVID-19), and will further reduce the burden on NHS services.

This will help combat the spread of coronavirus misinformation in the UK, as well as helping ensure people stay home, protect the NHS and save lives.

The GOV.UK Coronavirus Information Service is an automated 'chatbot' service which will allow the British public to get answers to the most common questions about coronavirus direct from government.

The service will provide information on topics such as coronavirus prevention and symptoms, the latest number of cases in the UK, advice on staying at home, travel advice and myth busting.

The service will also allow the government to send messages to all opted-in users if required.

To use the free GOV.UK Coronavirus Information Service on WhatsApp, simply add 07860 064422 in your phone contacts and then message the word 'hi' in a WhatsApp message to get started.

A set of menu options is then presented which the user can choose from and then be sent relevant guidance from GOV.UK pages as well as links to GOV.UK for further information.

Prof Yvonne Doyle, Medical Director, Public Health England, said:

This service will help us ensure the public has a trusted source for the right information about coronavirus, updated with the latest public health guidance and providing assurance that they are not misled by any of the false information circulating.

Matt Idema, Chief Operating Officer, WhatsApp, said:

At difficult times like these, people are using WhatsApp more than ever to connect with and support their friends, family and communities. We are pleased to be able to provide the UK Government with the communications tools to help them answer the public's questions about the virus with reliable, timely health advice, in order to keep people safe.

Other recent Government communications include:

Earlier this week the government texted people across the UK to inform them of the new rules announced by the Prime Minister on 23 March 2020. Details here –  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-sms-messages>

The Government has also sent text messages to the vulnerable as part of the shielding package announced by the Prime Minister on 22 March 2020. Details here –  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

---

## **Statement on vocational and technical qualifications in 2020**

We recognise learners on vocational and technical courses urgently need reassurance about how their qualifications will be assessed and awarded in the coming weeks and months. We are working as quickly as possible to develop an approach which enables learners to get the qualifications they deserve and that they need to progress.

For the wide range of vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) used for progression and taken in schools, colleges and training providers, we are considering how similar arrangements to those set out for GCSEs, AS and A levels could be applied. Some form of teacher calculated grade, or other form of estimation based on assessment that has already taken place, will be possible in many cases. For other qualifications, it might be more appropriate to adapt the assessment or delivery arrangements so that everyone can have confidence in the outcome. And for some qualifications that signify occupational competence or award a licence to practise in safety-critical industries, assessment might need to be delayed in order to ensure public safety and meet the needs of employers.

There are many different types of qualification, awarding organisations, learner groups and assessment approaches, so the landscape is complex and it is clear that one size will not fit all circumstances.

We are working urgently with the Department for Education, awarding organisations, other regulators and the wider sector to develop and publish a clear approach for the different categories of VTQs in the coming days.

---

## **Post-Transition period action deadlines extended**

This information is for the veterinary pharmaceutical industry.

While the UK and EU negotiate additional arrangements, we will continue to engage with you at regular intervals to keep you informed of what you need to know and the actions that you will need to take.

You will be given enough time to complete these actions which will extend past the end of the transition period of 31 December 2020, by at least 1 year.

We will update you later in the year with information about the changes that may affect you.

---

## **UK space sector working together on response to coronavirus**

The Chief Executive of the UK Space Agency and the President and Chair of the UKspace trade body met virtually last week to discuss the space sector's response to Covid-19.

The UK space sector employs 42,000 people and generates an income of £14.8 billion each year, while supporting £300 billion of wider economic activity through other industries with satellite services such as navigation, communications and Earth observation. Space is part of the UK's Critical National Infrastructure and has in-built resilience due to the autonomous nature of many orbital operations, the relatively low number of specialist staff required for ongoing operations, and multiple contingencies.

During the meeting the UK Space Agency and UKspace agreed to:

1. Maintain an effective flow of information between the space sector and government during the COVID-19 crisis.
2. Establish dedicated teams from the UK Space Agency and UKspace to direct companies towards the support available from government.
3. Identify any further actions that the government and trade body can take to minimise the disruption of COVID-19.
4. Broaden the engagement with space businesses beyond members of UKspace.

Graham Turnock Chief Executive of the UK Space Agency said:

While we know the UK space sector is strong and resilient, we have been engaging regularly with representatives from industry and academia to fully understand the challenges they are likely to face over the coming months.

We have agreed an initial plan of action with UKspace to ensure the whole UK space sector has access to the unprecedented package of government support already available, and are carefully considering the need for any further, more targeted measures to secure high-skilled jobs and safeguard our world-leading space capabilities.

Graham Peters, Chair of UKspace, the trade association, said:

UKspace members have an extraordinary wealth of technical and scientific expertise and many provide critical services in areas of telecommunications, position navigation and timing and Earth observation.

We are working closely with the UK Space Agency and our members to ensure critical space enabled services remain operational; to find ways our members can support the national effort to fight the virus; and in helping the government take actions that will make the sector resilient to the economic challenges so it can take advantage of future opportunities once the virus has been defeated.

There is an unprecedented package of government-backed and guaranteed loans to support businesses, making available an initial £330 billion of guarantees – equivalent to 15% of GDP.

This includes:

- The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme providing government-backed loans of up to £5 million to small and medium-sized businesses.
- The Bank of England's COVID Corporate Financing Facility will provide a quick and cost-effective way to raise working capital for those large firms who need it.

More details about business support schemes can be found at:

[businesssupport.gov.uk](https://businesssupport.gov.uk)

---

# Covid-19: Estate agents, lettings agencies and bingo halls to pay no business rates this coming financial year

- local authorities will be fully compensated
- part of a business rates holiday introduced from 1 April 2020

Estate agents, lettings agencies and bingo halls that have closed as a result of Covid-19 measures to restrict the spread of the virus will be now be exempted from business rates in 2020-21.

This measure comes after the Chancellor announced in the Budget that, in response to Covid-19, the business rates retail discount would be increased to 100% next year and would be expanded to the hospitality and leisure sectors.

Today the government has announced that some of the exclusions for this relief have been removed, so that retail, leisure, and hospitality properties that have closed as a result of the Covid-19 restriction measures will now be eligible for the relief.

This will ensure that estate agents, lettings agencies and bingo halls that are required to close will not pay any business rates next year.

Rishi Sunak commented:

We are determined to do whatever it takes to support businesses during Covid-19, which is why we have extended business rates relief for the high street.

Today, I am removing some the exclusions for this relief, so that retail, leisure, and hospitality properties that have closed as a result of the measures announced by the Prime Minister in his statement on Monday will now be eligible for the relief.

This will ensure that estate agents, lettings agencies and bingo halls that are required to close will not pay any business rates next year.

Eligible businesses will be rebilled by their local authority and the new bill will give them the discount of 100%.

If businesses have made payments in the meantime, they will be refunded by their local authority. We are working with local authorities to ensure new bills are issued as soon as possible.

The Devolved Administrations will receive funding under the Barnett formula to support businesses in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Guidance for local authorities on the application of the holiday will be published by MHCLG shortly.

## **Notes**