

****Latest virus update****

WORKPLACE CLOSURES

There continues to be debate about which businesses can remain open and which should close. Willie and Wendy have had discussions with several employers over the last few weeks to discuss how they are complying with the health guidance which has evolved. This is our understanding of the current position although the First Minister has said that further guidance may be issued soon.

There is a slight difference in the guidance issued from the Scottish Government and the UK Government. For example, because it is very difficult to operate social distancing on building sites and because it is not essential that most construction is completed now, the Scottish Government (rightly we believe) has advised that all building sites, except those building hospitals, should close.

Oil workers face especially challenging working conditions as it is impossible to socially distance on a helicopter, but it is important that we keep the oil and gas industry operational to supply us with energy. So, the oil and gas industry have been working with the governments and expert advisers on how to ensure the safety of workers and have developed mitigation measures.

The Scottish and UK Government's guidance is clear that non-essential businesses or organisations can continue to operate if they stick to the strict guidance especially on social distancing. They want to get as many people as possible working from home too. For some organisations this is impossible, and they should close. For those that can engage with their workers and unions to develop good and safe working practices, they can remain operational. The Chief Medical Officer advised last week that businesses and organisations should take a precautionary approach and close if they are unable to immediately install changed working practices in partnership with their workers.

Special consideration is required for those workers who live with people who are shielding because of age or health conditions.

Anyone who would like to discuss their company or organisation please simply reply to this email.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others-social-distancing/pages/overview/>

SCOTTISH EMERGENCY BILL

Last week the House of Commons agreed emergency powers to enable us to cope with the virus. These included new powers for the police to stop people gathering and breaching the social distancing guidance.

This week the Scottish Parliament will debate an additional bill to secure additional powers. It will increase the minimum notice period for private and social tenants to up to six months depending on the grounds used, helping to protect them from eviction. It will also adjust criminal procedures and to other aspects of the justice system, to ensure essential justice business can continue.

It proposes that some criminal cases be allowed to go ahead in front of a judge without a jury. We have put down amendments objecting to this. In England they've suspended jury trials from going ahead at present, but they haven't scrapped them. We should be doing the same. Either these trials should be paused for the duration of the crisis or we should find a big enough space that jurors can sit a safe distance apart.

VOLUNTEER
There is a new 'Scotland Cares' campaign to encourage people to volunteer during virus pandemic. Volunteers have three options which are signposted from the Ready Scotland website:

- returning NHS workers will be directed to existing voluntary arrangements in NHS Scotland
- to support public services, including the NHS and councils, people will be directed to a site co-ordinated by the British Red Cross
- to charities or community groups in their area people will be directed to Volunteer Scotland

www.ReadyScotland.org

Businesses who can offer support should email covid19response@gov.scot

POLICE REPORTING

We have received lots of complaints and concerns about people gathering, travelling long distances by car to exercise or remaining in holiday homes when they should be living at home.

We have discussed with the police how best to deal with the complaints and concerns in a proportionate manner and agreed that constituents should phone the police directly on 101. That way they can assess how best to respond and glean all the necessary information from firsthand witnesses.

BENEFITS

Since 16th March, the UK Government has received more than 800,000 claims for Universal Credit, normally they receive approximately 55,000 a week.

They have moved 10,000 staff from elsewhere and are recruiting additional staff too. Changes to benefits include

- Those applying for Contributory ESA will be able to claim from day 1 – as opposed to day 8 - and we have removed the need for face-to-face assessment.
- Both Universal Credit and Contributory ESA can now be claimed by phone or online.
- Increasing the standard rate of Universal Credit and working tax credit for this year by around £1000.
- Temporarily relaxing the application of the Minimum Income Floor (MIF) for all self-employed claimants affected by the economic impact of COVID-19 to ensure that the self-employed can access UC at a more generous rate.
- Making Statutory Sick Pay available from day 1 – as opposed to day 4 - where an eligible individual is sick or self-isolating; and
- Increasing in the Local Housing Allowance rates for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit claimants so that it covers the cheapest third of local rents – which is worth on average £600.

They are only offering face-to-face appointments - conducted in accordance with guidelines on social distancing - for the small number of claimants who would otherwise not be able to receive support.

They will not be checking conditionality compliance with work search requirements for the next three months. This means no sanctions should be applied for this period. The government does want claimants to continue to look for work as there are new opportunities in many sectors.

SCREENING

There is a temporarily pause on several screening programmes.

- Breast Screening (mammograms)
- Cervical Screening (smear tests)
- Bowel Screening (home test kits)
- Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) Screening (ultrasound of abdomen)
- Diabetic Retinopathy (Eye) Screening (images taken of the eye).

Pregnancy and Newborn Screening Programmes, including tests offered during pregnancy and just after birth, will continue where logistically practical.

Results for those who have recently been screened or who have completed and returned home test kits will continue to be processed.

The suspension will be reviewed after 12 weeks at the latest.

This allows staff to be re-allocated including to COVID-19 laboratory testing and covering for colleagues who are unwell or self-isolating.

EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE EXPANSION DELAYED

Councils will no longer be legally obliged to deliver 1140 hours of funded early learning and childcare from this August.

TRAVEL AND HOLIDAY ADVICE

<https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/2020/02/coronavirus-travel-help-and-your-rights/>

PPE

There are new measures to protect health and social care staff:

- eight weeks' worth of PPE to all GP surgeries to be delivered by the end of this week
- PPE delivered to local cluster points for onward distribution or collection by social care providers
- extra staff to prepare orders for social care, plus additional delivery drivers, longer delivery hours and use of more external delivery companies to increase capacity
- adding to well-established arrangements in hospitals, all health boards now have a single point of contact to manage local supply and distribution

Over last four to six weeks, around 34 million items have been delivered to hospitals.

<https://www.gov.scot/news/protection-for-health-and-social-care-staff/>

SELF CATERING

Self-catering accommodation and caravans will be eligible for both the one-off £10,000 grant for small businesses and the one-off £25,000 grant for businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors where this is the primary source of earned income and the property is let for 140 days or more. There is concern from some who have self-catering properties that they are losing out including farmers who have

diversified to sustain the farm business. We are discussing with the Scottish Government.

<https://www.gov.scot/news/supporting-tourism-through-coronavirus/>

NEW SUPPORT FOR NHS DENTISTS

We are pleased to report that the Scottish Government has issued a revised funding package for NHS dentists. This will provide 80% of the average income from items of service and patient contributions. This is a more equitable funding solution.

<https://bda.org/advice/Coronavirus/Documents/Scotland%20Financial%20Sustainability%20Measures%20for%20Independent%20Dental%20Practices%20300320.pdf>

BREXIT AND INDEPENDENCE - REMEMBER THEM?

The Scottish Government has stopped its preparations for another independence referendum and urged the UK Government to stop its preparations for Brexit.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19---independence-referendum-cabinet-secretary-for-constitution-letter/>