

Coronavirus Bill 2019-21: Key Measures Overview

The UK Government has introduced the Coronavirus Bill 2019-21. This bill will provide additional powers to the Government, covering a wide range of areas where provisions may be necessary to respond to the pandemic. It has five main objectives.

The Bill had its First Reading on 19th March, it went through the remaining stages on w/c 23rd March. The powers provided by the Bill will last two years.

Not all provisions will be enacted immediately, and adjustments can be made to 'sunset' some provisions while extending others depending on the scientific advice at the time.

1. Increase the available health & social care workforce.

- New registration powers for NMC and HCPC, allowing them to temporarily register, fit and suitable experienced persons as healthcare professionals. Appropriate provisions are also being made to register GPs and Pharmacists in devolved health systems.ⁱ
- Emergency registration powers for SWE, SCW to register fit and suitable experienced persons as social workers. SSSC will be able to temporarily register social workers who are retired, on a career break, or in their final year of training.
- New form of unpaid statutory leave (EVL)ⁱⁱ, and powers to establish a compensation scheme for some of the loss of earnings incurred by volunteers. Maximising the number of volunteers able to relieve pressure on services.

2. Easing the burden on frontline staff

- Temporary amendments to the Mental Health Act 1983 (and corresponding acts in Scotland and Northern Ireland) on examination timelines and detention.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Expansion of indemnity coverage for clinical negligence of health care workers on activities related to COVID-19.
- Changes to local authority care and support including; simplifying discharge assessments, duties to meet needs for care and support; charging for care etc.^{iv}
- Changes to the registration of deaths and still births.^v

3. Constraining and slowing the virus

- Education powers including; temporary closure of educational institutions.
- Measures to ensure Border Force resources are not depleted, arrivals may be directed to ports of entry with sufficient staff. The Secretary of State will also be given the power to direct port operators to suspend (partly or wholly) if necessary.
- Provisions for the screening and isolation of certain persons (this will be a consistent UK wide response), providing public health officers, constables, and immigration officers with the ability to direct/detain individuals for suitable screening and assessment.^{vi}
- Ability to restrict/prevent events or gatherings (subject to evidence).^{vii}
- Court and tribunal hearings will be able the use of video/audio technology.
- Postponement of elections.

4. Managing the deceased with respect and dignity^{viii}

- Additional powers to national and local authorities to direct organisations to support in the 'death management' process, so that bodies can be stored, transported, and disposed of with care and support.
- Expansion of the people who can register a death, and amendments to who is able to sign a medical certificate cause of death.
- Changes to regulations in devolved nations in regards to medical certificates and inquests.

5. Supporting people

- Measures to provide relief to employers (focused on SMEs) for the cost of their statutory sick pay – funding can be provided in advance or in arrears, and in the form of deductions from the employers existing National Insurance liabilities. SSP will also be available from day one of absence.^{ix}
- Allow the Government to temporarily modify existing legislation procedures around NIC, and enable the alter the rate of contributions payable by employees, employers, and the self-employed.^x
- Allow Government and Devolved Administrations to set out requirements for the provision of information about food supply chains in writing, rather than secondary legislation (allowing or powers to be used at short notice).^{xi}

Non-Government Amendments:^{xii}

- Number of amendments in regard to the Bill's two-year period. The amendment most likely to succeed reduces date of bill expiry from two years to six months, to be extended by a further six months' subject to Parliamentary approval.
- Proposed addition of a clause to require status reports explaining how powers are being used to be subject to a debate and vote on an amendable motion in the Commons, and debated in the Lords.
- Two proposed amendments which seek to provide additional social security provisions.
- Lib-Dem amendment on guaranteeing provisions for social care, and a requirement on local authorities to meet adult care needs.
- Further amendments on victims of slavery/human trafficking, transport for isolated communities, Brexit transition period extension, and postponement of Church of England General Synod elections.

Acronyms;

EVL: Emergency Volunteering Leave
HCPC: Healthcare Professionals Council
NIC: National Insurance Contributions.
NMC: Nursing & Midwifery Council

SCW: Social Care Wales
SSSC: Scottish Social Services Council
SWE: Social Workers England

ⁱ Pages 6-7 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0122/en/20122en.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Workers are able to take a period of EVL if they receive a certificate issued by relevant authority that states they are approved to work as a volunteer in health and social care. Page 9

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8861/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Page 8 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0122/en/20122en.pdf>

^{iv} Page 9 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0122/en/20122en.pdf>

^v Page 9 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0122/en/20122en.pdf>

^{vi} Page 16 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0122/en/20122en.pdf>

^{vii} Page 16 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0122/en/20122en.pdf>

^{viii} <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8860/>

^{ix} The bill does not change the eligibility for SSP – see note from HOC Library

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8864/>

^x Page 18 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-01/0122/en/20122en.pdf>

^{xi} The Government notes that it does wish to activate these clauses unless required. It is also noted that its response to food supply chains is based off industry insight. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8862/>

^{xii} <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/coronavirus-bill>