

## New Settlement for Living with the Virus

### Lessons Learnt from Summer 2021

#### Intro:

Successful economies are built on confidence. With our economy re-emerging after 16 months of hibernation, confidence and progression are critical. The Government's decision to move England to Step 4 of the roadmap was the right one. But rather than opening-up the economy, the 'pingdemic' closed it down.

This was surely not the Government's intention. But it appeared to be the consequence of an internal compromise within the Government of competing perspectives. Whilst this has always been present throughout the pandemic, the Step 4 announcement was constructed without consultation with the outside world – firms especially – who could have immediately identified the unintended consequences. Throughout the crisis, a more consultative approach, for example on workplace guidance and JRS, has allowed the Government to anticipate outcomes and therefore make better policy, better communicated, and better adopted.

Changes to self-isolation policy introduced in England, as well as in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have helped to ease the impact of the 'pingdemic'. However, many firms are still struggling with staff shortages driven by self-isolation. This is particularly important as the end of summer fast approaches; cases are likely to rise as social mixing increases with the return of schools and many firms introducing hybrid working patterns.

Ahead of potentially difficult winter, the government's Covid-19 Autumn & Winter Plan has set out the right ambition: keeping no stone unturned in its efforts to keep the economy open and learning to live with the virus. It includes a greater use of covid secure tools rather than a reliance on self-isolation to manage risk, a sliding scale of interventions and overall offers a more balanced plan.

To ensure 'Plan A' is a success, it is vital to learn the lessons from the summer about how the Government can adopt a different kind of balance – a balance that boosts the confidence of the public rather than policymakers. The confidence of workers to go to work; of customers to go to shops; and of businesses to stay open. This means **confidently opening the economy whilst also boosting public confidence to participate in it.**

This is what should guide us going forward in the face of new variants, new waves, the risk of waning immunity of vaccines, and a possible winter flu escalation. We must always be guided by the medical experts, but we also need to learn to live with the virus.

With autumn fast approaching, business is not looking for the Government to retreat from its role in supporting business to manage the impact of the pandemic. Instead, our starting point is that the Government must use all available tools to deliver a new settlement that helps the country live confidently with the virus.

To achieve this shared goal, the Government should base its approach for living with the virus on the following three principles:

1. **Using mass-testing to stop mass self-isolation**
2. **Utilising all 'COVID secure' tools available to build employee and customer confidence**
3. **Maximising our world leading vaccine programme**

The commitment from the CBI is to work at speed with our membership, the Government, and the devolved administrations to find a common, balanced approach to living with the virus.

But confidence also requires certainty. Clear forward guidance for firms about what measures will be introduced under 'Plan B' should infection rates rise will maximise their ability to plan with certainty. Transparency about how and when those decisions will be made is essential.

### **Principle One: Using mass-testing to stop mass self-isolation**

Businesses have welcomed recent changes to the rules which exempt double-vaccinated employees from having to self-isolate if identified as close contacts. This change, as well as the publication of the self-isolation exemption list, has helped to open-up the economy and ease the impact of the 'pingdemic'.

Self-isolation remains an important tool to be used precisely in the fight against the virus. However, there is still no route to release the pressure on firms with large proportions of their workforce who have not had both vaccinations. Firms with younger workforces - including hospitality and retail - continue to be heavily impacted, impeding their ability to recover.

The alternative, which would allow us to live confidently with the virus, is mass testing. A "test to release" scheme for those yet to receive both vaccinations would ensure self-isolation is best targeted at those who risk spreading the virus. And as autumn and winter approach, testing needs to work for all businesses. This means having a broad spectrum of testing options to suit different business scenarios.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Introduce immediately a 'test to release' scheme to end self-isolation for those not double-vaccinated:**
  - Introduce a daily contact testing regime over a period of days (the number of which to be determined by scientific advice) to act as the trigger for release from self-isolation for those contacted by NHS Test & Trace who have not been double-vaccinated.
- **Deliver an effective testing regime that works for all businesses.**
  - Expand the daily contact testing pilot into close contact services such as manufacturing, logistics, hospitality, and other affected sectors.
  - Reintroduce government funded workplace testing scheme and work with industries, such as retail, to develop a system of 'at home' testing to support those businesses operating across multiple sites.
  - Maintain government funded community testing to support business efforts to drive confidence and safety.

### **Ensure that testing capacity matches demand as social mixing increases this autumn to maintain employer and staff confidence in the return to workplaces.**

- Explore alternative testing options beyond lateral flow and PCR which may be more time and cost efficient and could maintain/increase testing uptake.
- Provide targeted logistical support to increase testing uptake and work with businesses to help amplify local public health campaigns in areas where cases are rising quickly.

## **Principle Two: Utilising all 'COVID secure' tools available to build employee and customer confidence**

Throughout the pandemic, maintaining personal safety has been a shared objective between business, employees, and the Government. Last summer's 'COVID secure' workplace guidance showed the value in how government guidance can support responsible business, underpinned by clear communication with employees, to drive confidence and consensus. As many businesses begin to implement their hybrid working plans, this must continue to form the basis of how we learn to live confidently with the virus. Critical to this will be using all the 'COVID secure' tools available to build employee and customer confidence.

Health experts have consistently advised that face coverings can play a key role in reducing the spread of the virus, keeping firms and our economy running. By providing a visible sign of preventing transmission they are also an important tool in boosting the public's confidence that they can travel and work safely.

The Government's Plan B has kept open the option of introducing mandatory COVID Status Certificates in certain environments at short notice. Whilst business supports the role certification can play in large venues, the potential pace of these changes fail to acknowledge the operational complexity of implementing them in practice.

The introduction of any prospective scheme, including relevant guidance, should be done in partnership with business and other stakeholders to ensure ease of access, ease of use and ease of implementation, and reserved for larger venues.

Finally, there is the question of international travel. While firms have welcomed the Government's decision to simplify international travel restrictions by moving to a two-tier structure, with vaccination status acting as the key determinant of restrictions and testing, the Government must continually review the remaining restrictions to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and the aviation sector has the opportunity to trade its way to recovery.

Moreover, with a challenging winter period ahead, and the CJRS winding down, the Government should consider sector-specific support to ensure that jobs within the international travel sector are retained, and operators within the sector are ready for a strong summer season in 2022.

Overall, what the Government needs to recognise is that businesses are diligent in implementing COVID safety measures to mobilise staff and engage customers alike. They are also at the frontline of implementing Government measures so can better advise how to do so effectively.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Maintain COVID-secure workplace restrictions and safety measures, including hygiene and ventilation, to keep employees safe and to build confidence.**
  - HSE should provide guidance to the Government on the workplace scenarios where these should be mandated.
  - This guidance should **not include** 'capacity restricting' measures, such as the 1metre+ rule.
  - Closely monitor case numbers in schools and, if necessary, consider the reintroduction of COVID-secure measures such as face coverings in communal areas to minimise higher transmission risks in the workplace driven by employees' children.

- **Develop a workable COVID Status Certification scheme as an additional tool to manage risk in large venues. This should be:**
  - Based on either proof of vaccination, a negative coronavirus test result, or natural immunity.
  - Utilised only for large venues with high volumes of attendees – sports stadiums, concert halls (not to be used for retail or hospitality).
  - Aligned with existing COVID policies already in place such as testing, vaccinations, and international travel.
  - Developed with business with clear criteria for when and how certification should be employed, including business-specific legal counsel and help for monitoring and enforcement.
  - Science-led and time-limited, with clarity on the scheme’s purpose, timelines for implementation and review.
  
- **Mandatory guidance for face coverings in continuous close contact settings:**
  - Where individuals are likely to be close contact with others that they do not know and are in an enclosed/indoor space for a continuous period of time. This would not include hospitality.
  - Such settings could include logistics hubs, airport terminals, public transport or whilst queuing to enter a venue indoors.
  - These measures should be reviewed throughout the autumn, taking into account the prevalence of the virus in society, the uptake of the vaccine and vaccine booster, and the deployment of other tools for managing risk.
  
- **Build on the changes brought forward by the October GTT review, while supporting the aviation sector’s recovery from the pandemic**
  - Further sector support should be considered by the Government, to ensure that while the sector tries to trade its way to recovery, it is supported in retaining jobs and in dealing with fixed costs.
  - The Government should now ensure that it builds on the changes brought forward by the latest review, by prioritising removing testing requirements as much as possible, and sets a clear date for a further GTT review.
  - The Government should also prioritise ensuring greater reciprocity between countries, ensuring the reopening of key markets and guaranteeing that NHS-approved vaccines will be recognised when Britons travel abroad.
  
- **Build confidence in short-term capacity to safely and efficiently process international arrivals:**
  - Work with airlines, airports and UK Border Force to ensure COVID status checks for inbound travellers are conducted as smoothly and early as possible, including conducting pre-flight checks.
  - Review the resources available to UK Border Force and provide additional resources, if needed, at key sites for as long as the situation persists.
  
- **Ensure that the aviation sector is well-positioned to recover from the pandemic, and long-term competitiveness is not damaged**
  - In the immediate term, European hubs have benefitted significantly at the UK’s expense from our slower pace of recovery.
  - In the long term, there is a genuine danger of the UK losing its hub status if the UK travel sector remains damaged and is not able to recover promptly.

- This could be a disaster for the UK's ambitions to compete on the world stage and become a trading powerhouse over the next decade, as set out in the Government's *Global Britain* strategy.
- The Government should seriously consider financial support to the international travel sector to ensure the damage sustained to international competitiveness is not long term.

**It should be said that most businesses would rather not have any of these restrictions in place. But they recognise that they are a preferable alternative to the mass self-isolation regime implemented this summer.** They are also only likely to accept them if they participate in shaping them for effective implementation. The Government must return to 'in advance' business consultation to create better policy, implemented properly.

### **Principle Three: Maximising our world leading vaccine programme**

The vaccine roll-out has been the stand-out success of the Government's response to the pandemic. It is also an example of how the power of the state can combine with the ingenuity and agility of business to deliver transformative change.

92% of the adult population have had their first vaccine dose and 84% of adults have had both doses. The number of doses administered each day is now significantly below the peak of 500,000 reach in mid-March. Finishing the job of delivering on the vaccine rollout – including the booster programme for certain age groups - will play a key part of how we learn to live confidently with the virus.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Support vaccine uptake rates particularly amongst groups where take-up is low.**
  - Create a clear communication campaign from the Government on the safety and efficacy of the vaccine.
  - Firms could leverage their internal networks and communication vehicles to support the vaccination delivery effort. For example, large employers could consider holding organised vaccine days or supporting pop-up vaccination centres.
- **Government and business to work together to deliver a world leading vaccine 'booster' programme in the autumn.**
  - Businesses should continue to show flexibility in supporting employees to get their vaccine/booster vaccine during working hours to encourage take-up.
  - Government should keep up the momentum on the vaccination rollout and provide sufficient funding for winter flu jabs and covid booster jabs to prevent winter absences and keep the economy moving into 2022.
- **Supercharge the Therapeutics Taskforce.**
  - Government should prioritise and work at speed with business to enable the Therapeutics Taskforce to identify and clinically trial and approve repurposed drugs and new drugs / treatments for COVID-19.

The CBI is ready to maximise the input and evidence base from across our membership to work with the Government to build on the proposal outlined above and develop a new settlement between business and government for a balanced approach for living with the virus.