



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 9068, 30 April 2021

Coronavirus: A history of English lockdown laws

By Jennifer Brown
Esme Kirk-Wade

Contents:

1. First national lockdown
2. Minimal lockdown restrictions
3. Reintroducing restrictions
4. Second national lockdown
5. Reintroducing the tier system
6. Third national lockdown
7. The steps out of lockdown



Contents

Summary	3
1. First national lockdown (March to July 2020)	6
1.1 Allowing outdoor recreation (early May)	6
1.2 The lockdown shifts to gatherings restrictions (late-May to late-June)	7
2. Minimal lockdown restrictions (July to September 2020)	9
2.1 Higher penalties for illegal raves	10
2.2 Early local restrictions	10
3. Reintroducing restrictions (September to October 2020)	12
3.1 The rule of six	12
3.2 Restrictions on opening hours for hospitality businesses	12
3.3 The first-tier system	13
4. Second national lockdown (November 2020)	14
5. Reintroducing the tier system (December 2020)	15
5.1 Restrictions over the Christmas period	15
6. Third national lockdown (January to March 2021)	19
7. The steps out of lockdown (March 2021 to present)	20
7.1 International travel ban	22
7.2 Powers to disapply restrictions	23

Summary

The UK now has hundreds of laws made in response to the coronavirus pandemic.¹ Many of these laws could be described as “lockdown laws”. The Library uses the term “lockdown laws” to describe national and local coronavirus restrictions regulations and directions which place restrictions on movement, gatherings and high-street businesses.

The Library’s paper [coronavirus: the lockdown laws](#) provides a detailed discussion of these laws. A [collection of Library work on coronavirus restrictions](#) is on the Library’s website.

Coronavirus restrictions and requirements applied nationally in England

Staying home



People are prohibited from leaving home without a “reasonable excuse”.

Staying away



People are prohibited from staying away from home overnight without a “reasonable excuse”.

Social gatherings ban



Gatherings of more than two people are prohibited unless for a limited number of exempted purposes.

Rule of six



Gatherings of more than six people are prohibited unless they are for an exempted purposes. Exemptions include organised sports, small weddings and support groups.

Large gatherings



Gatherings of more than thirty people are prohibited.

Hospitality closures



Pubs, bars and restaurants must close but can operate a takeaway/ delivery service.

Opening times



Pubs, bars and restaurants must close at a specific time.

International travel ban



People are prohibited from leaving the United Kingdom without a “reasonable excuse”.

¹ See: legislation.gov.uk, [coronavirus legislation](#), undated



Phase one: first national lockdown

England was in national lockdown between late March and June 2020. Initially, all non-essential high street businesses were closed and people were ordered to stay home, permitted to leave for essential purposes only. Starting in May 2020, the laws were slowly relaxed. People were permitted to leave home for outdoor recreation from 13 May. On 1 June, the restriction on leaving home was replaced with a requirement to be home overnight, and people were permitted to meet outside with up to six people.

Phase two: minimal lockdown restrictions

Most lockdown restrictions were lifted on 4 July. Hospitality businesses were permitted to reopen. New health and safety guidance on operating businesses "COVID securely" was published. Gatherings up to thirty people were legally permitted, although the Government was still recommending people avoid gatherings larger than six.

Phase three: reimposing restrictions

On 14 September, England's gathering restriction was tightened and people were once again prohibited from meeting more than six people socially. The new "rule of six" applied in both indoor and outdoor spaces. Eleven days later, pubs, bars and restaurants were told they had to shut between 10pm and 6am.

During this period, a patchwork of local restrictions were imposed across England. On the 14 October, the Government rationalised local restrictions by introducing a "three tier system". At first most of the country was placed in tier one, under similar restrictions to the previous

national rules. As time went on, more of the country was placed in the higher two tiers.

Phase four: second national lockdown

On 5 November, national restrictions were reintroduced in England. During the second national lockdown non-essential high street businesses were closed, and people were prohibited from meeting those not in their support bubble inside. People could leave home to meet one person from outside their support bubble (outdoors only).

Phase five: reintroducing a tier system

On 2 December, the tier system was reintroduced (with modifications). Restrictions on hospitality businesses were stricter and most locations were initially placed in tiers two and three. On 19 December, the Prime Minister announced that a new 'tier four' would be introduced following concerns about a rising number of coronavirus cases attributed to a new variant of the virus. The tier four rules were similar to those imposed during the second national lockdown. On 30 December, after the first tiering review under the new four tier system, around 75% of the country was placed under tier four restrictions.

Phase six: third national lockdown

Following concerns that the four-tier system was not containing the spread of the new variant of the virus, national restrictions were reintroduced for a third time on 6 January. The rules during the third lockdown were more like the rules in the first lockdown. People were once again told to "stay home". Unlike during the second lockdown, leaving home for outdoor recreation was again banned. However, people could still form support bubbles (if eligible) and more gatherings were exempted from the gatherings ban (for example, religious services and some small weddings were permitted).

Phase seven: the steps out of lockdown

On 8 March 2021, England began a phased exit out of lockdown. This consists of a four-step plan, forming part of the Government's broader roadmap intended to "cautiously but irreversibly" ease lockdown restrictions. Instead of a return to the tier system, the Government confirmed that it planned to lift restrictions in all areas at the same time as the level of infection was "broadly similar" across England.

England moved to step two restrictions on the 12 April, which has seen the reopening of outdoor attractions and settings. Prior to this, as part of step one, children returned to schools and restrictions on gatherings were relaxed, with the rule of six reinstated (in outdoor settings only). Step three will be reached "no earlier than 17 May".

Coronavirus guidance and the lockdown laws

There is now a huge range of government guidance relating to coronavirus. Most coronavirus guidance is a mixture of information on the law and public health advice. The UK Government has been amending and adapting its coronavirus guidance as its response to coronavirus has progressed. Some of these changes have not required changes to the law, but have had a significant impact on how people experience the lockdown. Changes to coronavirus guidance are not discussed in detail in this briefing.

1. First national lockdown (March to July 2020)

On Monday 23 March 2020, the Prime Minister addressed the nation to announce extraordinary measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus. He asked the public to stay at home and said that the police would have powers to issue fines to those who left home without a reasonable excuse.² The address effectively put England into 'lockdown'.

On Thursday 26 March regulations were made which³:

- Significantly restricted people's free movement by prohibiting leaving home without a "reasonable excuse" and banning public gatherings (with some exemptions).
- Closed all but essential high street businesses. Businesses that could operate remotely (retail and some hospitality), were permitted to operate delivery only.
- Provided the police with powers to enforce the new laws. Police officers could issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) to those they suspected of lockdown offences. FPNs provide accused persons the opportunity to pay to avoid prosecution for the offence.

The first review of the regulations was carried out on the 16 April. The restrictions were extended without major changes.⁴

1.1 Allowing outdoor recreation (early May)

The second formal review of the lockdown in England was due on 7 May. The Government took advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies but did not make an immediate announcement on the status of the lockdown. Instead it was announced that the Prime Minister would make a statement on 10 May setting out England's "roadmap for the next phase" of the lockdown.⁵

The Prime Minister made a televised statement on 10 May in which he announced a "change in emphasis" to the UK Government's guidance on work and exercise during the lockdown. He announced that the Government was now⁶:

- 'Actively encouraging' those who can't work from home to go to work. The Prime Minister said that the Government would publish "new guidance for employers to make workplaces COVID-secure."

² Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 23 March 2020

³ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#)

⁴ Foreign & Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 16 April 2020;

⁵ Foreign & Commonwealth Office, [Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 7 May 2020

⁶ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM address to the nation on coronavirus](#), 10 May 2020

- Encouraging “people to take more and even unlimited amounts of outdoor exercise”. The Prime Minister said would be OK from Wednesday 13 May to “sit in the sun in your local park”, “drive to other destinations” and to ‘play sports with members of your own household’.
- Planning to “increase the fines” associated with FPNs issued under the regulations.

Following the announcement, Dominic Raab (Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) told *BBC News* that guidelines would be changed to allow two people from different households to meet outside staying two meters apart.⁷

On 13 May, regulations were made in England which amended the first coronavirus restrictions regulations. These regulations:

- Amended the list of reasonable excuses to be outside to include recreational purposes.⁸
- Amended the text of the regulations to make it clear that people can meet one person from outside their household in open air spaces for recreation or exercise.⁹
- Increased the fines associated with the FPNs issued under the regulations. Fines for the first offence increased from £60 to £100 (reduced to £50 if paid within 14 days)¹⁰

The first regulations did not need amending to allow people who could not work from home to return to work, as they already provided for this.¹¹

1.2 The lockdown shifts to gatherings restrictions (late-May to late-June)

The third formal review was due on 28 May. That day the Prime Minister published England’s [Covid-19 recovery strategy](#). He announced that restrictions on gatherings would be relaxed to allow people to meet outside, including in private gardens, in groups of up to six from 1 June. He said that it “remains the case that people should not be inside the homes of their friends and families, unless it is to access the garden”.¹²

On 31 May, regulations were made (to have effect from 1 June) which fundamentally altered the first coronavirus restrictions regulations in England. These regulations:

⁷ *BBC News*, [Coronavirus: Use common sense to see loved ones outdoors – Dominic Raab](#), 11 May 2020

⁸ [r2\(3\)\(a\)\(iii\)](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2020*

⁹ [r2\(3\)\(a\)\(iii\)](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2020*

¹⁰ [r2\(4\)](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2020*

¹¹ [r6\(2\)\(f\)](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020*

¹² Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM press conference statement on the five tests](#), 28 May 2020; see also: Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM: Six people can meet outside under new measures to ease lockdown](#), 28 May 2020

8 Coronavirus: A history of English lockdown laws

- Removed the prohibition on being outside without a “reasonable excuse” and replaced it with a requirement to have a “reasonable excuse” to stay overnight somewhere other than your home.¹³
- Changed the gatherings restriction to restrict indoor gatherings of two or more and outdoor gatherings of more than six. A list of exceptions to these rules allowed gatherings for work and education purposes (amongst other things).¹⁴
- Amended the relevant police powers. The police did not have the authority to remove people who are contravening the requirement to stay overnight in their home from where they are staying. They could not use force to break up a prohibited gathering taking place in private.¹⁵
- Changed the requirement to review the regulations every three weeks to every four weeks.¹⁶

The main effect of these changes was to shift the focus of the lockdown away from the former requirement to stay at home and towards the new restrictions on gatherings. Whilst this shift gave people in England far more freedom of movement than they had previously, it still placed restrictions on their ability to gather socially, particularly indoors.

Reopening retail and introducing support bubbles

Two weeks after third formal review the UK Government announced further changes to the lockdown in England. In a statement made on the 10 June, the Prime Minister¹⁷:

- Confirmed that from 15 June all retail businesses would be permitted to reopen.
- Announced that people who live alone or in single parent households would be able to form a ‘[support bubble](#)’ with one other household.

On the 12 June the Government brought forward amendments to the first coronavirus restrictions regulations to give effect to these changes.¹⁸ These changes, along with the managed return of some sporting events and the introduction of the requirement to wear face coverings on public transport from 15 June, effectively brought England into “step two” of the UK Government’s “recovery strategy”.¹⁹

¹³ [r2\(6\), The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 3\) Regulations 2020](#)

¹⁴ [r2\(7\), The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 3\) Regulations 2020](#)

¹⁵ [r2\(8\), The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 3\) Regulations 2020](#)

¹⁶ [r2\(3\), The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 3\) Regulations 2020](#)

¹⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM statement at the coronavirus press conference](#), 10 June 2020

¹⁸ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 4\) Regulations 2020](#)

¹⁹ HM Govt, [Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government’s COVID-19 recovery strategy](#), May 2020, p30; Department of Transport, [Face coverings to become mandatory on public transport](#), 4 June 2020

2. Minimal lockdown restrictions (July to September 2020)

The fourth formal review was due on 25 June. Major changes to England's lockdown were announced on the 23 June. This was the last time major changes were announced connected with a formal review point of the lockdown laws.

The Prime Minister announced in a statement to the House of Commons that from the 4 July²⁰:

- Pubs, restaurants, hairdressers some leisure facilities and tourist attractions would be able to reopen.
- Two households would be able to meet indoors.
- "Staycations" in England would be permitted and "accommodation sites" in England would be reopened.
- Weddings with a maximum of thirty attendees would be permitted.

The Prime Minister said:

Our principle is to trust the British public to use their common sense in the full knowledge of the risks, remembering that the more we open up, the more vigilant we will need to be. From now on, we will ask people to follow guidance on social contact, instead of legislation.²¹

Following the announcement, the UK Government published guidance on what people "can and can't do after 4 July". It said:

It will be against the law to gather in groups larger than 30 people, except for a limited set of circumstances to be set out in law and unless all members of the group are exclusively from two households.

Moving forward, from 4 July, people will be trusted to continue acting responsibly by following this and related guidance, subject to an upper legal limit on gatherings (as described above).

This implied that, barring amended restrictions to gatherings most restrictions would be revoked from 4 July.

On the 3 July new coronavirus restrictions regulations were made for England to come into force the next day.²² These regulations:

- Revoked the old regulations (and its amendment regulations).
- Provided a new prohibition of gatherings of more than thirty people.
- Provided the UK Government with new powers to restrict access to public spaces.

²⁰ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM announces easing of lockdown restrictions](#), 23 June 2020; HC Deb, [Covid-19 update](#), 23 June [volume 677, c1167-1170]

²¹ HC Deb, [Covid-19 update](#), 23 June [volume 677, c1168]

²² [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(No. 2\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#)

- Provided the police with similar enforcement powers they had under the old regulations to enforce the new rules.

2.1 Higher penalties for illegal raves

The UK Government made new regulations in response to the coronavirus pandemic (including laws requiring people to wear face coverings and those which amended local authority powers) but did not make changes to the principal lockdown regulations in England until late August.

On the 27 August the UK Government amended the English regulations to create a new offence of participating or organising an illegal rave during the pandemic. Those accused of this offence can be issued an FPN worth £10,000.²³

2.2 Early local restrictions

Stricter coronavirus restrictions for certain local areas had been used as early as July. Leicester was the first city to be placed into “local lockdown” on 1 July.²⁴ More areas were placed in local lockdown during the summer and autumn. Initially, local lockdowns were imposed via standalone regulations. These laws were made by the UK Government national governments, but only apply in a specified “protected area”.²⁵ The rules differed in each area and changed frequently. By October there was a complicated patchwork of local restrictions across England.

Pre-tier system “local lockdown” regulations in England			
Regulations	Date introduced	Number of area changes	Date revoked
The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Leicester) Regulations 2020	4 July	3	3 August
The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Blackburn with Darwen and Luton) Regulations 2020	25 July	0	1 August
The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Blackburn with Darwen and Bradford) Regulations 2020	1 August	5	22 September

²³ [r2, The Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Restrictions on Holding of Gatherings and Amendment\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#)

²⁴ HC Deb, [Covid-19 Update](#), 29 June 2020, [volume 678, c111]

²⁵ See for example: [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(North East and North West of England\) Regulations 2020](#)

<u>The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Leicester) (No. 2) Regulations 2020</u>	3 August	1	14 October
<u>The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) on Gatherings) (North of England) Regulations 2020 (revoked)</u>	5 August	9	14 October
<u>The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Bolton) Regulations 2020</u>	10 September	0	3 October
<u>The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Birmingham, Sandwell and Solihull) Regulations 2020 (revoked)</u>	15 September	1	14 October
<u>The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (North East of England) Regulations 2020</u>	18 September	5	14 October

3. Reintroducing restrictions (September to October 2020)

3.1 The rule of six

On 9 September, the Prime Minister addressed a press conference at Number 10 to announce the tightening of coronavirus restrictions for England. He said that “over time, the rules have become quite complicated and confusing” and that therefore the Government was “simplifying and strengthening the rules – making them easier for you to understand and for the police to enforce.” He announced that from Monday 14 September a new “rule of six” would be introduced. People would be prohibited from meeting socially in groups of more than six in any setting.²⁶

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock made a statement to the House of Commons the following day providing more details on the prospective rule.²⁷

Regulations were made on the 13 September which came into force the next day which put the “rule of six in law.”²⁸

3.2 Restrictions on opening hours for hospitality businesses

On the 21 September, the Chief Scientific Advisor and Chief Medical Officer for England gave a briefing on coronavirus. They set out the latest data on the spread of coronavirus and warned that “we are in a situation where numbers are clearly increasing. They’re increasing across all age groups.”²⁹

The following day the Prime Minister made a statement in the House of Commons in which he announced further changes to England’s lockdown laws in order to help control the spread of coronavirus. He announced that from Thursday 24 September:

all pubs, bars and restaurants must operate a table service only, except for takeaways. Together with all hospitality venues, they must close at 10 pm and to help the police enforce this rule I am afraid that that means, alas, closing and not just calling for last orders, because simplicity is paramount. The same will apply to takeaways, although deliveries can continue thereafter. I am sorry that this will affect many businesses just getting back on their feet, but we must act to stop the virus from being transmitted in bars and restaurants.³⁰

²⁶ Prime Minister’s office, Number 10 Downing Street, [Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 9 September 2020

²⁷ HC Deb, [Covid-19 Update](#), 10 September 2020

²⁸ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(No. 2\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 4\) Regulations 2020](#)

²⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, Department of Health and Social Care, and Sir Patrick Vallance, [Chief Scientific Advisor and Chief Medical Officer briefing on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 21 September 2020

³⁰ HC Deb, [Covid-19](#), 22 September 2020








Regulations were made on the 23 September, to come into force the next day, which gave effect to the change.³¹

3.3 The first-tier system

On 12 October, the Prime Minister made a statement in the House of Commons saying the Government was “simplifying” local restrictions by introducing a tiered system:

In recent months we have worked with local leaders to counter local spikes with targeted restrictions. This local approach has inevitably produced different sets of rules in different parts of the country, which are now complex to understand and to enforce. So just as we simplified our national rules with the rule of six, we will now simplify and standardise our local rules by introducing a three-tiered system of local covid alert levels in England, set at medium, high and very high.³²

On 14 October 2020, the new tiered system for coronavirus restrictions was implemented.³³

England's first tier system			
Tier	Gatherings	Hospitality	
1 Medium	 Rule of six People are prohibited from socialising in groups of more than six (unless for an exempt purpose)	 Opening hours Hospitality businesses must close at 10pm.	
2 High	 Household mixing People are prohibited from visiting meeting people they do not live indoors.	 Opening hours Hospitality businesses must close at 10pm	
3 Very high	 Household mixing People are prohibited from mixing with other households both indoors and most outdoor settings.	 Opening hours Hospitality businesses must close at 10pm.	 Alcohol restrictions Pubs, bars and restaurants must serve alcohol with a “substantial meal”. This rule means that “wet pubs” close.

³¹ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(No. 2\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 5\) Regulations 2020](#)

³² HC Deb, [Covid-19 Update](#), 12 October 2020

³³ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Local COVID-19 Alert Level\) \(Medium\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#); [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Local COVID-19 Alert Level\) \(High\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#); [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Local COVID-19 Alert Level\) \(Very High\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#)

4. Second national lockdown (November 2020)

On 31 October, the Prime Minister addressed a Number 10 press conference to announce that a new national lockdown would be imposed from the 5 November.³⁴ He made a statement on the 2 November (the following Monday) setting out the details of the new lockdown.³⁵

The rules during the second national lockdown resembled those imposed during the first. People had to:

- **People had to stay home:** Individuals are permitted to leave home when they have a “reasonable excuse”. There was a non-exhaustive list of reasonable excuses which includes buying essential goods, conducting work which it is not “reasonably possible” to do from home and for “open air recreation”.³⁶
- **People had to minimise their social contact:** Individuals were only permitted to gather inside with those in their support bubble.³⁷ People were permitted to meet one person at a time outside.³⁸
- **Non-essential high street businesses had to close** or move their business to delivery only.³⁹ Hospitality businesses (such as restaurants and pubs) could continue to sell food and drinks for consumption at home.⁴⁰

³⁴ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), 31 October 2020

³⁵ HC Deb, [Covid-19 Update](#), 2 November 2020

³⁶ [r6](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No. 4) Regulations 2020*

³⁷ [r8](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No. 4) Regulations 2020*

³⁸ [r9](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No. 4) Regulations 2020*

³⁹ [r16](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No. 4) Regulations 2020*

⁴⁰ [r17](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No. 4) Regulations 2020*

5. Reintroducing the tier system (December 2020)

On 23 November, the Prime Minister made a statement in the House of Commons setting out the Government's [Covid-19 winter plan](#). The plan included the reintroduction of a modified tiered system from the 2 December and special measures for socialising during Christmas.⁴¹

The restrictions in the second tiered system differed from those in place prior to the November national lockdown. There were three main differences⁴²:

- The business rules applicable to hospitality businesses in tier two were applied in tier three prior to the national lockdown. Under the new system, hospitality businesses in tier three were now required to close and move their business to takeaway only.
- Hospitality businesses permitted to remain open had to close at 11pm (instead of 10pm as was required under the first system).
- Organised large events (elite sport events, live performances) could take place in tiers one and two (with restrictions). Previously, organised large events weren't permitted in any tier.

The following Thursday (26 November), the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced the tier allocations for England.⁴³ Accompanying his statement was a document setting out the Government's [rationale for each allocation](#). Only Cornwall, the Isle of Scilly and the Isle of Wight were placed in tier one.⁴⁴ The modified tiered system was instated on 2 December 2020.⁴⁵

5.1 Restrictions over the Christmas period

The information in the section is taken from the Library briefing [Coronavirus: Christmas restrictions](#). That briefing provides more information on the restrictions and the spread of coronavirus in England at the time.

On 25 November 2020, the Governments in the four nations of the UK set out plans to allow families and friends to meet more at Christmas than was previously allowed under the coronavirus restrictions. They stated that during the 23-27 December up to three households could form an exclusive 'Christmas bubble.'

Rules for the forming of a Christmas bubble, were set out in the [Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(All Tiers\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#) in England. These included that it must be formed of a maximum

⁴¹ HC Deb, [Covid-19: Winter Plan](#), 23 November 2020

⁴² House of Commons Library analysis of [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(All Tiers\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#); [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(England\) \(No. 4\) Regulations 2020](#)

⁴³ HC Deb, [Covid-19 Update](#), 26 November 2020

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(All Tiers\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#)

of three households, you could only be in one bubble and that you could not change your Christmas bubble. Equivalent legislation was introduced in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

However, alongside the legal provision for people to meet up over the Christmas period had been a message from scientists and the Government that people should exercise caution. For example, in November, the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, [cautioned](#) that he would not advise someone to hug an elderly relative at Christmas; he said that even though something was allowed in law, did not mean that someone should do it.⁴⁶

Introducing a tier four

On 19 December 2020, the Prime Minister, and the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Medical officer, announced in a Downing Street press conference that urgent changes needed to be made to coronavirus restrictions. This was in response to rapidly increasing cases of Covid-19, especially in London, the South East and East of England, and concerns about a new variant of the coronavirus.

A stricter tier of coronavirus restrictions, tier 4, was announced on 19 December to apply across London and large parts of the South East of England and came into force at 7am on 20 December.⁴⁷ The tier four rules were broadly similar to those in place during the national lockdown in November.

In tier 4 areas, people were required to stay at home unless they have a reasonable excuse to leave. All non-essential retail and hospitality businesses were closed (with the exception of click and collect, delivery and takeaway services) and people could only meet with one other person in certain public outdoor places.

Change to Christmas rules

The Prime Minister also announced changes to the rules in England over the Christmas period. He said that in light of the evidence on a new variant of coronavirus, Christmas plans could not continue:

As Prime Minister, it is my duty to take the difficult decisions, to do what is right to protect the people of this country.

Given the early evidence we have on this new variant of the virus, and the potential risk it poses, it is with a heavy heart that I must tell you we cannot continue with Christmas as planned.

In England, those living in tier 4 areas should not mix with anyone outside their own household at Christmas, though support bubbles will remain in place for those at particular risk of loneliness or isolation.








Across the rest of the country, the Christmas rules allowing up to three households to meet will now be limited to Christmas Day only, rather than the five days as previously set out.

⁴⁶ BBC News, [Covid: Don't hug elderly relatives at Christmas warns Chris Whitty](#), 26 November 2020

⁴⁷ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(All Tiers\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 4\) Regulations 2020](#)







As before, there will be no relaxation on 31 December, so people must not break the rules at New Year.⁴⁸

In tier 4 areas, the rules were not be relaxed at all over the Christmas period. No indoor gatherings were allowed over the Christmas period (with certain exceptions to this, including support bubbles). In tiers 1-3, Christmas bubbles were allowed, but only for one day on Christmas day.

England's second tiered system ⁴⁹				
	Rule of six		Large gatherings	Opening hours
				
1				
Medium alert	Indoor and outdoor gatherings of more than six people are prohibited unless exempt.		Those who organise gatherings of 30 or more people face higher penalties. Large events (elite sport, live performances) can operate at 50% capacity or up to 1,000/ 4,000 people indoors/ outdoors (whichever is lower).	Hospitality venues must call last orders at 10pm and close by 11pm.
	Household mixing	Large gatherings	Opening hours	Alcohol sales restrictions
				
2				
High alert	People are prohibited from meeting those not part of their support bubble inside. People can meet up to six people outside.	Those who organise gatherings of 30 or more people face higher penalties. Large events can operate at 50% capacity or up to 1,000/ 2,000 people indoors/ outdoors (whichever is lower).	Hospitality venues must call last orders at 10pm and close by 11pm.	Hospitality can only serve alcohol with a main meal.

⁴⁸ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#): 19 December 2020

⁴⁹ [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(All Tiers\) \(England\) Regulations 2020](#)

<p>3 Very high alert</p>	<p>Household mixing</p>  <p>People are prohibited from meeting those not part of their support bubble inside. People can meet up to six people in outdoor public spaces (parks, public gardens etc).</p>	<p>Large gatherings</p>  <p>Those who organise illegal gatherings of 30 or more people face higher penalties.</p> <p>Large events are not permitted.</p>	<p>Closures</p>  <p>Hospitality must close but are permitted to operate via takeaway or delivery only.</p>
<p>4 Stay at home</p>	<p>Staying home</p>  <p>People are prohibited from leaving their home without a "reasonable excuse".</p>	<p>Social gatherings ban</p>  <p>People are prohibited from meeting those not part of their household/support bubble inside.</p> <p>People can only meet one person from outside their household/support bubble in a public outdoor place.</p> <p>Those who organise gatherings of 30 or more people face higher penalties.</p>	<p>Closures</p>  <p>Hospitality must close but are permitted to operate via takeaway or delivery only.</p> <p>Non-essential retail must close but are permitted to operate via click and collect or delivery only.</p>

6. Third national lockdown (January to March 2021)

On Monday 4 January, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, addressed the nation to announce a third national lockdown for England.⁵⁰ The Prime Minister said that hospitals “are under more pressure from Covid than at any time since the start of the pandemic”. He said it was “clear that we need to do more, together, to bring [the] new variant of the virus under control while our vaccines are rolled out”.⁵¹

The Government made amendment regulations on 5 January 2021 to the existing tier system regulations. These regulations brought the national lockdown into force. The changes came into force at midnight on 6 January.⁵²

During the lockdown people were required to stay home and were only permitted to leave with a reasonable excuse. Meeting one person outside for recreation was not permitted under these national rules. However, two people not in a support bubble were allowed to meet to exercise.⁵³ There were limited exempted larger gatherings from this rule, but religious services and some small weddings were exempt.⁵⁴ The third national lockdown also involved the closing of schools (something that was not a feature of the second lockdown). The Prime Minister said he hoped schools would be able to re-open from February half term and that areas might be able to move down tiers from then.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [Prime Minister announces national lockdown](#), 4 January 2021

⁵¹ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [Prime Minister's address to the nation](#), 4 January 2021

⁵² [r3](#), *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 3) and (All Tiers) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021*

⁵³ Cabinet Office, [National lockdown: Stay at Home](#), 4 January 2021

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Prime Minister's Office, [Prime Minister's address to the nation: 4 January 2021](#)

7. The steps out of lockdown (March 2021 to present)

On Monday 22 February 2021, the Prime Minister made a statement to the House of Commons setting out a four-step plan for easing lockdown restrictions in England, as part of the Government's [roadmap out of lockdown](#).⁵⁶ While acknowledging that the threat posed by the virus "remains substantial", he credited the "resolve of the British public and the extraordinary success of our NHS in vaccinating over 17.5 million people across the UK" for enabling these steps to be taken.⁵⁷

The Prime Minister stated the intention for the roadmap to be "cautious but irreversible", describing it as a "one-way road to freedom". However, he did say that the Government could not "rule out re-imposing restrictions at local or regional level if evidence suggests they are necessary to contain or suppress a new variant which escapes the vaccines".⁵⁸

Instead of a return to the tier system, he confirmed that the Government planned to lift restrictions in all areas at the same time as the level of infection was "broadly similar" across England.⁵⁹

Step one began on 8 March with the reopening of schools. From the same date, people could also leave home for recreation with their household or support bubble, if eligible for one, or with one person from outside their household.

Following this, the Government passed new legislation to facilitate the remaining steps out of lockdown ("the Roadmap Regulations"). These regulations came into force on 28 March and will expire on 31 June 2021, unless revoked or replaced before.⁶⁰

From 29 March, the stay at home order was lifted and the rule of six was reintroduced in outdoor settings. Outdoor sports facilities were permitted to reopen, and formally organised outdoor sport to recommence.

England moved to step two restrictions on the 12 April. At a press conference confirming the move to step two, the Prime Minister announced that "shops, gyms, zoos, holiday campsites, personal care services like hairdressers and, of course, beer gardens and outdoor hospitality of all kinds" would all be able to reopen.⁶¹ In addition, the number of guests permitted at weddings was increased from 6 to 15, and the number of visitors to care homes from one to two.

⁵⁶ HC Deb, [Covid-19: Road Map](#), 22 February 2021 [volume 689, c625-628]

⁵⁷ Ibid., c625

⁵⁸ Ibid., c628





⁵⁹ Ibid., c625

⁶⁰ [r21](#), The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps) (England) Regulations 2021

⁶¹ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM statement at coronavirus press conference: 5 April 2021](#), 5 April 2021




As part of step three, which will be reached “no earlier than 17 May”, the Government intends to relax restrictions on outdoor gatherings to permit groups of up to 30 people. Indoors, the rule of six will apply. In addition, most businesses “in all but the highest risk sectors” will be able to reopen, including in indoor settings.⁶²

Step four, which the Government says will be reached “no earlier than 21 June”, involves lifting “all legal limits on social contact”.⁶³

England: Lockdown restrictions steps			
	Movement	Gatherings	Business
<p>1</p> <p>(from 29 March)</p>	<p>International travel ban</p>  <p>People are prohibited from leaving the United Kingdom without a “reasonable excuse”.</p>	<p>Rule of six or two households (outdoors)</p> <p>6</p> <p>People are prohibited from meeting inside with people not in their household/support bubble unless exemptions apply.</p> <p>Outdoor gatherings involving more than six people or people from only two households are prohibited unless exempted. Exemptions include gatherings of people from only two households and organised team sports.</p>	<p>Closures</p>  <p>Non-essential retail, hospitality venues and close contact venues must remain closed (except click and collect, takeaway and delivery).</p>
<p>2</p> <p>(From 12 April)</p>	<p>International travel ban</p>  <p>People are prohibited from leaving the United Kingdom without a “reasonable excuse”.</p>	<p>Rule of six or two households (outdoors)</p> <p>6</p> <p>People are prohibited from meeting inside with people not in their household/support bubble unless exemptions apply.</p> <p>Outdoor gatherings involving more than six</p>	<p>Reopening</p>  <p>Non-essential retail and personal care services can re-open.</p> <p>Hospitality venues may offer food and drink for consumption outdoors.</p>

⁶² Cabinet Office, [COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021 \(Summary\): Step 3](#), 22 February 2021

⁶³ Cabinet Office, [COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021 \(Summary\): Step 4](#), 22 February 2021

people are prohibited unless exempted.				
	International travel ban	Large gatherings (outdoors)	Rule of six or two households (indoors)	Reopening
3 (No earlier than 17 May)	 People are prohibited from leaving the United Kingdom without a "reasonable excuse".	 Outdoor gatherings over 30 people prohibited.	6 Indoor gatherings involving more than six people are prohibited unless exempted.	 Hospitality can reopen inside with table service. Businesses such as nightclubs and sexual entertainment venues must remain closed.
4 (No earlier than 21 June)	<i>Removal of "all legal limits on social contact"</i>			<i>Reopening of nightclubs and easing of restrictions on large events and performances.</i>
Note: As explained above, there is no provision for level four in the Roadmap Regulations.				

7.1 International travel ban

The lifting of the requirement to stay at home on 29 March would have meant international travel could have resumed for any purpose, subject to certain entry requirements. However, [regulation 8](#) of the new Roadmap Regulations provides for a specific travel ban (subject to reasonable excuses provided for in [Schedule 5](#) and certain people listed in [Schedule 6](#)) which makes it an offence to:

- leave England to travel to a destination outside the United Kingdom⁶⁴; or
- travel to, or be present at, an embarkation point for the purpose of travelling from there to a destination outside the United Kingdom.

According to the roadmap, any return to non-essential international travel will take place "no earlier than 17 May". The Government hopes that travel to and from the UK can recommence in time for people to take a summer holiday this year.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ [Schedule 5](#) provides that persons are permitted to travel to the Common Travel Area, where that is their final destination.

⁶⁵ The Cabinet Office, [Roadmap Reviews: Update](#), 5 April 2021

7.2 Powers to disapply restrictions

The Roadmap Regulations provide powers for the Secretary of State to disapply the coronavirus restrictions in relation to a specific premises or event, for the purpose of research on the potential transmission of Covid19 in controlled environments. The Secretary of State must seek advice from the Chief Medical Officer before making such a direction.⁶⁶

This is a new power that wasn't present in previous iterations of England's lockdown law. It appears to allow the Government to pilot and sanction some large ticketed events, as the roadmap out of lockdown says will happen during steps two and three.

⁶⁶ [19](#), The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps) (England) Regulations 2021

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).