

Updated guidance for UK veterinary practices on working safely during Covid-19

This BVA guidance is intended to support veterinary practices to make the transition from providing essential veterinary care only to providing a more normal range of veterinary services while working safely.

It replaces previous BVA guidance on essential veterinary services and recognises that veterinary practices will need to make the transition at their own pace and according to national and devolved legislation and local guidance. It will remain in place for as long as necessary in line with government advice.

This BVA guidance is supplementary to the [RCVS guidance and flowchart](#), published on 9 April and updated on 19 May.

Government plans for easing lockdown restrictions across the UK

During May, all four governments of the UK announced plans for easing lockdown restrictions (see summary of plans at Annex 1, page 6).

All governments are working towards easing lockdown restrictions in a number of steps or phases and transitioning to a “new normal”. The easing will be done at different times and at a different pace in different parts of the UK, but the contents of the stages are broadly similar.

The Institute for Government has produced a useful [overview of the different approaches in the four nations](#) of the UK.

There is no explicit guidance on changes to the veterinary sector in any of the governments’ plans. Veterinary professionals must continue to work within RCVS guidance.

Working on the borders

Due to the legal differences and variations in approach between the four nations of the UK and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, vets should be mindful of their own local situation and refer to the relevant government website for more information.

Veterinary professionals working with clients on both sides of a border will need to take this into consideration and work under the laws and guidance relevant to where the work is taking place.

Transitioning to a more normal range of veterinary services

In line with the easing of restrictions across the UK, we are advising that veterinary practices *begin* transitioning towards providing as full a range of veterinary services as possible in a safe manner. This transition must be:

1. in line with local legislation, rules, and guidance and local conditions;
2. in the context of safe working practices; and
3. in line with clinical and professional judgement.

However, during the pandemic it will not be a return to pre-Covid ‘business as usual’.

General principles for veterinary practices

- 1. Safe working:** All services should be risk assessed and provided in a manner that supports safe working and social/physical distancing, but recognises that 2m distancing will not always be possible between team members. Including:
 - a. continuing to work from home if possible and appropriate
 - b. minimising in-person contact with clients
 - c. maintaining a safe physical distance from others where possible
 - d. working in fixed pairs or small teams, where possible, to reduce contact with others
 - e. considering wider health and safety needs, such as safe animal handling
 - f. practising good hand hygiene and biosecurity at all times
- 2. Prioritising cases:** Each veterinary practice will need to make this transition at their own pace, based on their available resources and the extent to which they can adapt their workplace or working practices. Practices will need to assess and prioritise veterinary caseloads, including cases that have not been seen during the lockdown, and manage how to re-establish services and start seeing healthy animals. Prioritising must be based on clinical and professional judgement for animal health and welfare and public health, and practices may want to take a phased approach to undertaking this work.
- 3. New ways of working:** Individual consults and procedures may take longer than they used to in order to practise social/physical distancing. Practices should consider how to charge appropriately for their professional time, including for remote consultations, and how to communicate this to clients.
- 4. Prudent use of resources:** Veterinary professionals should continue to be mindful of the prudent use of resources, such as medical PPE and oxygen, if supplies are limited. (See section on PPE and face coverings below.)
- 5. Supporting colleagues:** Practices who have staff returning from self-isolation or furlough should provide return-to-work meetings to support staff in understanding any changes to previous ways of working, including social/physical distancing measures and the use of technology for remote consultations. Employers should be aware of the importance of supporting all employees' mental health and wellbeing at times of change and uncertainty. Advice and guidance are available via [Vetlife](#), [Vet Support NI](#), and [Vet Support Scotland](#). The government has also provided [Guidance for the public on the mental health and wellbeing aspects of coronavirus](#).

Supporting one another

We continue to urge neighbouring practices to work together to ensure full geographical cover for emergency veterinary services, for example, where a practice is struggling to cover the rota due to staff self-isolating.

We are asking practices, at these difficult times, to put aside commercial interests to support one another, including encouraging the retention of clients by their original practices.

Face coverings and PPE

Face coverings: In England, Scotland and Northern Ireland the government is advising people to consider using cloth face coverings in certain circumstances, for example in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not possible. In Wales, it is considered a matter of personal choice.

Face coverings are not intended to protect the wearer, but to protect against inadvertent transmission of the disease to others if you are asymptomatic. A cloth face covering is not the same as surgical facemasks used as PPE and supplies of surgical masks must continue to be reserved for those who need it.

Face coverings in veterinary practice: The wearing of a cloth face covering is optional throughout the UK, but veterinary practices may want to consider the following:

- asking staff to wear cloth face coverings when not using surgical masks for specific tasks (eg surgery and chemotherapy) – this can help to model good behaviour and is a reminder that we are not working as normal.
- asking clients to wear cloth face coverings when entering a practice, for example attending a euthanasia. This should be discussed during the triage and appointment booking process.

PPE: The UK Government is advising against the precautionary use of extra PPE. RCVS Knowledge has produced excellent [guidance on the use of PPE in veterinary practice during the Covid-19 pandemic](#) (updated 15 May 2020). You can also watch the RCVS Knowledge webinars on infection control and biosecurity in practice: [Part 1 \(recorded 27 March\)](#) and [Part 2 \(recorded 30 April\)](#).

BVA Guidelines for safe working in veterinary workplaces

1. Undertake a risk assessment for your workplace and any on-site visits

- Involve colleagues, as far as possible, to help the whole team understand the risks and mitigating actions.

2. Minimise client contact as much as possible and manage their expectations:

- Risk assess all in-person work.
- Clarify the client's medical status with regard to Covid-19 before booking any appointments.
- Advise owners coming into the practice (eg for a euthanasia) on what to expect, including that it may look and feel different to normal due to social distancing measures.
- Only allow one client per animal, where possible.
- Consider asking clients, if possible, to wear cloth face coverings when inside the practice.
- Continue to ask clients to wait outside the consult room and, if necessary, outside the premises.
- Obtain histories and discuss and agree treatment plans remotely.
- Use technology to triage and consult whenever possible and appropriate.
- Consider remote prescribing in line with [RCVS guidance](#) (Note: [this guidance will be reviewed](#) no later than 30 June).
- Obtain payment remotely.
- Ensure contact-free collection of medication is in place, with a specific, secure collection time and place organised in advance.
- Post medication if appropriate following [Post Office guidance](#) and, where applicable, following [RCVS controlled drugs guidance](#).

3. All staff who can work from home should continue to work from home at this time. This could include:

- Administrative staff.
- Vets and nurses carrying out triage and remote consultations from home, if appropriate.
- Enabling working from home by people who are self-isolating and those who are clinically vulnerable, if appropriate.

4. Minimise staff contact in the workplace as much as possible:

- Stagger arrival, departure, and break times.
- Reduce congestion, for example, by having more and separate entry and exit points to the workplace.
- Work in consistent pairs or small teams, if possible, for those who need to work in close proximity, for example, work that involves lifting or restraining animals and surgical procedures.
- Allocate teams to specific workspaces (such as consult rooms and theatres) and avoid sharing equipment where possible, such as pens, stethoscopes, and otoscopes.
- Don't share food and other provisions.

5. Follow all hygiene and biosecurity measures:

- Provide hand washing facilities (or hand sanitiser if washing is not possible) at all entry and exit points and in vehicles.
- Thoroughly clean equipment and work areas after each use.
- Follow [RCVS Knowledge PPE advice](#).
- Wash uniforms regularly (if possible, launder them at work) and don't wear them travelling to or from home.
- See additional section above on PPE and face coverings.

6. Re-think the physical space and layout:

- Consider changing the layout of workspaces, if possible, to allow people to work further apart from one another.
- Create additional space by using any parts of the premises freed up by remote working.
- Use floor tape or paint to mark areas to help staff and clients keep to a 2m distance, where possible.
- Install screens to protect workers in reception areas or similar spaces.
- Define the number of clients that can reasonably follow 2m social distancing within the space, where possible. Take into account total floorspace as well as likely pinch points and busy areas.
- Ensure ventilation systems are serviced and in working order.
- Use outside areas for queuing where available and safe, eg car parks, but be aware of the impact on public spaces.
- Put in place pick-up and drop-off collection points, where possible, rather than passing goods such as medications hand-to-hand.
- *For further advice and guidance see also the 'Covid-19 Secure' guidelines on [shops and branches](#) and [offices](#) (applicability is England only but the generic advice may be useful across the UK).*

7. Risk assess and plan ahead for home visits:

- For all home visits:
 - Discuss plans in advance with householders to confirm how you intend to work. Make sure they understand the social distancing and hygiene measures that need to be followed and manage their expectations.
 - Minimise contact with the client and where face-to-face interaction is required, then this should only be with one person per visit. Ask the client to secure the animal ahead of the visit.
 - Ask householders to leave all internal doors open to minimise contact with door handles.
 - Use a fixed pairing system if you have to work in close proximity.
 - Allocate the same person to the same household if multiple visits are required.

- When visiting a household where someone is clinically vulnerable (but has not been asked to shield):
 - Make arrangements to avoid any face-to-face contact.
 - Be particularly strict about handwashing and other hygiene measures.
- If you are requested to assist with an animal in an infected or suspected household:
 - Follow [RCVS advice](#) and [APHA advice](#)
 - There is no expectation that vets should attend an infected or suspected household, in line with the RCVS Code supporting guidance (3.37f and 3.43)
 - Wear appropriate PPE
 - Mitigate the risks, for example, by arranging to see the animal outside the home, ie in a garden or garage.
- *For further advice and guidance see also the 'Covid-19 Secure' guidelines on [working in other people's homes](#) (applicability is England only but the generic advice may be useful across the UK).*

8. Risk assess and plan ahead for farm and yard visits:

- Maintain safe working practices around large animals and consider taking a second member of practice staff to assist. If two members of staff must travel to a site, consider travelling in separate vehicles or fixed pairings.
- Use a consistent pairing or team system.
- Risk assess and plan ahead. Clarify the client's medical status with regard to Covid-19 before booking appointments. Make sure your client understands the social distancing measures you will be putting in place and knows how you intend to work. In cases where clients are self-isolating or confirmed to have Covid-19, they should not be involved in the visit at all.
- Where possible, examine animals outside in the open air, rather than in an enclosed airspace.
- Maintain a physical distance of 2m from other people as much as possible.
- Make sure you follow your usual biosecurity practices, including wearing clean protective clothing and disinfecting between clients.
- Consider sedating animals needing treatment or investigation where appropriate, especially if this helps maintain the 2m physical distance from the handler.
- Minimise contact with the client, and where face-to-face interaction is required, this should only be with one person per visit.
- Do not enter the farmhouse or any other residential area for any reason and do not accept any drinks or food.
- Make sure no one else enters your vehicle during the visit (for example to collect equipment).
- *For further advice and guidance see also the 'Covid-19 Secure' guidelines on [working outdoors](#) (applicability is England only but the generic advice may be useful across the UK).*

9. Minimise the risks of vehicle sharing

- Avoid multiple occupancy vehicles if possible.
- If more than one person needs to travel to a client, the following should be encouraged:
 - Use a fixed pairing system – journeys should be with the same individuals and limited in the number of people travelling per vehicle.
 - Maximise space between occupants, for example sitting in diagonally opposite seats.
 - Maintaining good ventilation, for example, keeping windows open and passengers facing away from one another to reduce risk of transmission.
 - Vehicles regularly cleaned using standard cleaning products, with emphasis on handles and other areas where passengers may touch surfaces.
 - Wash hands before getting into the vehicle and on arrival at the visit. Keep hand sanitiser/wipes within vehicles to clean hands after each visit.

Next steps

We encourage practices to use this guidance (and other information and tools available on government websites) to carry out risk assessments for your own circumstances in discussion with the whole veterinary team.

Further advice

The four UK governments have developed, or are developing, guidance for workplaces. Practice owners and employees should review relevant guidance in the country where they are based. In England, the UK government has published [‘Covid-19 Secure’ guidelines](#) for eight different workplace settings (including offices, shops, and outdoor settings). These guidelines were developed in consultation with the devolved nations but are applicable in England only. However, they provide a useful framework for safe working.

Employers have a responsibility to follow all relevant guidelines. In England, employers should [download the notice to display in their workplaces](#) to show their employees, clients and other visitors, that they have complied with the government’s guidance.

For the latest BVA updates please visit: www.bva.co.uk/coronavirus

For additional species-specific advice, please visit relevant veterinary associations’ websites.

Annex 1

Summary of government plans for easing lockdown restrictions across the UK (as at 26 May 2020)

England

- [Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government’s Covid-19 recovery strategy](#) (11 May)
- This sets out three phases (current situation; smarter controls, reliable treatment) and three steps for lifting restrictions:
 - Step One (from 13 May) included some people returning to work, advice on face coverings in some circumstances, and allowing unlimited time outside for exercise, meeting one person from outside your household, and driving to outdoor open spaces in England.
 - Step Two (no earlier than 1 June and dependent on the five tests) includes a phased return to schools, opening non-essential retail, allowing events behind closed doors, and expanding household groups to include one other household.
 - Step Three (no earlier than 4 July and dependent on the five tests) includes reopening some of the remaining businesses and premises (including personal care, hospitality, public places, and leisure facilities).
- Decisions on easing measures will be based on the five tests set out on 16 April: protecting NHS capacity; a sustained and consistent fall in daily death rates; the rate of infection is decreasing; the operational challenges can be met; and measures will not risk a second peak of infections.
- The Government set out a new Covid-19 Alert Level system (from 1-5) to communicate the level of risk to the public. A Joint Biosecurity Centre will be set up to analyse data and set the new alert level.
- The UK Government also published guidance on making workplaces “[Covid-19 Secure](#)” on 11 May. This guidance was developed in consultation with the devolved nations but is applicable to England only.

Scotland

- [Route map for moving out of lockdown](#) (21 May)
- This sets out five phases (from Lockdown to Phase 4) to the varying of restrictions and in each phase describes what this will mean in different sectors: seeing family & friends; getting around; school, childcare and other educational settings; working or running a business; shopping, eating and drinking out; sport, culture and leisure activities; community and public services; gatherings and occasions; and health & social care.
- Scotland may move to Phase 1 following the 28 May review of Covid-19 regulations.
- Decisions on moving between the phases will be based on criteria which will be reviewed every three weeks. It may be that not everything listed in a single phase will happen at the same time.

Wales

- [Unlocking our society and economy: continuing the conversation](#) (15 May)
- This sets out a traffic light approach of Lockdown, Red, Amber, Green phases across different sectors: education and care for children; seeing family & friends; getting around; exercise, playing sport & games; relaxing & special occasions; working or running a business; going shopping; using public services; and practising faith.
- It does not set out a timeframe for moving between the phases but sets out where Wales is currently in each sector. The First Minister said on 15 May that Wales was moving carefully and cautiously out of Lockdown and into the Red zone.
- Decisions on moving between the phases or zones will be dependent on continued progress in containing the virus, as well as the development of guidance. Wales will also be informed by the Joint Biosecurity Centre's work on alert levels.

Northern Ireland

- [Executive approach to decision making](#) (12 May)
- This sets out five steps across six sectors: work, retail, education, travel, family & community, and sport, cultural & leisure activities.
- It does not set out a timeframe for the steps and the steps will not necessarily apply at the same time in different sectors.
- Decisions on moving between the steps will be based on three criteria: evidence and analysis; capacity of the health and social care services; and assessment of the wider health, societal and economic impacts of the regulations.