



British Veterinary Union (BVU) in UNITE **COVID-19 Advice and Guidance**

In light of the current global crises surrounding COVID-19, the British Veterinary Union (BVU) in UNITE, which is the largest UK trade union, can offer advice and guidance. Any members with concerns regarding their employment rights, workplace conditions and health protections should contact us as soon as possible. Since many colleagues will be faced with the same issues and anxieties, this advice is intended to benefit all veterinary workers, including support staff.

The disruption caused by COVID-19 will likely cause significant financial difficulties for the veterinary industry. UNITE has been lobbying the government to ensure that worker's rights and interests are recognised and protected, the result of which will be felt in all workers' pockets over the coming months.

If you are not already a member, please consider joining today to show solidarity with workers across the country facing financial hardship as a result of COVID-19, and to discover the wide range of employment services and protections BVU can offer you. While BVU in UNITE are proud to offer all members legal advice from day 1, the full package of members' benefits and entitlements is available to all workers of four weeks membership.

[Joining the British Veterinary Union](#)

Health and Safety

As a medical profession, we should be demonstrating high levels of biosecurity and risk management.

Practices should not take unnecessary risks. Services should be reduced to include only true emergencies and food security services. This will ensure that medical supplies can be prioritised for human healthcare services.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASAWA), employers have a duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their workforce and those affected by their operations (e.g. clients and paraprofessionals).

Important considerations for veterinary practices include:

- Ensuring adequate hand-washing facilities and PPE for staff and members of the public attending the practice
- Suspending routine work
- Telephonic consultation and triage
- Advance screening and risk classification of clients, with relevant precautions based on risk
- Sharing 24/7 provision of urgent care with other practices and/or companies
- Promptly identifying and isolating potentially infectious individuals. Nobody suspected to have, or have been in contact with COVID-19 should remain in the workplace under any circumstances. **Nobody suspected to have COVID-19 should remain in the workplace under any circumstances.**
- If any worker develops a new, continuous cough or high temperature, they should be sent home to follow self-isolation procedures.
- Cleaning and disinfecting communal objects and surfaces regularly, using standard cleaning products.
- Workplaces should consider, where feasible, splitting their teams into groups who do not physically interact, so that the practice can continue to provide urgent care should one team need to self isolate.
- If employees need to provide evidence to their employer that they need to stay at home due to coronavirus, they will be able to obtain an "Isolation Note" from the NHS 111 Online screening tool.

[NHS 111 "Isolation Note" and COVID-19 screening service](#)

Please see NHS guidelines for further general advice:
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

High risk workers

Practices should be conducting individual risk assessments for staff in any high risk category, and considering remote work they can be doing to ensure their safety at this time.

Some workers may be at a higher risk from COVID-19. If you believe yourself to fall into this category, you should urgently request a risk assessment meeting with your line manager.

If you are a manager in a workplace, you should consider whether any of your employees could be considered high risk, and if so, arrange a risk assessment meeting. Companies should ensure that risk assessments follow a fair and reasonable pattern. All high risk staff should be offered equal options, in line with the Equalities Act, though it is important to ensure the individuals' needs are met.

Those who are at increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) should be particularly stringent in following social distancing measures.

As per government advice, the following groups should be considered "high risk" in relation to COVID-19:

- those aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)
- those who are pregnant
- those under 70 with an underlying relevant health condition, such as;
 - chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases
 - chronic heart disease
 - chronic kidney disease
 - chronic liver disease
 - chronic neurological conditions
 - diabetes
 - problems with the spleen e.g. sickle cell anaemia
 - a weakened immune system as the result of conditions such as HIV and AIDS, or medicines such as steroid tablets or chemotherapy

If an employee has a disability (defined within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010), and that disability results in a higher risk of developing severe COVID-19, such as those with a compromised immune system, reasonable adjustments will **need** to be implemented. This could be accommodated for example by working from home, paid leave and so on.

Remote Working

As per government guidance, all employers should be considering remote working alternatives. Whilst we appreciate working in clinical veterinary practice cannot be done entirely remotely, there is plenty of work that can be adapted to remote working, such as diary and rota management, insurance and other clerical work, and telephone triage. Every effort should be made by employers to ensure that high risk staff are given the opportunity to continue working remotely.

Financial Support

For Businesses

A number of measures have been released by the UK Government to support businesses in the upcoming economic crisis. **Employers should make full use of these measures to**

ensure they can continue to pay staff full pay during periods of illness or isolation related to COVID-19, as well as during any mandated periods of reduced working hours.

BVU and UNITE will continue to lobby for financial assistance for businesses to be provisional on them providing job guarantees to employees.

- The UK government has announced a new Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, delivered by the British Business Bank, will enable businesses with a turnover of no more than £41 million to apply for a loan of up to £1.2 million, with the government covering up to 80% of any losses with no fees.
- For businesses with fewer than 250 employees, the cost of providing 14 days of statutory sick pay per employee will be refunded by the government in full.
- Businesses and self-employed individuals in financial distress and with outstanding tax liabilities receive support with their tax affairs.
- There will be a £3,000 cash grant to 700,000 of our smallest businesses, delivered by Local Authorities, and worth a total of £2 billion.
- Temporarily increasing the business rates retail discount in England to 100% for 2020-21 for properties below £51,000 rateable value. Nearly half of all business properties will not pay a penny of business rates.
- As of March 20th, the government have announced a scheme to cover employee wages up to £2500/month. This should enable you as employers to continue to pay your staff in full.

For Workers

To make sure people in work can take the necessary time off if they are suffering from coronavirus or advised to self-isolate, changes have been made to Statutory Sick Pay and Universal Credit to support self-employed claimants.

The changes at present include the following:

- People who cannot work due to coronavirus and are eligible for Statutory Sick Pay will get it from day one, rather than from the fourth day of their illness. Government intend to legislate so this measure applies retrospectively from 13 March 2020
- **Statutory Sick Pay will be payable to people who are staying at home on government advice, not just those who are infected,** from 13 March 2020 after regulations were laid on 12 March 2020.

We urge all Veterinary employers to provide full pay for the period of any illness or self isolation relating to COVID-19. This is an important factor in ensuring workers are able to put their health, and the health of their colleagues, family and the wider country first, without worrying about impending financial concerns.

Time off for any period of illness or self isolation *should not* be required to be “paid back” to the company. Any workers being offered this advice should be aware that they are not legally required to do so; however, at present your employer may legally offer you SSP rather than full pay in this situation.

This is an important concern for many of our members, particularly regarding self-isolation.

When addressing the House of Commons on 26.02.20, the secretary of state for health Matt Hancock MP said **“Self-isolation on medical advice is considered sickness for employment purposes”**; however, this constitutes guidance, and it is not legally clear that those who are asymptomatic are automatically entitled to sick pay. It is worth familiarising yourself with the specifics of your contract with regards to what constitutes the right to sick pay. **BVU strongly advises employers to apply sick pay equally for all those following government guidance on the matter, and warns that those who do not will not be following ACAS guidance on “good practice” as this would effectively count as endangering other members of staff and any members of the public they come into contact with.** Please see the advice issued by Public Health England on whether you need to self-isolate, which is regularly being updated;

[Government guidance on self-isolation](#)

- If employees need to provide evidence to their employer that they need to stay at home due to coronavirus, they will be able to obtain an “Isolation Note” from the NHS 111 Online screening tool.

[NHS 111 "Isolation Note" and COVID-19 screening service](#)

- If your employer instructs you to remain home to self-isolate for a specified period, you will be entitled to receive your full normal pay for the duration of your absence, because this absence then becomes a form of suspension. The government could address this problem by introducing a statutory right to normal pay during any period of self-isolation recommended by PHE. However, robust policies need to be adopted by employers to firm up this situation, in order to protect workers and public health.
- As of March 20th, the government have announced a scheme to cover employee wages up to £2500/month. This should enable your employer to continue to pay your full pay, however, we await further details of the scheme including what, if any, job guarantees and protections will be included.

Groups that are not entitled to Statutory Sick Pay

There will be workers who will not be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay, usually those most vulnerable, on zero hours contracts and the self-employed. The options open to those groups are not satisfactory, and that has always been the case - this is a situation trade unions are fighting to change.

There may be benefits you can claim during this time, depending on your individual circumstances. Advice can be found here:

[Coronavirus and claiming benefits](#)

There are also hardship grants available, which may be able to help with things like council tax payments. You may be able to apply for a “mortgage holiday” for up to 3 months.

Limited Company Locum Workers may be entitled to claim SSP via their own limited company. To do so you would need to be classed as an employee. SSP must be paid out of your limited company funds, but you may be able to claim this back from the government. Under normal circumstances, this would not be possible, but may be possible for COVID-19 related periods of illness or isolation, where you have been unable to work normally. It is best to discuss your individual situation with an accountant.

Your Rights At Work

During this crisis, it is likely you will be asked or expected to work outside of your contract. **Please read your employment contract thoroughly**, so you are confident dealing with requests from your employer about changes to your work schedule.

Any changes, especially with regard to hours or pay, MUST be agreed by you, unless your contract states that such changes can be implemented without your agreement.

BVU urge workers in good health and at low risk to favourably consider reasonable requests to ensure the safety of their higher risk colleagues, members of the public and the wider population, as well as to enable our profession to continue to meet animal welfare needs during this time.

However, your rights should not be compromised. **It is not reasonable for employers to expect unlimited overtime from employees.** As prolonged staff shortage is likely, a clear agreement in writing should be drawn up. Consider: when you may be able to claim time owed in lieu; rate of pay for overtime; when you should expect overtime pay to be received. You should not agree to changes to your working schedule that put your physical or mental health at risk.

Some people might feel they do not want to go to work if they're afraid of catching COVID-19. An employer should listen to any concerns staff may have. If there are genuine concerns, the employer must try to resolve them to protect the health and safety of their staff. For example, if possible, the employer could offer flexible working. If an employee still does not want to go in, they may be able to arrange with their employer to take the time off as holiday or unpaid leave. The employer does not have to agree to this.

Reducing hours and pay during this crisis

Your employer may want to reduce your hours and pay during this crisis. Please see the following UNITE guidance if this applies to you. Only agree to changes to your contract that you are comfortable with, and if you are a member, please seek direct advice on your individual circumstances before agreeing to contract changes.

[UNITE Temporary lay-off advice sheet](#)

Discrimination

Since the outbreak reached the UK there have been reports of harassment and hostility targeting individuals of Asian descent, in particular China. Within a workplace environment, employers are liable for any abuse, harassment or discrimination committed by their employees to fellow workers. They must take all reasonable steps to protect their workforce from this, for example by having equalities policies in place, appropriate training and clear grievance procedures for any workers facing harassment.

Caring for Dependents

Employees are entitled to time off work to help someone who depends on them (a 'dependant') in an unexpected event or emergency. This applies for requirements caused by COVID-19, under the Employment Rights Act. For example, providing or arranging childcare from school closures, caring for children or other dependents if they're sick, or need to go into isolation or hospital.

There's no statutory right to pay for this time off, but some employers might offer pay depending on the contract or workplace policy.

The amount of time off an employee takes to look after someone must be reasonable for the situation.

BVU strongly urges employers to support employees with dependents to care for during this crisis.

Please see RCVS guidance about whether you are classed as a key worker here:

[RCVS and BVA joint guidance on key worker status](#)

You can find further advice and guidance from UNITE here

[Unite coronavirus COVID-19 advice](#)