

UK Women's Budget Group responds to the Government's Covid-19 'Roadmap'

14 May 2020

This week the UK Government published documents detailing a 'roadmap' out of lockdown including:

1. The Government's Covid-19 Recovery Strategy¹
2. Health and safety guidance for employers²
3. Guidance on staged returns education and childcare settings³

On 12 May the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, responded to an urgent question in the House of Commons to announce that the furlough scheme will be extended at 80% of employees salary up to £2500 until the end of October 2020 and clarifying that guidance on flexibility from August is yet to be published.

The guidance and the Chancellor's statement address some of the questions raised in our previous briefing, *Easing the Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women*.⁴ However there remain serious questions and areas of concern for different groups of women, especially those sent back to work, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women⁵, lone parents and disabled people. This briefing sets out these concerns and makes recommendations for how to mitigate the worst effects.

Immediate concerns

Safety at work

Government guidance emphasises that working from home should be the first option where possible. For those who cannot, guidelines for employers published 12 May set out the need to maintain social distancing 'where possible', carry out a risk assessment, clean workplaces frequently, provide washing facilities and safety equipment if necessary and consult with staff and trade unions.

However, guidance on returning to work safely was published with less than 48 hours' notice for employers and transport agencies to prepare. There remain serious concerns about what protection workers have if employers do not maintain social distancing and other safety precautions with those already at work expressing worry about existing conditions⁶. The TUC has welcomed the guidance as a 'step in the right direction' but argued that more needs to be done to make workplaces safe.⁷

Data published by the ONS⁸ on 11 May highlights the risk of working during the pandemic with higher mortality rates among those who have continued to work so far than among those who are working from home. This suggests that so far not all employers have protected their staff. Care home workers are the

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884171/FINAL_6.6637_CO_HMG_C19_Recovery_FINAL_110520_v2_WEB_1_.pdf

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-educational-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020/actions-for-education-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020>

⁴ WBG, 4 May 2020, Easing the Lockdown: Potential Problems for Women, (<https://bit.ly/2zBM76Q>)

⁵ ONS data from 8 May shows Black people four times more likely to die from Covid-19 than white counterparts:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/07/black-people-four-times-more-likely-to-die-from-covid-19-ons-finds>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/12/dancing-with-the-devil-safety-concerns-rife-among-people-forced-back-to-work>

⁷ TUC, 12 May 2020, The government's back to work plans still won't make workplaces safe – here's why, (<https://bit.ly/2zxP0FI>)

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregistereduptoandincluing20april2020>

largest number of deaths (98 by 20 April) followed by taxi drivers/chauffeurs and then security guards. Nor is it clear what workers should do if their employer insists of their returning to work in a job where home working is possible.

Placing the onus on individual employers to maintain social distancing risks dangerous working conditions, especially for lower paid workers since they are more likely to be unable to work from home and, may feel unable to risk losing their source of livelihood if they refuse to work in unsafe conditions. The Resolution Foundation finds⁹ that just 1 in 10 of lower earners can work from home and 69%¹⁰ of these low paid workers are women. These workers are being sent back to work without enough time for employers to adapt or sufficient protection against those who fail to do so.

It remains unclear how exactly the Government will regulate these safety conditions at work. Although additional funding has been provided to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the £14 million investment does not make up for a 46% funding cut since 2010¹¹. Maintaining social distancing will be much more challenging for small businesses and those working in private spaces. We support the call by the TUC **for increased powers and funding for the HSE**. Further action including:

- a legal requirement for employers to publish their risk assessments,
- the HSE to have the capacity to inspect and challenge every employer so that breaks the rules and prosecute those who neglect worker safety.
- local authority enforcement teams getting out to make sure shops and warehouses are safe.
- Adequate PPE for workers who need it
- Employers to consult their unions and workforces and get union agreement to the actions they are taking to keep workers safe¹²

Avoiding a second peak must be priority.

Guidance for pregnant women

Maternity Action has documented¹³ many cases of women being told to take sick pay or unpaid leave as opposed to being suspended on full pay demonstrating that the law is not consistently well understood by employers. The Government guidance makes clear that 'expectant mothers are, as always, entitled to suspension on full pay if suitable roles cannot be found'. However, this statement is absent from guidance for educational settings where three quarters of teachers are women¹⁴. **This guidance needs to be widely disseminated to ensure employers and pregnant women know their rights**. Additionally, these rights should be extended to all clinically vulnerable people, without that right there is a risk of discrimination against those with long term health conditions.

Schools and childcare

The Government guidance says nannies and childminders (for pre-school children) can return to work as of 13 May if they are looking after children from one family. From 1 June primary schools (for years 1 and 6) are due to reopen with other children returning gradually and childminders will be allowed to care for

⁹ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/03/Doing-what-it-takes.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/2019-wbg-briefing-gender-employment-and-earnings/>

¹¹ <https://www.shponline.co.uk/news/hses-funding-will-be-cut-100m-over-ten-years/>

¹² TUC, 12 May 2020, The government's back to work plans still won't make workplaces safe – here's why, (<https://bit.ly/2zxP0FI>)

¹³ <https://maternityaction.org.uk/2020/03/end-unfair-treatment-of-pregnant-women-and-new-mothers-in-covid-support-schemes/>

¹⁴ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest#by-ethnicity-and-gender>

school aged children. Nurseries will also be able to re-open for all children, not just those of key workers. Secondary school children will likely not return until September.

The safety issues outlined above will be particularly challenging for teachers, teaching assistants, school support staff and childcare workers as maintaining social distancing with small children is unrealistic. Although children appear to be largely asymptomatic it is not clear that they are less likely than adults to spread Covid-19. Government guidance involves school children being kept in groups of 15, which may still be too large to maintain social distancing in many classrooms. This will mean that those children who do return may have to return part-time. Similarly, the guidance states that it may be necessary to place a cap on places in childcare settings to maintain social distancing, again suggesting that there will not be childcare available for all those who need it.

Most parents of younger children rely on schools and childcare services to go to work. While childcare should be seen as a joint parental responsibility, in practice it is more often mothers who reduce working hours or re-arrange work around childcare. For lone parents returning to work while schools and childcare are closed presents an impossible problem. Lone parents are particularly likely to rely on informal networks of unpaid care to supplement paid care services, which is currently impossible under social distancing rules. With schools and nurseries remaining closed at least until June and unable to provide full time care due to smaller class sizes, it is unclear how workers with children, especially lone parents, are supposed to return to work.

When questioned on this, the Prime Minister replied *“if you can’t get the childcare you need to get to work that is plainly an impediment on your ability to get to work and your employer should recognise that.”* The repeated emphasis on individual employers’ action does not go far enough to protect parents and carers from discrimination. The Government revised the rules of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS or furlough) to allow people who could not work as a result of caring responsibilities to be furloughed, but this is not a right. **Parents and carers need a guarantee they can rely on the CJRS if inadequate childcare prevents them from returning to work including the right to be furloughed. Part time furlough should be introduced immediately to allow parents to share paid work and caring for children.**

For those with secondary age children who cannot expect schools to open until September, there is no guidance about how parents are supposed to cope when they need to return to work and cannot, while social distancing continues, rely on informal support networks like grandparents and friends over the summer holidays.

The childcare sector was already underfunded prior to this crisis. Additional pressures as a result of the pandemic has led providers to warn that many will no longer be financially viable meaning there will be a serious shortage of childcare places.¹⁵ All of these problems will be felt more acutely by women who often take on the majority of the responsibility for childcare meaning that if childcare is not available, it will inhibit women’s return to work, as well as putting a workforce dominated by women at serious risk.

Transport

Government guidance says workers ought to avoid public transport as much as possible in order to keep social distancing available for those using buses and trains. Walking, cycling and driving private cars is being encouraged.

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52506919>

Women are significantly less likely than men to drive and therefore more likely to rely on public transport¹⁶ where social distancing will be a challenge. Car ownership across the UK is closely associated with wealth and therefore gender. In England, men are more likely than women to take trips by car (although this does change depending on age) and to travel further distances. In addition, 46% of households in the lowest income quintile have no access to a car, compared to 13% of those in the highest income quintile.¹⁷

Equality impact assessments

The Government's recovery document recognises that both health and economic risks associated with Covid-19 is unequally distributed amongst different groups of the population stating that "older people, men, people who are overweight and people with underlying health conditions" are disproportionately at risk and, that sectors closed are staffed by "workers...[who] are more likely to be low paid, younger and female."

However, the document fails to acknowledge the additional risk faced by Black and ethnic minority communities. ONS figures show Black people are four times more likely to die from Covid-19¹⁸, this is a serious omission reflected in the lack of protections for these groups.

The document makes mention of the impact of Covid-19 on gender equality internationally but does not outline how this will impact on gendered inequalities in the UK. With indications that the gender pay gap could increase by up to 15%¹⁹ and women's increased vulnerability to exploitation, discrimination and poverty²⁰, this is a serious oversight. **The Government ought to be monitoring the economic impact of Covid-19 on those with protected characteristics by collecting sex, race, and disability disaggregated data on who is being furloughed and why, who is being made redundant and who is claiming social security.**

Sex, disability, pregnancy and race are all protected characteristics under the Equalities Act 2010 therefore these are examples of the **need for the Government to undertake and publish meaningful equality impact assessments which take account of different groups socio-economic roles and risks.**

Looking ahead

Social care

We are glad to see that throughout the recovery documents that the Government recognises the social care system has been integral in responding to the pandemic but requires serious attention and action. Social care has been given insufficient support during this crisis, with inadequate testing and access to PPE. The sector was already facing a crisis of under-funding before Covid-19 and the sector is now warning of closures because of increased costs, reduced revenues and widespread staff shortages.²¹

The Government commits to "innovative operating models for the UK's health and care settings, to strengthen them for the long term and make them safer for patients and staff" . However, it repeats its commitment to longer term reform of the social care sector "so no one is forced to have to sell their home to pay for care." This ignores the fact that many elderly and disabled people who rely on social care

¹⁶ WBG (2020) Public transport and gender, (<https://bit.ly/3fO1k5e>)

¹⁷ Department of Transport, 2019, Household car availability by household income quintile: England, from 2002 – 2018, <https://bit.ly/2piWS92>

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/07/black-people-four-times-more-likely-to-die-from-covid-19-ons-finds>

¹⁹ <https://inews.co.uk/news/coronavirus-gender-pay-gap-uk-effects-poverty-charity-2841642>

²⁰ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/easing-lockdown-potential-problems-for-women/>

²¹ BBC (26 April 2020), Coronavirus 'could close half of Wales' care homes' (<https://bbc.in/2Ya2YHR>)

do not have homes to sell. Despite the now exacerbated crisis in social care the Government continues to 'kick the can down the road' where **urgent action is needed immediately.**

There is recognition that public health, community care and social care are public goods **requiring investment and recruitment**, yet recruitment drives will be ineffective without rethinking pay and conditions for carers. When the Government argues that investment in infrastructure will be needed to reboot the economy, this must include **social care and childcare being included here as part of the crucial investment in social infrastructure needed to create jobs, return people to work and reduce gender inequalities.**

Economic support

On 12 May the Chancellor confirmed that the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) will be extended until the end of October, remaining at 80% of salary up to £2500. He indicated that from August there will be greater 'flexibility' in the scheme to allow people back to work on a part time and socially distanced basis.

This is a welcome recognition that intervention continues to be vital to mitigating the worst economic effects of the virus. However, part-time furlough should be available now to enable parents to share care and paid work rather than waiting until August. **Parents need a guarantee from the Government that they will continue to be protected by the CJRS until safe childcare is available when they need it.** Again, **an Equality Impact Assessment is crucial.**

The Chancellor also committed to supporting those made unemployed. This must include an increase in the level of social security including **Universal Credit and Child Benefit as these will be integral to supporting those who lose their jobs.**

The CJRS has demonstrated that economic intervention to avoid poverty is both desirable and possible. Changes to UC need to reflect this: **Government must end the five week wait by issuing advance grants, abolish the two child limit and increase rates of Child Benefit.** With data showing women's pre-existing vulnerability to poverty²², women losing their jobs at a faster rate than men²³ and, 42% of lone parents (90% of whom are women) expecting to live on £500 or less in May²⁴ – social security will be vital to ensuring widespread protection against poverty. **For migrant workers made unemployed, it is essential that No Recourse to Public Funds conditions are suspended.**

Finally, the Chancellor committed to working with trade unions on training, support and job creation. WBG research²⁵ finds that investing in care creates double the number of jobs for women and almost the same number for men as the same investment in construction. These jobs are also relatively lower carbon and promote gender equality. **Rethinking what we mean by investment and who we are investing in could help rebuild the economy in better and more equitable ways.**

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²² <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/easing-lockdown-potential-problems-for-women/>

²³ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/women-bear-brunt-of-coronavirus-economic-shutdown-in-uk-and-us>

²⁴ <https://inews.co.uk/news/coronavirus-gender-pay-gap-uk-effects-poverty-charity-2841642>

²⁵ <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/WBG-Budget-2020-FINAL.pdf>