

Guide to the Coronavirus Act 2020

This is a basic guide to the Coronavirus Act 2020, the emergency legislation passed by the UK government on 25 March 2020 in response to the coronavirus pandemic. It sets out why there is a Coronavirus Act and sets out the basic provisions of the Act.

Table of Contents

Why	there is a Coronavirus Act	2
(i)	Freedom of Assembly	2
(ii)	Powers over potentially infectious persons	4
(iii)	Mental Health	5
(iv)	The powers of government	7
(v)	Death and Funerals	7
(vi)	Education	9
(vii)	Local Authority Care and Support	10
(viii)	Sunset clause	12
(ix)	Secondary legislation on coronavirus	12

Why there is a Coronavirus Act

Originally at the start of February 2020 the UK government passed regulations to deal with the coronavirus outbreak, namely the Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020, under the Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984, as amended by the Health and Social Care Act 2008. Less than a month later the government published its Coronavirus Action Plan, which revealed that it was considering tabling a bill in Parliament "to help systems and services work more effectively in tackling the outbreak." The Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced that the bill would be part of the government's strategy to move the UK from the 'contain' to the 'delay' phase of the Action Plan.

(i) Freedom of Assembly

Schedule 22 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 places temporary restrictions on freedom of assembly across the United Kingdom, which would affect churches and Christian events. The Act specifies that government ministers have powers to declare the beginning and the end of a "public health response period." Ministers have powers to prohibit or restrict events or gatherings in order to prevent, protect against, delay or otherwise control the incidence or transmission of coronavirus. The obligations for ministers with powers over England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are identical, except for the sections on Offences, Enforcement and Prosecutions.

Public health response period for restricting freedom of assembly

The Secretary of State must make a declaration to begin and end a "public health response period" to prevent, protect against, delay or otherwise control the incidence or transmission of coronavirus in England. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the ministers of the respective devolved administrations have this responsibility.

For England see Schedule 22, Part 2, Section 3.

For Scotland see Part 3, Section 13.

For Wales see Part 4, Section 26.

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, Section 37.

Ministerial powers to prohibit or restrict events or gatherings

Government ministers at the UK and devolved levels have the power to prohibit or otherwise restrict events or gatherings for the purpose of "preventing, protecting against, delaying or otherwise controlling the incidence or transmission of coronavirus."

For England see Part 2, Section 5.

For Scotland see Part 3, Section 15.

For Wales see Part 4, Section 28.

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, Section 39.

Ministers may issue a direction prohibiting, or imposing requirements or restrictions in relation to the holding of an event or gathering. Such prohibitions, requirements, or restrictions "may

only be imposed on owners, occupiers of premises, organisers of events or any other person involved in holding such an event or gathering."

For England see Part 2, Section 5(3)(a)(b(c)).

For Scotland see Part 3, Section 15(3)(a)(b)(c).

For Wales see Part 4, Section 28(3)(a)(b)(c).

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, Section 39(3)(a)(b)(c).

"Any other person involved in holding such an event or gathering" does not include those who are only attending an event or gathering.

For England see Part 2, Section 5(7).

For Scotland see Part 3, Section 15(7).

For Wales see Part 4, Section 28(7).

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, Section 39(7).

Informing prospective attendees of prohibition, requirements or restrictions

Ministers can impose requirements on owners, occupiers, organisers "or any other persons involved" (apart from those who are only attending) to inform those planning to attend an event or gathering that it is prohibited, or any requirements or restrictions on it.

For England see Part 2, Section 5(5).

For Scotland see Part 3, Section 15(5).

For Wales see Part 4, Section 28(5).

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, Section 39(5).

Power to close premises or impose restrictions on persons entering or remaining in them

Government ministers may for the purpose of preventing, etc. coronavirus, issue a direction that imposes prohibitions, requirements or restrictions regarding entry into or departure from premises, or location of persons within premises.

For England see Part 2, Section 6.

For Scotland Part 3, Section 16.

For Wales see Part 4. Section 29.

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, Section 40.

Prohibitions, requirements or restrictions on number of attendees, individuals' reason to be in premises, etc.

The government may issue a direction restricting the following: the number of persons in particular premises, the size of the premises, the purpose for which a person is in the premises, the facilities in the premises, a period of time.

For England see Part 2, Section 6(6).

For Scotland see Part 3, Section 16(6).

For Wales see Part 4, Section 29(6).

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, Section 40(6).

Offences

Individuals found guilty of the offence of failing to comply with a prohibition, requirement or restriction imposed on them by a direction will be liable on summary conviction to a fine. The fine in England as well as in Wales has no specified limit. The fine in Scotland must not exceed "the statutory maximum." Alternatively, in Scotland only a person may on conviction of indictment be liable to a fine. In Northern Ireland, fine on summary conviction should not exceed £100,00. This is based on Schedule 18 of the Coronavirus Act 2020, Health Protection Regulations for Northern Ireland. Also in Northern Ireland, a person on conviction of indictment is liable to a fine.

For England see Part 2, 9(2).

For Wales see Part 4, 32(2).

For Scotland see Part 3, 21(2).

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, 44(2)(a) and (b).

(ii) Powers over potentially infectious persons

Schedule 21, Parts 2-5 of the Coronavirus Act confers "powers on public health officers, constables and immigration officers in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland" over persons who are potentially infectious. The definition of a 'potentially infectious' person is as follows:

"the person is, or may be, infected or contaminated with coronavirus, and there is a risk that the person might infect or contaminate others with coronavirus or the person has been in an infected area within the 14 days preceding that time."

An 'infected area' is any country, territory or other area outside the UK declared as such by the Secretary of State as being somewhere where there is known or thought to be "sustained human-to-human transmission of coronavirus," or a place from which there is a high risk that coronavirus will be transmitted to the UK.

Public health officers may direct a person to go immediately to a place to be screened and assessed for coronavirus infection, remove that person to send them to that place, or request a constable to do so. The public health officer may only do this if he or she considers it necessary and proportionate (a) in the interests of the person, (b) for the protection of other people, or (c) for the maintenance of public health. The public health officer must inform the person why they are being directed or removed, and that it is an offence not to comply if directed, or to abscond if removed. An immigration officer has similar powers.

For England see Schedule 21, Part 2, sections 6-7.

For Wales see Part 4, sections 50-51.

For Scotland see Part 3, sections 27-28.

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, sections 71-72.

Screening and assessment

A public health officer may require the person to remain in the place for screening and assessment for up to 48 hours. A public health officer may require the person to be screened and assessed, and this may mean providing a biological sample or allowing a healthcare professional to take a biological sample (a blood sample or a sample of respiratory secretions) by appropriate means.

Constables and immigration officers have similar powers, but the time limits on their powers to detain potentially infectious persons in places specified for screening and assessment are limited to 24 hours for a constable and 3 hours for an immigration officer. If it is not practical for a public health officer to take a sample during this time, a constable may extend the period for a further 24 hours and an immigration officer for a further 9 hours.

For England see Schedule 21, Part 2, sections 8-13.

For Wales see Part 4, sections 52-57.

For Scotland see Part 3, sections 29-34.

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, sections 73-38.

Powers exercisable after assessment

After assessment and whilst the transmission control period is still ongoing, a public health officer may still impose necessary and proportionate restrictions on a person, including providing information to the public health officer or any specified person, contact details for the duration of the specified period, to go for further screening and assessment, to remain isolated in a specified place for a specified period. The person may be restricted as regards movements or travel within or outside the UK, activities including work or business, contact with other persons or with other specified persons. The public health officer must inform the person of the reason for such restrictions, and tell them that it is an offence to fail to comply with them.

For England see Schedule 21, Part 2, sections 14-17.

For Wales see Part 4, sections 58-61.

For Scotland see Part 3, sections 35-39.

For Northern Ireland see Part 5, sections 79-82.

(iii) Mental Health

The Coronavirus Act relaxes legislation on compulsory admission to psychiatric hospitals. Here is what it says about England and Wales.

Applications for compulsory admission to hospital for assessment or treatment

The Mental Health Act 1983 is modified by the Coronavirus Act, so that only the

recommendation of one doctor is required to make an application under section 2 or 3 of the Mental Health Act (Schedule 8, Part 2, section 3). This is "if the [medical] professional considers that compliance with the requirement under that section for the recommendations of two practitioners is impractical or would involve undesirable delay."

In other words, the first doctor has discretion under the Coronavirus Act as to whether a second doctor's recommendation is required.

However, this does not apply to an emergency application under section 4 of the Mental Health Act. (Coronavirus Act, Schedule 8, Part 2, s. 3(4))

For applications for compulsory admission of patients who are already in hospital, any registered medical practitioner or approved clinician can write a report for section 5(2) of the Mental Health Act (Coronavirus Act, Schedule 8, Part 2, section 4). This is if that doctor believes that it would be impractical or lead to undesirable delay if the required report were to be prepared by the practitioner or clinician charged with the treatment of the patient in question.

The total amount of time for which patients who are accused in criminal proceedings or under a sentence can be remanded to hospital under the Mental Health Act has been changed to be indefinite. This is because section 5 of Schedule 8, Part 2 amends Sections 35(7) and 36(6) as if the words "or for more than 12 weeks in all" were omitted.

Scotland

The Coronavirus Act lengthens the time permitted for emergency detention of a patient in hospital from 72 hours to 120 hours (Schedule 9, Part 2, Section 3).

The granting of short-term detention certificates by an approved medical practitioner no longer requires consultation with a mental health officer, if such consultation is considered to be impractical or liable to cause a delay (Schedule 9, Part 2, Section 4).

Only one approved medical practitioner needs to provide a mental health report on a patient to issue a compulsory treatment order for a patient (Schedule 9, Part 2, Section 5(1)).

Nurses have the right to detain patients pending medical examination for up to 6 hours instead of the usual 3 hours (Schedule 9, Part 2, Section 7).

Legal requirements for reviewing orders and directions which authorise detention of patients in hospitals are suspended (Schedule 9, Part 2, Section 9).

Northern Ireland

Applications for compulsory admission of patients to hospital for assessment can be made by a relevant social worker if he or she believes it would be impractical or cause delay for it to be made by an approved social worker (Schedule 10, Part 2, Section 3(1)). The relevant social worker making the application must have personally seen the patient not more than five days before the date of application (Schedule 10, Part 2, Section 4).

Regarding applications for compulsory admission for psychiatric assessment for patients who are already in hospital, they can be detained following a report by a medical practitioner who is a staff member in hospital for up to 120 hours. Likewise for such a patient pending such a report, he or she can be detained for up to 12 hours. (Schedule 10, Part 2, Section 5)

A patient must be seen as soon as is practicable and not later than 12 hours after.

There are various other extensions of the time for which a patient can be detained in hospital for assessment and treatment, as well as of the period of remand to hospital.

The Department for Justice in Northern Ireland may give a direction to transfer prisoners to hospital if it believes that it is impractical or would cause delay to have reports from two registered medical practitioners. (Schedule 10, Part 2, Section 12(1)).

(iv) The powers of government

The Coronavirus Act weakens the power of the legislatures in the United Kingdom in that it postpones elections, referendums, recall petitions and canvass (sections 59-64). This also applies to the Police and Crime Commissioners' elections which were due on 7 May 2020. This adds to the fact that Parliament went into recess earlier than the scheduled date of 31 March.c

At the same time because the Coronavirus Act is emergency legislation, it is clear that the relevant government departments are now having to draft statutory guidelines to explain more clearly what the requirements are.

Finally, a decision was made to suspend new jury trials for criminal court cases, but this was for hygiene purposes in light of the coronavirus outbreak. There is nothing about this matter in the bill. Other types of court cases are ongoing.

(v) Death and Funerals

England and Wales

Medical certificate for cremation

Only one medical certificate is required for the cremation of a deceased person in England and Wales, as opposed to two including the confirmatory medical certificate that was required in the Cremation (England and Wales) Regulations 2008, section 17(2).

For England and Wales see Section 19.

For Scotland See Schedule 14, Part 1. For cremations in Scotland, see Schedule 14, Part 2.

For Northern Ireland see Section 21.

Supplemental powers of medical referee

Regulation 12 of the Cremation Regulations has effect as if 12(a) were omitted, i.e. a medical referee no longer needs to investigate the cause of death of a deceased person.

For England and Wales see Section 19(4).

Registration of deaths and still-births

Information concerning deaths

A qualified informant (required under the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 to give information about a death or still-birth to the registrar) no longer has to give information

about a death in person. He or she may give it by telephone or "by any other methods specified in guidance issued by the Registrar General," if he or she cannot attend before the registrar in person. In such cases, the qualified information does not have to sign the register in the presence of the registrar.

Section 36 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, which gives penalties for failure to give information, does not apply to a funeral director who provides information about a death in reliance on paragraph 2(1) of Part 1 of Schedule 13.

If it would be impractical for a person to give information about a death or still-birth (whether due to being ill, having to care for others, being at risk of infection, staff shortages at the registrar's office or any other reason), that person is to be treated as unable to give information under 3(1).

Schedule 13, Part 1, 3(4).

Alternative delivery methods of relevant documents

Any relevant documents can be delivered by any electronic or other means set out in the Registrar General's guidance.

Relevant documents include those that are either required or permitted by or under the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, and certificates under section 1 of the Birth and Deaths Registration Act 1926 (prohibition on disposal of body except on registrar's certificate).

Schedule 13, Part 1, 5(1).

Notification of death to coroner

This paragraph provides an exception to the Notification of Deaths Regulations 2019 (S.I. 2019/1112), 3(1)(e) or (f) for a registered medical practitioner to notify the relevant senior coroner of a person's death in the circumstances that are described therein. This is unless the medical practitioner also reasonably believes that there is no registered medical practitioner who may sign a death certificate, or that there is one but he or she is not available to sign the certificate within a reasonable time of the person's death.

For provisions for England and Wales see Schedule 13, Part 1.

For Scotland see Schedule 13, Part 2.

For Northern Ireland see Schedule 13, Part 3.

Burial and cremation

Local authorities and the appropriate national authorities must have regard to the desirability of disposing of a dead person's body or other remains (a) in accordance with the person's wishes, if known, or (b) otherwise in a way that appears consistent with the person's religion or beliefs, if known.

Schedule 28, Part 4 – Deceased's wishes etc.

Inquests

COVID-19 is not a notifiable disease under section 7(2)(c) of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, and therefore there is no opportunity to hold an inquest with a jury if a senior coroner suspects a death was caused by it.

Coronavirus Act 2020, section 30(1) for England and Wales, section 31(1) for Northern Ireland.

However on 9 March 2020, the government <u>had already updated the list of notifiable diseases</u> to include COVID-19. What this means is as follows:

"Registered medical practitioners (RMPs) have a statutory duty to notify the 'proper officer' at their local council or local health protection team (HPT) of suspected cases of certain infectious diseases."

(vi) Education

The Coronavirus Act gives government ministers the power to give directions for temporary closure or continuity of educational institutions and childcare premises (Schedules 16 and 17). They must have regard to advice from the Chief Medical Officer or the Deputy Chief Medical Officers of the Department of Health and Social Care. The direction should be a necessary and proportionate action in response to the incidence or transmission of coronavirus.

Temporary closure of educational institutions and childcare premises

The relevant ministers (Secretary of State for Education, ministers for education in Wales, Scotland and the Department for Education in Northern Ireland) are given powers to give a temporary closure direction applying to one or more named educational institutions, all education institutions or educational institutions of a particular description, and registered childcare providers. Temporary closure means that a body responsible for an educational institution prevents people from attending that institution's premises.

Temporary closure may be related to either the attendance of persons generally at an educational institution, or to the attendance of specified persons, to premises generally or to specified premises or parts of premises, to attendance in general or for specified purposes. It may also be related to providing for different purposes as far as attendance is concerned, and make transitional, transitory or saving provision.

For England and Wales see Schedule 16, Part 1; for Scotland see Part 2; for Northern Ireland see Part 3.

Enforcement

The Secretary of State for Education, or the Welsh Education minister, can force an educational institution or registered childcare provider to close by applying to the High Court or the county court for an injunction, and without giving notice to the responsible body. Part 1, section 1(8) and 1(9) and section 2(7) and 2(8)

In Scotland the Scottish ministers can apply by interdict or by specific implement to force a relevant authority to comply, and without giving notice. Part 2, Section 12(3)

In Northern Ireland, the Department for Education in Northern Ireland can enforce a temporary closure direction by applying to the High Court for an injunction against the managers of a school, and without giving notice. Part 3, section 14(9).

Temporary continuity directions for education, training and childcare

Likewise the Secretary of State for Education may give a temporary continuity direction applying either to one or more named relevant institutions in England, all relevant institutions in England (or any part of England), or to relevant institutions in England (or any part of England) of a particular description. Such a direction is given to the responsible body of the institution in question.

The direction may require an educational institution to open, to stay open, to re-open, or to open at times when it would not usually be open. It may require the alteration of term dates. It may require an educational institution to provide or arrange for transport relating to education, training and childcare. The direction may also require an educational institution to allow specified persons to attend it.

For England and Wales see Schedule 17, Part 1; for Scotland see Part 2; for Northern Ireland see Part 3.

The law on enforcement of temporary continuity directions is the same as for temporary closure directions.

(vii) Local Authority Care and Support

The powers and duties of local authorities in England and Wales can be found in Schedule 12, Parts 1 and 2, and in Scotland in section 16 of the Coronavirus Act. The Coronavirus Act gives local authorities permission to disregard certain duties in the Care Act 2014 for England, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013, the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 and the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 (Adult Carers and Young Carers: Identification of Outcomes and Needs for Support) Regulations 2018. For ease of reference here only the relevant sections of the Coronavirus Act 2020 will be indicated.

Assessing needs for care and support

The main changes made by the Coronavirus Act to the law on social care provided by local authorities is relaxation of duties regarding assessment of needs for care and support.

Local authorities do not have to comply with any duties imposed by the following:

Assessment of an adult's needs for care and support

This includes assessment on whether an adult has care and support needs and if so what those are, regardless of the authority's view of the level of the adult's needs for care and support or the level of the adult's financial resources.

For England see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, section 2.

For Wales see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 2, sections 20-24.

For Scotland see Coronavirus Act 2020, section 16(1).

Local authorities in England do not have to adhere to duties to give written records of assessments. Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, section 2(1)(d)

Any duties to determine whether a person's needs meet the eligibility criteria

For England see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, section 2(2).

For Wales see Coronavirus Act 2020 Schedule 12, Part 2, Section 22(2)(a).

Assessment of a carer's needs for support

For England see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, section 2(1)(b).

For Wales see Coronavirus Act 2020 Schedule 12, Part 2, section 21.

This includes assessment on whether a carer has support needs and if so what those are, regardless of the authority's view of the level of the carer's needs for support or the level of the carer's financial resources or of those of the adult needing care. It also includes an assessment of whether the carer is able and willing and likely to continue to be able and willing to provide care for the adult needing care, etc., having regard to whether the carer works or wishes to do so and whether the carer is participating in or wishes to participate in education, training or recreation.

Refusal of assessment

Provisions on refusal of assessment do not apply. This means that if an adult who is deemed to lack mental capacity refuses an assessment, and the local authority is satisfied that carrying out the assessment would be in the adult's best interests, the local authority is no longer required to carry out an assessment.

For England see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, Section 1(2)(a).

For Wales see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 2, Section 20.

A local authority is no longer required to carry out an assessment if an adult who refuses a needs assessment is either experiencing abuse or neglect or is at risk of those.

For England see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, Section 1(2)(b).

For Wales see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 2, Section 20.

Needs of children, children's carers and young carers

Local authorities in England do not have to comply with duties imposed by Care Act provisions on assessment of a child's needs for care and support, a child's carer's needs for support, or a young carer's needs for support.

Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, Section 2(3).

Local authorities in Scotland do not have to comply with duties to assess needs of disabled children if it would be impractical, or if it would cause unnecessary delay in providing services to any child under section 22(1) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

Coronavirus Act 2020, section 16(8).

Care and support plans

Local authorities don't have to comply with duties such as preparing support plans or care and support plans, preparing an independent personal budget for the person if it isn't going to meet the care and support needs, or duties to review plans.

For England see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, Section 11.

For Wales see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 2, Section 31.

Continuity of care and support when person moves

Local authorities don't have to comply with duties of notification, assessment, etc. when a person moves, or cases where assessments are not complete on the day of move.

For England see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, section 12.

For Wales see Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 2, Section 32.

Transition for children to adult care and support

Local authorities in England do not have to comply with duties imposed by relevant sections of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 or the Children Act 1989.

Coronavirus Act 2020, Schedule 12, Part 1, Section 15.

(viii) Sunset clause

The Coronavirus Act expires 2 years after the day it was passed, which means that it expires on 25 March 2022.

The Coronavirus Act also allows for a six-month parliamentary review to take place. A government minister has to arrange for a motion to be debated within 7 sitting days of the House of Commons after each six-month review period, the first of which is dated from the day the Act was passed. This means that within 7 sitting days of 25 September 2020, a minister must arrange for the House of Commons to debate the following motion, set out in the Act:

"That the temporary provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 should not yet expire."

If MPs reject this motion, a government minister has to use the power set out in section 90(1) of the Act to ensure that the Act's temporary provisions expire within 21 days of MPs voting on this motion.

(Section 98)

(ix) Secondary legislation on coronavirus

Secondary legislation passed by Parliament and the devolved legislatures also places legal restrictions upon movement of persons and places of worship.

Restriction of movement

The Regulations also place restrictions on people's movements. In accordance with permission to open places of worship for broadcasting an act of worship, ministers of religion or worship leaders may travel to go to their places of worship for that purpose.

Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, section 6(k).

Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020, section 8(2)(k).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, section 8(5)(k).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, section 5(2)(k).

Closure of places of worship

A person who is responsible for a place of worship must ensure that, during the emergency period, the place of worship is closed, except for uses permitted in paragraph (6).

Places of worship may be used only for funerals, to broadcast an act of worship over the internet, radio or television, or to provide essential voluntary services or urgent public support services (including the provision of food banks or other support for the homeless or vulnerable people, blood donation sessions or support in an emergency).

Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, section 5(5) and 5(6).

Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020, section 7(2).

In Wales, see also the amendments to these Regulations which apply to places of worship and crematoriums, which mean that social distancing of two metres does not need be observed between two members of the same household or a carer and the person they are caring for.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, section 4(a).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, sections 4(6) and 4(7).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, section 4(5) and 4(6).

Burial grounds

As many churches have burial grounds, the law on the latter is applicable to those responsible for them:

"A person who is responsible for a crematorium or burial ground must ensure that, during the emergency period, the crematorium is closed to members of the public, except for funerals or burials."

Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, section 5(8).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, section 4(9).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, section 8.

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