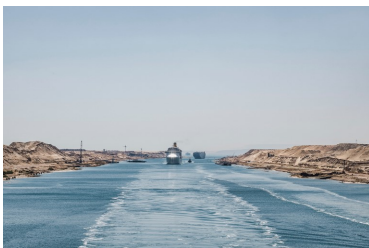




MARCH NEWSLETTER

Issue 16

Suez canal blockage: concerns over impact on building materials



The canal route that connects the Mediterranean to the Red Sea handles more than 10 per cent of global maritime trade. There is concern that some building materials could become harder to obtain as global trade is hit by the fallout of the container ship blocking the Suez canal. The large vessel, operated by Taiwanese shipping firm Evergreen, had been blocking the Egyptian trade route that connects the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. The canal is one of the world’s busiest shipping routes and handles more than 10 per cent of global maritime trade.

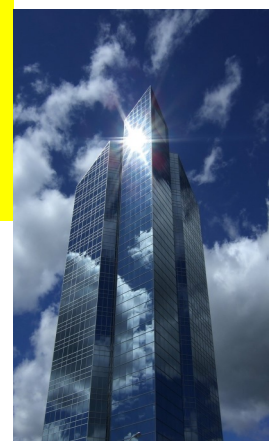
Initial attempts to remove the ship, which became wedged amid high winds and a dust storm on Tuesday morning (23 March), were unsuccessful. News agency *Reuters* quoted one of the firms involved in the operation as saying their work to free the stranded vessel could take “weeks”. On Monday (29 March), the ship was partially refloated but, as of 9am (UK time), had not yet been moved. John Newcomb, CEO of the Builders Merchants Federation and co-chair of Construction Leadership Council’s product availability working group said on Friday (26 March): “Container imports have been a major issue for some time but over the last couple of weeks we have seen a slight easing of lead times. Unfortunately, this is likely to change again if the Suez canal is blocked for any length of time and we are monitoring the situation closely. Taken from <https://www.constructionnews.co.uk>

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Stamp duty holiday extended to end of June

The stamp duty holiday on house purchases has been extended for a further three months, Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced in his Budget.

The property purchase tax has been suspended on the first £500,000 of all sales in England and Northern Ireland since July.

The tax break for will now continue until the end of June.

After that the nil rate band will be set at £250,000 - double its standard level - until the end of September.

Rishi Sunak told MPs the extra move was "to smooth the transition back to normal - and we will only return to the usual level of £125,000 from October 1".

The stamp duty holiday was introduced to help buyers who might have taken a financial hit because of Covid. It was also intended to boost a property market hit by lockdown.

During the stamp duty holiday there has also been some relief from the equivalent taxes for property buyers in Scotland and Wales - which is set to end on 31 March.

The extension of the stamp duty holiday will provide relief for people buying and selling homes, according to property group Knight Frank.

"The extension is fair because completion dates for buyers and sellers have been jeopardised through no fault of their own," said Tom Bill, head of UK residential research at Knight Frank.



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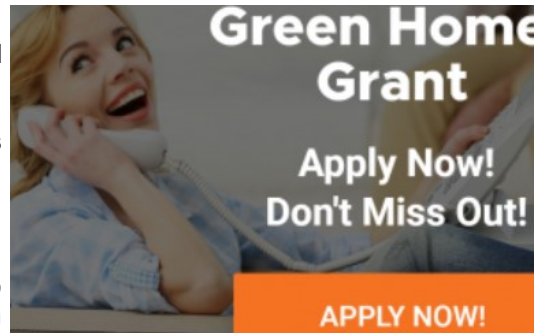


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Outrage at decision to axe Green Homes Grant with four days' notice
Shock as six-month old policy is scrapped without warning - and £1.2bn short of launch promise

The decision of the government to axe the Green Homes Grant has been greeted with shock and outrage by the sectors tasked with delivering the troubled energy efficiency scheme.

The fact that the decision to close the Grant to new applications on 31 March was announced on Saturday, along with a promise to 'boost' energy efficiency funding for poorer households by £300m has been seen as an attempt to 'bury bad news'. There had been fears that the government wouldn't rollover the full £1.5bn it promised at the scheme's launch, but the fact that it is not extending the application period and only expects now to grant £300m of vouchers - a shortfall of over £1 billion - is seen as a major climbdown.



Construction industry groups have expressed their frustration and shock at the decision to close the scheme to new applications with only four day's notice.

Julie Hirigoyen, chief executive at the UK Green Building Council, typified the mood from the built environment sector. She said: "Slashing more than £1bn in funding for energy efficiency is an absolute travesty, for households wanting to take action and for businesses trying to plan ahead, and has created yet another roadblock for decarbonising the country's 29 million homes. We have been left speechless by this news, which comes just days after the Environmental Audit Committee sent a clear message to government that if we are to meet our legally binding target to be net zero carbon by 2050, urgent action is needed to improve energy efficiency of homes this decade."

The Green Homes Grant, which offered vouchers to pay for energy efficiency upgrades in insulation, low-carbon heating and heating controls, has been beset by long delays in approving applications from homeowners and, catastrophically in some cases, by delays in paying contractors for work completed. The scheme reached the level of national scandal when it was reported that some smaller installation firms had had to declare bankruptcy in response to the payment delays, while others had to lay off staff after scaling up to meet the predicted demand for the scheme.

The Federation of Master Builders, whose members were actively involved in installations, joined the chorus of outrage.

Taken from H & V News <https://www.hvnplus.co.uk/news/outrage-at-decision-to-axe-green-homes-grant-with-four-days-notice-29-03-2021/>

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COVID-19: Outdoor get-togethers and sport resume in England - but PM warns 'we must be cautious'

The prime minister urges people to stick to the rules amid the threat of coronavirus variants and rising cases in Europe.

People are now allowed to meet in groups of up to six or as two households and outdoor team sports are reopening in a major easing of England's lockdown restrictions.

As the "stay at home" order ended at midnight, Boris Johnson stressed that "we must remain cautious", saying cases were rising across Europe and new variants were threatening the COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

From 29th March 2021 in England:

- Groups of up to six people - or two households - can socialise in parks and gardens
- Football and cricket pitches, tennis and basketball courts, outdoor swimming pools can reopen
- Golf courses and sailing clubs can reopen



Meanwhile in Scotland

Stay Local rule to apply from 2 April.

The First Minister has set out a timetable for the re-opening of parts of society over the next two months.

Stay at Home regulations will be lifted on 2 April and replaced with guidance to Stay Local, with more services including hairdressers, garden centres and non-essential click and collect services able to open from 5 April.

More college students will also return to on-campus learning and outdoor contact sports will resume for 12-17 year olds on 5

April if progress on vaccination and suppression of Coronavirus (COVID-19) continues. The Scottish Government then hopes to lift all restrictions on journeys in mainland Scotland on 26 April. Discussions will be held with island communities already in lower levels on the possibility of having a faster return to more socialising and hospitality with restrictions on mainland travel to protect against importation of the virus.

Vaccination of all nine JCVI priority groups – more than half of the population, accounting for 99% of COVID-related fatalities – is expected to be completed by mid-April, supplies allowing. The dates outlined are enabled by strong new evidence that suggests vaccines reduce the chances of transmitting the virus as well as reducing serious illness and death, even after a first dose.

Further expected easing on 26 April :

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