COVID-19 guidance for community organisations that run support groups

*****DECEMBER 10th 2021 UPDATE*****

New Plan B COVID-19 restrictions

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a move to Plan B in England on Wednesday 8th December, following the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the UK. Early analysis from the UK Health Security Agency suggests the doubling time could be as little as 2.5 to 3 days.

As seen in previous waves, a swift rise in cases can lead to a rapid rise in hospitalisations, which will lead to increased pressure on the NHS. The data in South Africa is showing a rapid increase in hospitalisations.

As of Friday 10th December, face coverings are now compulsory in most public indoor venues, such as cinemas, theatres and places of worship. There will be exemptions in venues where national policy suggests it is not practical to wear one, such as when you are eating, drinking or exercising. For that reason, face masks will not be required in hospitality settings. However, guidance continues to encourage use of face coverings in indoor, crowded spaces. See the national guidance for a detailed list of the indoor settings where face coverings are currently mandatory.

From Monday 13th December, those who can will be advised to work from home.

From Wednesday 15th December, and subject to parliamentary approval, the NHS Covid Pass on the NHS App will become mandatory for entry into nightclubs and settings where large crowds gather – including unseated indoor events with 500 or more attendees, unseated outdoor events with 4,000 or more attendees, and any event with 10,000 or more attendees.

Omicron cases and their close contacts will need to continue to self-isolate for 10 days, and regardless of close contact age or vaccination status. Daily contact testing of close contacts will replace self-isolation for Omicron close contacts at a date to be determined.

Current UK COVID-19 guidance

COVID-19 remains a serious health risk. It is still possible to catch and spread COVID-19, even if you are fully vaccinated. COVID-19 will be a feature of our lives for the foreseeable future, so we need to learn to live with it and manage the risk to ourselves and others. All of us can play our part by understanding the situations where risks of COVID-19 infection and transmission are likely to be higher, and taking action to reduce these risks. COVID-19 is spread by airborne transmission, close contact via droplets, and via surfaces. In general, the risk of catching or passing on COVID-19 is higher in crowded and enclosed spaces, where there are more people who might be infectious and limited fresh air.

To read the full guidance please visit Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread.

B&NES COVID-19 guidance

While the virus is in circulation, along with other winter illnesses such as colds and flu, we advise that people continue to follow simple day-to-day measures that are still hugely effective, such as:

- Wearing face coverings in busy indoor environments and crowded places. Face coverings are now a legal requirement in shops, personal care services, in most public indoor venues, such as cinemas, theatres and places of worship and on public transport services
- Let fresh air in if you meet indoors. Meeting outdoors is safer
- Give each other space– particularly when meeting indoors
- Regular hand washing
- Taking regular lateral flow tests to break transmission, particularly on days when you're more likely to catch or spread COVID-19, like before mixing with people in crowded indoor places
- Isolating and booking a PCR test if showing any coronavirus symptoms
- Getting fully vaccinated is the best way of protecting you & others against COVID-19

To read the full information and advice please visit B&NES COVID-19 latest information and advice.

Keep well this Winter - Flu and COVID-19 booster jabs

Flu is a serious condition that kills on average 11,000 people in England each year and hospitalises tens of thousands more. Adults at high risk from flu are also most at risk from COVID-19 and the free flu vaccine is more important than ever, to help protect the nation from a double threat this winter.

Flu vaccination is an important priority this autumn to reduce morbidity and mortality associated with flu, and to reduce hospitalisations during a time when the NHS and social care may also be managing winter outbreaks of COVID-19.

This autumn and winter, it's more important than ever to get vaccinated to protect yourself against flu and COVID-19. This is because:
- more people are likely to get flu this winter as fewer people will have built up natural immunity to it during the COVID-19 pandemic
- if you get flu and COVID-19 at the same time, research shows you're more likely to be seriously ill
- getting vaccinated against flu and COVID-19 will provide protection for you and those around you for both these serious illnesses

It's easy for us to pass on COVID-19 or flu viruses without knowing. This winter there are two essential vaccines you'll need to protect yourself and your loved ones. Find out if you're eligible now at www.nhs.uk/wintervaccinations.

Running Support Groups

When delivering a support group, it is critical that all staff, volunteers and attendees of the support group follow national COVID-19 guidelines, particularly the Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread guidance. Key aspects are summarised below:

1. Understand the risks of COVID-19: In general, **the risk of catching or passing on COVID-19 is higher in crowded and enclosed spaces**, where there are more people who might be infectious and limited fresh air. In situations where there is a higher risk of catching or passing on COVID-19, you should be particularly careful to follow the guidance on keeping yourself and others safe.

2. Get vaccinated: Getting fully vaccinated is the best way of protecting you and others against COVID-19. Evidence indicates that 2 doses of a COVID-19 vaccine provide very effective protection against hospitalisation. If you have not yet received the COVID-19 vaccine, you should get vaccinated.

3. Let fresh air in if you meet indoors. Meeting outdoors is safer: Meeting outdoors vastly reduces the risk of airborne transmission, but this may not always be possible. If you're indoors, you should let fresh air in to reduce the risk of catching or spreading

COVID-19. There is guidance on Ventilation of indoor spaces to stop the spread of coronavirus.

4. Wear a face covering: From 10th December, face coverings will be required by law in most indoor public places and on public transport, including taxis. See a full list of places where you must wear a face covering. There are some exemptions. You do not have to wear a face covering in hospitality settings such as cafés, restaurants and pubs. This is because it is not practical to keep removing face coverings to eat or drink. COVID-19 spreads through the air by droplets and aerosols that are exhaled from the nose and mouth of an infected person.

5. Get tested and self-isolate if required: If you develop COVID-19 symptoms, self-isolate immediately and get a PCR test, even if your symptoms are mild. You must also self-isolate if you are told to do so by NHS Test and Trace.

6. Take tests if you do not have symptoms to help manage your risk: Around 1 in 3 people with COVID-19 do not have any symptoms. This means they could be spreading the virus without knowing it. Testing regularly increases the chances of detecting COVID-19 when you are infectious but are not displaying symptoms, helping to make sure you do not spread COVID-19. You can get tests from pharmacies or online. Find out more about how to get rapid lateral flow tests.

7. Try to stay at home if you're feeling unwell: If you feel unwell but do not have COVID-19 symptoms, or your COVID-19 test is negative, you may still have an illness which could be passed on to other people. Many common illnesses, like the flu or the common cold, are spread from one person to another. Staying at home until you feel better reduces the risk that you will pass on an illness to your friends, colleagues, and others in your community. This will help reduce the burden on our health services.

8. Wash your hands regularly and cover coughs and sneezes: Regular hand washing is an effective way to reduce your risk of catching illnesses, including COVID-19.

9. Limit close contact with other people: You may choose to limit the close contact you have with people you do not usually live with. You may also choose to take a lateral flow test before being in close contact and also encourage those people you are meeting with to do so. This includes close contact in a higher risk environment, or when spending prolonged periods of time with a vulnerable individual. It is important to consider that others may wish to continue to take a more cautious approach. We should all be considerate of this and provide the opportunity and space for others to reduce close contacts if they wish.

Individuals previously identified as clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV)
Following expert clinical advice and the successful rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine programme, people previously considered to be CEV are not being advised to shield again. If they were previously identified as CEV, they should continue to follow the guidance outlined above. They should take advice from a health professional on whether additional precautions are needed.

B&NES Council Help for Businesses
You can get COVID-19 business advice and guidance by visiting the B&NES Council Help for Businesses section of their website. This includes information on controlling COVID-19 transmission in the workplace, what to do if a staff member, customer or supplier gets coronavirus and managing an outbreak.

There is also an array of resources available for staff, employers and public facing. These include resources on testing, isolation, vaccination, a social media toolkit and some new local 'Let's look after each other' resources. You can download posters for the following disease prevention measures:

- Face coverings

- Mandatory face covering poster for businesses
- Sanitising your hands
- Making space for others
- Washing your hands

10 Step Toolkit

This 10-step toolkit aims to help community organisations deliver their face-to-face support groups safely.

1. Keep up to date with COVID-19 guidance and information

National COVID-19 guidelines
National guidance is updated regularly, so consider signing up to government updates.

Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread

Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19)

National and local COVID-19 statistics

B&NES COVID-19 latest information and advice

2. Complete a COVID-19 risk assessment

- A Risk Assessment (RA) must be completed prior to delivering your support group, taking account of the core guidance, information in this document and the relevant Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance, which sets out a range of mitigations organisations and groups should consider, including:
    - *cleaning surfaces that people touch regularly*
    - *identifying poorly ventilated areas in the venue and taking steps to improve air flow*
    - *ensuring that volunteers who are unwell do not attend the workplace*
    - *communicating to volunteers the measures you have put in place*

- B&NES Council have produced a template COVID-19 risk assessment and COVID-19 Risk Assessment Checklist, which you can use a guide of risks and measures to consider. Please contact the B&NES Public Health team for copies Public_Health@BATHNES.GOV.UK.

- The Health & Safety Executive also has some useful guidance on Risk assessment during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with a Risk assessment template and examples

- The sections of this toolkit will can also help inform your COVID-19 RA

- The results of the RA must be shared with volunteers and displayed on your website

- If using an external facility not managed by your organisation to host the support group, please ensure a RA has been completed by the venue owner/manager and COVID-19 guidelines are being adhered to. You should factor whether additional / further measures are required in your COVID-19 RA.

3. Testing and turn away people with COVID-19 symptoms

- Staff, volunteers and group members should self-isolate and take a PCR test if they have a high temperature, a new continuous cough, or a loss or change to their sense of smell or taste. They must also self-isolate if they have tested positive for COVID-19, live in a household with someone who has symptoms (unless they're exempt from self-isolation), or have been told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace. **This should be clearly communicated ahead of each group session.**

- Check for and turn away individuals with COVID-19 symptoms or who are required to self-isolate

- Organisations and groups should encourage staff, volunteers and group members to take regular rapid lateral flow tests (twice weekly) even if they do not have COVID-19 symptoms.

Organisations and groups should consider specifically requiring a LFD test within the last 24 hours before each group session and demonstrate negative test results on arrival.

4. Provide adequate ventilation

- You should make sure there is a supply of fresh air to enclosed spaces where there are people present. This can be natural ventilation through windows, doors and vents, mechanical ventilation using fans and ducts, or a combination of both.

- You should identify any poorly ventilated spaces in your premises and consider steps you can take to improve fresh air flow in these areas. In some places, a CO2 monitor can help identify if the space is poorly ventilated. For further guidance please click here.

- Encourage people to use outside space where it's practical, especially for higher-risk activities such as exercise, or when people are singing or raising their voices.

- You can find more information in the Ventilation of indoor spaces to stop the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance

- The Health & Safety Executive has some useful guidance on Ventilation and air conditioning during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

5. Enable people to check in at the venue

- You are no longer legally required to collect contact details, however doing so will help to support NHS Test and Trace to reduce the spread of the virus. You can enable people to check in by providing an NHS QR code, though you do not have to ask customers to check in or turn them away if they refuse.

- If you display an NHS QR code, you should also have a system to collect (and securely store) names and contact details for those who ask to check in but do not have the app.

- To support NHS Test and Trace, organisations and groups should keep a record of all volunteers who come onto their premises, including their shift times on a given day and their contact details

6. Clean more often

- Regular cleaning plays a vital role in limiting the transmission of COVID-19. Full cleaning guidance can be found here.

- Increase the frequency of cleaning, using standard cleaning products such as detergents and bleach, paying attention to all surfaces but especially ones that are touched frequently. You could make a checklist of priority areas (such as door handles, light switches, surfaces).

- Toilet and bathroom facilities - set clear guidance for staff and group members on using and cleaning bathroom facilities. Consider additional handwashing signage.

- If you are cleaning after a known or suspected case of COVID-19 then you should refer to specific guidance explained here.

- You should ask your staff and customers to use hand sanitiser and clean their hands frequently and provide them with advice to promote good hygiene.

7. Have clear handwashing and hygiene procedures

- One of the most effective ways for people to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading is washing their hands regularly. Think about how you can promote good hygiene and make sure your messages reach people who have difficulty with their sight or hearing.

- Ensure suitable hand washing facilities or hand sanitiser are available, including running water, liquid soap and paper towels or hand driers. Consider displaying handwashing posters in the venue if not already in place
- Consider providing hand sanitiser around venues, in addition to washrooms. Further guidance on which hand sanitiser to use can be found here.

- Ensure that handwashing and hand sanitiser facilities are checked and refilled regularly, and that any equipment placed is accessible to (and does not impede) wheelchair users.

- Consider using signs and posters to promote good hygiene, making people aware:
    - How to wash their hands effectively.
    - That they should wash their hands frequently.
    - That they should avoid touching their faces or face coverings.
    - That they should cough or sneeze into a tissue which is binned safely, or into their arm if a tissue is not available.

8. Face covering and social distancing

- From 10th December, face coverings will be required by law in most indoor public places and on public transport, including taxis. See a full list of places where you must wear a face covering. There are some exemptions. You do not have to wear a face covering in hospitality settings such as cafés, restaurants and pubs. This is because it is not practical to keep removing face coverings to eat or drink. Where worn correctly, this can reduce the risk of transmission.

- Staff, volunteers & group members should be encouraged to wear face coverings and this should be expected in crowded spaces, unless exempt, whilst at an indoor group session

- Be aware that face coverings may make it harder to communicate with people who rely on lip reading, facial expressions and clear sound. You need to consider the reasonable adjustments needed for workers and group members with disabilities.

- Although there are no regulations, encouraging visitors to ‘give each other space’ would be a sensible measure to consider.

- Social distancing measures – consider what distance is needed and how this will be implemented i.e. marshalling and signage

9. Consider using the NHS COVID Pass to reduce the risk of transmission

- You could consider using the NHS COVID Pass to reduce the risk of transmission. The NHS COVID Pass allows people to demonstrate that they are at a lower risk of carrying COVID-19 and transmitting it to others, through vaccination, testing or natural immunity. It can help organisations to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

- The NHS COVID Pass will be available through the NHS App, the NHS website, or as a letter that can be requested by ringing NHS 119. Participants will also be able to show text or email confirmation of test results.

- If you use the NHS COVID Pass, you should ensure that you comply with all relevant legal obligations and guidance, including on equalities. You can find more information in the NHS COVID Pass guidance

- Even when using the NHS COVID Pass, it is still important that you follow the rest of the guidance and put measures in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading at your venue or event.

10. Communicate key messages and instructions prior to arrival

- Prior to commencement of groups, communicate that social distancing rules must be adhered to. How to stop the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance can be circulated to members.

- Communicate to all members information and guidance on hand washing and the use of face coverings.

- Ensure members are clear about all procedures, and what is required upon arrival and exit where appropriate prior to their arrival.