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**COVID-19 guidance for community organisations that run support groups**

**\*\*\*JANUARY 21st 2022 UPDATE\*\*\***

**England to return to Plan A following the success of the booster programme**

On Wednesday 19th January, the government announced that the [measures put in place under Plan B in England will be lifted](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/england-to-return-to-plan-a-following-the-success-of-the-booster-programme), following millions getting the booster, which gives strong protection against Omicron. This means:

- The government is no longer asking people to work from home if they can. People should speak to their line managers about returning to the office and should follow the [Working Safely guidance.](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-covid-19)

- Face coverings are no longer be advised for staff and pupils in secondary school and college classrooms

- **From 27th January:** Face coverings will no longer be advised for staff and pupils in communal areas of secondary schools, nor for staff in communal areas of primaries. Directors of Public Health will only be able to recommend pupils and staff wear masks in communal areas in places where there are outbreaks or where the local public health situation justifies it, and with sign-off from the Education Secretary.

- **From 27th January**: There is no longer a legal requirement to wear a face covering. ***However, the government suggests that you continue to wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you may come into contact with other people you do not normally meet***

- **From 27th January**: Venues and events will no longer be required by law to check visitors’ NHS COVID Pass. The NHS COVID Pass can still be used on a voluntary basis.

**Current UK COVID-19 guidance**

**COVID-19 remains a 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.

Following the guidance will help you to understand situations where there is a greater risk of catching or spreading COVID-19 and the steps that you can take to stay safe and protect others. Every action you can take to help reduce the spread will help reduce pressure on the NHS during the winter months.

**To read the full guidance please visit** **[Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread.](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do)**

**To read the local B&NES information and advice please visit** [**B&NES COVID-19 latest information and advice.**](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/coronavirus)

**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 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](http://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](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus), particularly the [Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread guidance.](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do) 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. To maintain this high level of protection through the coming winter, [you should also get a booster vaccine](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/book-coronavirus-vaccination/) for COVID-19 when offered. Winter is a difficult time when our immunity is weaker. Getting the booster vaccine is an essential part of ensuring immune defence this season. If you have not yet received the COVID-19 vaccine, [you should get vaccinated.](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/coronavirus-vaccine/)

**3. Get tested and self-isolate if required:** If you develop [COVID-19 symptoms](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/symptoms/), self-isolate immediately and [get a PCR test](https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test), even if your symptoms are mild. You must also self-isolate if you are told to do so by NHS Test and Trace. The self-isolation guidance has recently changed, so please read the [Stay at home: guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection) for the full updated guidance and the procedure to follow.

**4. 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.](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing/regular-rapid-coronavirus-tests-if-you-do-not-have-symptoms/)

**5. 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.](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-ventilation-of-indoor-spaces-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus/ventilation-of-indoor-spaces-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19)

**6. 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.

**7. 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.

**8. 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.

**B&NES Council Help for Businesses**

You can get COVID-19 business advice and guidance by visiting the [B&NES Council Help for Businesses](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-latest-information-and-advice/help-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](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Let%27s%20look%20after%20each%20other_face%20coverings.pdf)
* [Sanitising your hands](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Let%27s%20look%20after%20each%20other_sanitising%20your%20hands.pdf)
* [Making space for others](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Let%27s%20look%20after%20each%20other_space.pdf)
* [Washing your hands](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Let%27s%20look%20after%20each%20other_washing%20your%20hands.pdf)

**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](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)

National guidance is updated regularly, so consider [signing up to government updates](https://www.gov.uk/email-signup?topic=/coronavirus-taxon).

[Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do)

[Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-covid-19)

[National and local COVID-19 statistics](https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/)

[B&NES COVID-19 latest information and advice](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/coronavirus)

**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](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do), information in this document and the relevant [Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-covid-19), 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](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/COVID%20Risk%20Assessment%20Checklist.pdf), 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. A [COVID-19 Staff Risk Assessment](https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/COVID-19%20STAFF%20RISK%20ASSESSMENT_1.pdf) has also been produced. This Risk Assessment should be used as a guide and shouldn’t replace a thorough workplace Risk Assessment.

- The Health & Safety Executive also has some useful guidance on [Risk assessment during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic](https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/risk-assessment.htm), with a [Risk assessment template and examples](https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/risk-assessment-template-and-examples.htm)

**- 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](https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-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](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-and-treatment/when-to-self-isolate-and-what-to-do/) 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](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing/regular-rapid-coronavirus-tests-if-you-do-not-have-symptoms/) even if they do not have COVID-19 symptoms. You should do a rapid lateral flow test before:

- mixing with people in crowded and enclosed spaces where there’s limited fresh air

- visiting someone who is at higher risk of getting seriously ill from COVID-19

You can still pass COVID-19 on even if you’re vaccinated.

**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](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-covid-19/events-and-attractions#facility-3).

- 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](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-ventilation-of-indoor-spaces-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus/ventilation-of-indoor-spaces-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19)

- The Health & Safety Executive has some useful guidance on [Ventilation and air conditioning during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic](https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/equipment-and-machinery/air-conditioning-and-ventilation/index.htm)

**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](https://www.gov.uk/create-coronavirus-qr-poster), 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](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings)**.**

**- 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](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings#left-area)**.**

**- 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](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1021288/20200520_COVID-19_Infection_prevention_...l_Best_practice_hand_washing.pdf) 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](https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/hand-sanitiser/index.htm).

- 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**

**- There is no longer a legal requirement to wear a face covering. However, the government suggests that you continue to wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you may come into contact with other people you do not normally meet**

**- Staff, volunteers & group members should be encouraged to wear face coverings, particularly when coming into contact with people who are at higher risk to getting severely ill from COVID-19**

**- 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, particularly when coming into contact with people who are at higher risk to getting severely ill from COVID-19.**

**- 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](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/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](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/covid-pass/)**, 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](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/nhs-covid-pass)

**- 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](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19) can be circulated to members.

- Communicate to all members information and guidance on [hand washing](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/best-way-to-wash-your-hands/) and [the use of face coverings](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own).

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