

Risk mitigation for people experiencing homelessness following the rapid emergence of SARSCoV-2 Omicron variant – Position Statement 10th Dec 2021

This Position Statement follows the Government announcement on 8 December 2021 to enact [Plan B](#) due to the high probability of widespread community transmission of SARSCoV-2 Omicron variant putting the NHS under unsustainable pressure. Plan B commits to communicating clearly and urgently to the public that the level of risk has increased and that steps should be taken to manage the increased risks of the virus.

The Omicron variant has **increased transmissibility** and **escape from immunity** when compared to the previous dominant Delta strain. Currently, numbers of Omicron cases are doubling every 48-72 hours and will exceed Delta cases by end of December. This exponential growth will very rapidly lead to case numbers that could exceed those seen last winter. Numbers of hospitalisations are also predicted to increase markedly. Despite anecdotal reports of mild symptoms, there is insufficient data at present to characterise any changes in the clinical presentation and severity of disease. As with previous variants, older people and those with chronic comorbidities are at greatest risk of hospitalisation and death. [SAGE](#) have stated that Omicron may cause people to become **infectious sooner** compared to Delta, and that the **role of airborne transmission may be greater** than has previously been the case. SAGE have highlighted the increased risk of outbreaks in institutional settings and the need for additional measures.

Two doses of vaccine now provide minimal protection against infection. Even one dose of vaccine provides substantial protection against severe disease which can be further increased with a second and third dose. The third dose also makes people much less likely to develop infection and pass it on to others. Among people experiencing homelessness, vaccine uptake remains lower than for the general population. Taken together, all this means that the **risk of outbreaks among residents and staff in hostels and emergency accommodation has increased substantially and that additional measures are now necessary to manage this risk.**

Current Sector Response:

The following measures, which should already be in place and actively promoted across the sector, have proved extremely effective in preventing and containing widespread transmission: -

1. Not re-opening communal night shelters
2. Single rooms with own bathrooms or reduced sharing of bathroom facilities, regular hand washing and increased cleaning frequency throughout facilities
3. Ongoing provision of information, training, and support for frontline staff teams to implement these measures
4. Improving access to and maximising uptake of COVID-19 vaccination through a continuous and supported offer
5. Actively identifying clinically vulnerable people and providing separate facilities or specific areas within facilities to reduce exposure risk and improve access to healthcare and social support
6. Rapid identification of residents who are symptomatic and rapid access to PCR testing for all symptomatic residents and staff. PCR testing is best when supported by key workers and/or health outreach teams
7. Supported isolation including welfare checks alongside provision of food, drinks etc. for residents who are symptomatic and/or PCR positive. Supported isolation can be managed in situ or in designated facilities
8. Outbreak testing and prevention measures if 2 or more cases are diagnosed in the same facility within 10 days
9. Use of face coverings, increased ventilation, regular handwashing, cleaning and promotion of social distancing
10. Strengthening liaison with local health providers to ensure clinical assessment, engagement with care, access to drug, alcohol and mental health services and access to antiviral treatments for eligible cases as they become available

Recommended additional mitigation measures:

To mitigate the risk posed by Omicron variant due to increased [transmissibility](#) and [escape from immunity](#), we strongly recommend that the following **additional infection prevention and control measures are rapidly implemented across all hostels and emergency accommodation services nationally.**

11. A programme of training and ongoing support to increase vaccination and regular testing of staff and residents.
12. Staff home testing and supporting residents to self-test twice weekly using Lateral Flow tests (LFT) with isolation of positives and confirmatory PCR testing.
13. 10 days of supported isolation of contacts of PCR confirmed cases or 10 day daily lateral flow testing as per government guidance.

Experience demonstrates a spectrum of willingness and ability amongst resident to engage in vaccination and regular testing but also that staff teams play a major role in motivating residents.

The collective response of the sector throughout the pandemic to date has achieved an unprecedented reduction in overall mortality among people experiencing homelessness as reported by the [Office for National Statistics](#). The response has also prevented large numbers of COVID-19 [hospitalisations and deaths](#). Rapid implementation of the additional risk mitigation measures recommended is essential to secure these gains and continue to protect residents and staff teams.

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