

## **Public health rationale for ongoing free COVID-19 testing to protect people experiencing homelessness – Position Statement 10th March 2022**

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This position statement follows *Risk mitigation for people experiencing homelessness following the rapid emergence of SARSCoV-2 omicron variant – Position Statement 10th Dec 2021*

Even with extensive risk mitigation efforts, the SARSCoV-2 Omicron variant resulted in unprecedented levels of transmission and outbreaks in accommodation facilities for people experiencing homelessness nationally. While the Omicron variant appears to be less clinically severe than previous SARSCoV-2 strains, numbers of people needing hospital treatment peaked in January 2022 at levels comparable to the first wave of April 2020.

Both case numbers and hospitalisations remain at high levels and are starting to increase again. The latest ONS survey data (11<sup>th</sup> March) also shows increasing rates in adult age groups with 1 in 25 people currently infected. Changes in population behaviour following reductions in control measures, waning immunity and increased transmissibility of the B2 subvariant of Omicron likely account for these changes. Most hospitalisations and deaths occur in those who have not been fully vaccinated. Ongoing high levels of infection are particularly concerning for the homeless sector due to the combination of communal living facilitating transmission, high levels of clinical vulnerability and very low levels of vaccination. This presents an ongoing severe risk. Availability of free testing in this sector therefore remains critical to control.

On 24 February 2022 the Government removed the legal requirement for infected people to self-isolate and for close contacts who are not fully vaccinated to self-isolate. Despite the removal of these legal requirements, [Government guidance](#) and public health advice remains that: -

- People with any of the main symptoms of COVID-19, even if their symptoms are mild, should have a PCR test
- People with any of the main symptoms of COVID-19 or a positive test result should self-isolate and avoid contact with other people
- People who experience homelessness and rough sleeping are prioritised for offering COVID-19 vaccination and should be supported to take up offers of vaccination
- Local authorities will continue to manage local outbreaks of COVID-19 in high risk settings

On 1 April 2022, the Government plans to further update guidance and set out specific ongoing steps to protect vulnerable groups from COVID-19. From this date the Government will no longer provide free universal symptomatic and asymptomatic testing for the general public in England, but will continue to provide free testing for some symptomatic at-risk groups and social care staff. Specifically which at-risk and staff groups will be included for ongoing free testing has not yet been announced.

**We strongly advise that people experiencing homelessness and frontline staff teams should be included in the at-risk groups eligible for ongoing free COVID-19 testing from 1 April 2022.**

### Public health rationale for ongoing free COVID-19 testing: -

- People who experience homelessness and rough sleeping are more **clinically vulnerable** to COVID-19 due to early onset multiple morbidity including undiagnosed and poorly managed chronic health conditions
- **Low levels of vaccine protection** among people who experience homelessness and rough sleeping nationally – in London only 13% have received a full course of vaccination (2 doses plus a booster dose)
- SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant has **increased transmissibility** and **escape from immunity**. COVID-19 spreads through droplets and aerosols in shared airspaces. Even where single rooms with own bathrooms have been provided, communal shared airspaces continue to drive outbreaks in these facilities. Removing access to free PCR and LFD testing would result in **extensive uncontrolled transmission** with **serious clinical consequences** for people with underlying health conditions and **major disruption to service provision**
- People who experience homelessness and rough sleeping have some of the worst health outcomes in our society. Removing access to free PCR and LFD testing would **exacerbate this existing health inequity**

We agree with the [Government guidance](#) (Updated 7 March 2022) for commissioners and providers of hostels and a range of accommodation services for people experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping (NOT including night shelters – which should remain closed). Government guidance continues to reiterate the importance of ongoing public health risk mitigation measures including: -

- Providers should continue to implement daily monitoring of COVID-19 symptoms among residents and staff
- Any resident with COVID-19 symptoms, even if these symptoms are mild, should stay in the accommodation setting, avoid contact with other people and should be helped to arrange a PCR test even if they have received one or more doses of COVID-19 vaccine
- Meeting the health and wellbeing needs of residents with COVID-19. Residents with COVID-19 should have their own room and personalised plans in place, which include:
  - provision of food and water
  - support for physical and mental health (including drug, alcohol and nicotine dependence and/or treatment needs)
  - wellbeing
  - communication (for example being provided with a mobile phone)
- General principles to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses should continue to be followed: increased ventilation; frequent hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched objects and surfaces in the hostel, such as door handles, handrails, tabletops, and electronic devices (such as phones)
- Providing face coverings at reception for all residents and staff to be worn in communal areas
- Regular LFD testing to increase the chances of detecting COVID-19 in infectious persons not displaying symptoms (1 in 3 infections are asymptomatic)

- Working with local public health teams to support the development of solutions to deliver COVID-19 vaccinations for people experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping
- Continuing to plan for and manage the hostel space to avoid spread of COVID-19 infection. Residents who fall into the categories below should be supported to isolate and access testing, ideally in their own self-contained accommodation (with their own bathroom and kitchen): -
  - residents who have symptoms of COVID-19 and may be waiting for a test result (possible case)
  - residents who have received a positive test result for COVID-19 (confirmed case)
  - residents considered to be in the same household as someone with symptoms or who has had a positive test (household contacts)
- Providers should ensure plans are in place for each setting for prevention and response to COVID-19 cases and outbreaks, including a clear picture of all alternative local provision that could be used in the case of an outbreak

**Implementation of this public health guidance is dependent on the continued availability of free testing for people experiencing homelessness, rough sleeping and staff supporting them.**

**Outreaching of COVID-19 vaccine also needs to continue to improve uptake of first, second, third and any JCVI recommended future doses.**

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