UCU Covid-19 guidance: Omicron variant, 14 December 2021

UCU has called for immediate action from employers to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and the Omicron variant in all post-16 education settings.

The Omicron variant will continue to spread rapidly across the UK and there is high risk of vaccine evasion, particularly with those people who have not had their booster vaccination. SAGE experts predict Omicron will become the dominant variant in the UK before Christmas with evidence of cases doubling every 2-3 days[1].

Employers must take decisive action now to adopt all reasonably practicable measures that could reduce the transmission of Covid-19 across workplaces. Any reduction in social mixing now will reduce transmission significantly and allow for more people to receive their booster dose of the vaccine.

UCU is calling for all teaching to move online immediately and for new rapid risk assessments in all post-16 education settings to be carried out in consultation with UCU reps. Reps should also seek the implementation of the following control measures at this critical time:

- reduce the number of people required on site to the lowest level possible so that only essential and unavoidable work activities take place at this time

- ensure a safe working environment for those working in-person and at home which considers the potential risks to their physical and mental health

- ensure there is a safety threshold for ventilation of 12-17 litres per second per person in indoor spaces (CO_2 proxy of approximately 800ppm[2]). Employers can also use HEPA air filtration units to clean the air where appropriate and reduce airborne transmission risks

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[1] **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spi-m-o-consensus-statement-on-Covid-19-7-december-2021/spi-m-o-consensus-statement-on-Covid-19-7-december-2021**

[2] SAGE — 800ppm is typically 10-15 l/s/p (page 2)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/928720/S0789_EMG_Role_of_Ventilation_in_Controlling _ SARS-CoV-2_Transmission.pdf

- ensure all workers undertaking in-person work have access to high quality, well-fitting face masks which offer effective levels of respiratory protection from airborne transmission. (FFP2 standard facemasks filter at least 94% of viral particles and FFP3 filter at least 99%)

- ensure a minimum of 2m social distancing as standard to prevent close contact transmission

- ensure effective cleaning and hygiene measures are in place to reduce exposure through contact

- ensure access in work time to regular testing (PCR and LFD tests) and provide support to those who are asked to self-isolate. Employers should encourage testing uptake and improve Covid-19 reporting systems to quickly identify and control potential outbreaks

- ensure any workers at increased risk from Covid-19 are not required to undertake in person work at this time and that alternatives are offered to reduce exposure risks

- ensure all staff have access to vaccinations and boosters in work time without loss of pay

- ensure there is adequate instruction, information and training for all stakeholders on any new safety measures that will be implemented.

Resources and Further information

The latest DfE guidance can be found here:

Higher education

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1039607/HE_guidance_091221.pdf

Further education

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-Covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision

UCU guidance

UCU's Five Principles for Post-16 Education Recovery - https://www.ucu.org.uk/recovery-principles

UCU Covid-19 resources - https://www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus

Homeworking

Employers must implement contingency measures now to introduce remote working and reduce social mixing on site for those staff who are able to do this. We recognise that remote / homeworking will help to prevent transmission and significantly delay the spread of Covid-19 and the Omicron variant in particular across post-16 education.

Employers must ensure they have measures in place to ensure homeworking can be undertaken safely. Employers must update organisation wide stress risk assessments to ensure there are appropriate safety measures in place to prevent or control any work-related stressors such as excessive workloads.

UCU Stress Toolkit (stress risk assessment guidance): https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11447/Stress-toolkit/pdf/UCU_stress_toolkit.pdf and stress resources: https://www.ucu.org.uk/stress

HSE stress and homeworking resources: https://www.hse.gov.uk/home-working/index.htm

Ventilation

Risk assessments need to ensure each space to be utilised is well ventilated with clarity on maximum occupation levels to reduce airborne transmission risks. HEPA filtration units can be used to clean the air and CO_2 monitors can also be used as a proxy measurement to ensure there is a good supply of fresh air into a space to prevent spread of Covid-19. SAGE advise, '[v]entilation should be assessed, and if possible improved, first before considering whether there is a need to use an air cleaner.'

UCU ventilation guidance is here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11758/Covid-19-Ventilation-at-work-September-2021/pdf/covid19_ventilation-guidance-202109.pdf

SAGE EMG '*Potential application of Air Cleaning devices and personal decontamination to manage transmission of COVID-19*' 4th November 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/939173/S0867_EMG_Potential_application_of_air_cleaning_devices_and_personal_decontamination_to_manage_transmission_of_COVID-19.pdf

Face masks and face coverings

High quality face masks should be worn in indoor spaces and at any time where social distancing may be difficult (exemptions excluded). In addition, we want to see employers implement better quality face masks at a minimum FFP2 standard which offers 95% filtration of virus particles). FFP2 or FFP3 masks (without an exhalation valve) will offer protection to individuals and are subject to the Personal Protective Equipment Regulations 2002.

BSI guide to masks and face coverings for use in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic, June 2020. https://www.bsigroup.com/globalassets/localfiles/en-gb/product-certification/personal-safety/bsi-guide-for-personal-safety-equipment-0520.pdf

Mask Use and Ventilation Improvements to Reduce Covid-19 Incidence in Elementary Schools — Georgia, November 16–December 11, 2020

https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7021e1.htm

Social distancing

Social distancing can reduce close contact transmission and also support better ventilation and reduction in airborne transmission by limiting occupancy rates in indoor spaces. Social distancing should be seen as a positive measure which would help prevent a number of different transmission routes (close contact and droplet transmission, airborne transmission, and fomite transmission).

Independent SAGE statement on 2m vs 1m social distance guidance in indoor settings, June 2021 https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2m-vs-1m-guidance-Independent-SAGE-statement-June-21.pdf

Cleaning and hygiene

Enhanced and effective cleaning and hygiene measures must be in place. Employers need to ensure cleaning is undertaken by staff who are well trained and equipped to undertake regular cleaning duties. COSHH risk assessments for usage of all cleaning materials needs to be undertaken for cleaning staff and others who may come into contact with cleaning materials, sprays and sanitisers to ensure appropriate levels of information, instruction and training are in place to ensure safe usage and storage.

Cleaning, hygiene and handwashing to reduce coronavirus (Covid-19) transmission, HSE 9 December 2021.

https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/cleaning/index.htm

Disproportionate impact

Covid-19 has not impacted on everyone equally, and employers must consider the equality impact in their workplaces. There are many people at increased risk of contracting Covid-19 and many who could have severe and long term health outcomes. There are a number of unknowns about the risk factors for long covid and this must be considered in workplace risk assessments to protect people from the short and long term impact of Covid-19 infection. Individual risk assessments must also be undertaken to ensure individual risk factors are identified and appropriate measures put in place to protect people from harm.

84th SAGE meeting on Covid-19, 25 March 2021

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/976319/S1163_SAGE_84_-_Final_minutes.pdf

COVID-19 and Health Inequality, Independent SAGE Report 21, November 2020.

https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Inequalities-_i_SAGE_FINAL-draft_corrected.pdf

Long-Covid: A health and safety approach, UCU Breakfast Briefing, 29 Sept 2021.

https://www.ucu.org.uk/hs-breakfast-briefings

Testing, data and support

Regular PCR and LFD testing should continue for those people who are symptomatic or asymptomatic respectively with support mechanisms in place for those required to self-isolate. However workplace risk assessments need to identify the limits of testing as a control measure given the low uptake of testing, the data gap in reporting of test results, and the lack of support available to those who need to self-isolate. Employers should ensure they have suitable reporting mechanisms in place to improve the accuracy and transparency of testing data and mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of existing control measures in preventing transmission.

Using behavioural science to help minimise the spread of Covid-19, Independent SAGE Report 52, Nov 2021 https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/12th-November-Behavioural-Science-report.pdf