

UCU position on relaxation of national restrictions

The Westminster Government has published its workplace guidance just two working days before national restrictions will be relaxed in England which has left insufficient time for UCU reps and employers to meaningfully consult on risk assessments.

Employers have significant duties under health and safety legislation to ensure workplaces are safe for all which includes reducing covid transmission risks to the lowest level practicable.

As we now find ourselves in a third wave of the pandemic in the UK, with infection rates rising exponentially, increasing hospitalisations and just 52% of population fully vaccinated, we are clear that robust infection control measures are essential. Employers must control on site transmission to prevent further disruptions to education and to protect the health of staff and students.

Robust mitigations must remain in place following the relaxation of restrictions 19 July (England) and 9 August (Scotland). UCU's position on the following workplace mitigations is below. Further and more detailed guidance from UCU will be provided to members and branch representatives next week.

Ventilationⁱⁱ

Risk assessments need to ensure each space to be utilised is well ventilated with clarity on maximum occupation levels to reduce airborne transmission risks. Close monitoring of ventilation to ensure a good supply of fresh air into a space is essential. This can also be maintained through considered use of CO2 monitors.

Face masks and face coveringsⁱⁱⁱ

Face coverings should continue to be worn by all those able to do so when in indoor spaces. In addition, we want to see better provision of high quality face masks at a minimum FFP2 standard as this offers better protection to individuals from airborne transmission.

Social distancing^{iv}

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). Not all activities will need to take place 'in person' and the past year has shown it is possible to deliver lectures, tutorials and student support virtually.

Cleaning and hygiene^v

Enhanced and effective cleaning and hygiene measures must remain in place. Employers need to ensure cleaning is undertaken by staff who are well trained and equipped to undertake regular cleaning duties. 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. Employers must provide appropriate levels of information, instruction and training to ensure safe usage and storage.

Disproportionate impact^{vi}

Covid has not impacted on everyone equally, and employers must consider the equality impact of any relaxation in controls on those at increased risk of contracting covid and those 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 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.

Testing and self isolation^{vii}

PCR testing and LFD testing should continue for those people who are symptomatic or asymptomatic. However workplace risk assessments need to identify the limits of testing as a control measure given the low uptake of testing and the lack of support available to those self-isolating.

Homeworking

We recognise that home working continues to be an important measure to reduce social mixing and transmission. The sector has demonstrated over the past year that it is possible to work from home where necessary and homeworking needs to be part of employer's contingency plans to prevent outbreaks and further disruptions to education.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/13/covid-numbersengland-freedom-day-dont-add-up-strain-nhs>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/equipment-and-machinery/airconditioning-and-ventilation/identifying-poorly-ventilated-areas.htm>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emg-and-spi-b-application-ofco2-monitoring-as-an-approach-to-managing-ventilation-to-mitigate-sars-cov-2transmission-27-may-2021>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bsigroup.com/globalassets/localfiles/en-gb/productcertification/personal-safety/bsi-guide-for-personal-safety-equipment-0520.pdf>

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

^{iv} <https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2m-vs-1mguidance-Independent-SAGE-statement-June-21.pdf>

^v <https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/cleaning/index.htm>

^{vi} https://www.independentsage.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/11/Inequalities-_i_SAGE_FINAL-draft_corrected.pdf

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/tuc-calls-long-covid-be-urgently-recogniseddisability-prevent-massive-discrimination>

^{vii} <https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Supprtdocument-final.pdf>