**Gold Briefing – New Variant of Concern (Omicron), Plan B and the National Framework**

The purpose of this briefing is to provide an update to the note issued by COVID-19 Gold Command on 27th November 2021 and follows the statement from the Prime Minister on 8th December concerning the variant of concern known as Omicron and the decision to implement “Plan B”. This directs action required in all prisons.

The risk from COVID-19, in particular the Omicron variant, (and in addition Influenza), remains highly dynamic and there continues to be uncertainty about the challenges which may arise. It is now clear that we should anticipate a significant further increase in COVID-19 cases driven by the Omicron variant. Prisons will need to ensure a rapid response to suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases, and limit the ingress and spread of infection through proactive action. Our safe operating procedures (SOP) are well established and embedded in local operating protocols, and at this point are considered appropriate to mitigate the risk from the Omicron variant. Version 8 of the SOPs are available on the operational guidance platform. These reflect a general update and do not change the substance of existing public health advice or application of controls. We continue to work closely with public health colleagues to ensure that we are closely aligned to any new information about this variant, and any further precautions that may be necessary in prisons. We must remain focused on ensuring that our most vulnerable are protected at this time.

**Actions**

Plan B now requires of prisons in England (as is already the case in Wales) that any staff who can **work from home** should do so. Risk assessments should therefore be completed for areas locally so that staff can work on site where able, and remotely where necessary, balanced with the need to keep the jail running safely, decently and securely.

Cross site and non-essential working roles must also be considered, and effectiveness assessed. Non-essential cross site working should cease to reduce footfall, and necessary cross site working should be reviewed and managed through existing programs which have developed to mitigate risk over the last 20 months. **Minimising movement across sites and in and out of the prison** is important, but certain areas will still be assessed as essential for the continues safe running of the prison – for example HMIP, group staff visits, certain providers and essential maintenance.

Similarly, you must **work with workplace ROTL placement providers** to determine how prison work placements are able to continue given the community guidelines. It is important that establishments offering ROTL, work with placement providers to align prisoners continued availability for paid employment with the individual business model. Where placements are able to continue establishments must focus on the controls in place to manage the Covid risk. Placements should only be stopped where the risk is deemed unacceptable.

At this time the change in community guidance does not impact **domestic ROTL placements** and these are able to continue. Establishments are reminded that as of 09/12 prisoners going out on ROR must agree to test on return from the placement and this testing requirement must be included as a licence condition. The briefing detailing this requirement is available [here](https://pogp.hmppsintranet.org.uk/2020/04/15/hdc-and-rotl/). Further guidance has also been provided to assist establishments with the requirements around isolation of Omicron cases. This is provided below.



Prisoners taking part in any form of ROTL must be encouraged to take part in testing as per the testing guidance and should be reminded of the importance to follow community rules around face mask usage when out in the community. Th compartmentalisation guidance also remains in place and establishments must continue to follow that to determine their local cohorting arrangements.

You will have already seen the joint letter from Phil Copple, Kate Davies CBE and Dr Eamonn O’Moore sent to all Governors earlier this week highlighting the importance of regular testing and the protection offered by first, second and booster vaccines. It is vital that we do everything we can to protect our most vulnerable staff and people in prison.

 

You must now **prioritise** **vaccination booster clinics** in your establishment, as we have a limited window for leverage against infection spread. It is essential to prioritise supporting your local health provider to deliver the vaccine to any prisoner wishing to access their first, second or booster vaccine. Vaccination clinics need to be prioritised even if this involves restricting your regime to achieve this.

You must continue to actively **encourage staff to access the vaccine and booster dose** and to report their vaccination status on SOP in a timely manner. Staff should be actively encouraged to receive their vaccine as soon as they possibly can. Booster jabs will provide a level of protection against Omicron, it is likely to be the most important thing we can do in response to this variant.

Furthermore, you should **ensure that testing remains a focus for the establishment,** for staff, prisoners and visitors. Ensure PCR testing is completed for symptomatic and LFD positive cases, as this allows laboratories to do genomic sequencing and identify if Omicron is present. Specific guidance has been issued for Omicron Variant testing, for prisons in England and Wales. Please refer to the guidance below. Prison staff should be encouraged to test twice with LFD and 1 PCR test weekly at work, and should be further encouraged to LFD test for non-work activities in line with guidance   [Rapid lateral flow coronavirus (COVID-19) tests - NHS (www.nhs.uk)](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing/regular-rapid-coronavirus-tests-if-you-do-not-have-symptoms/)

   

To manage the increased Omicron risk, you are asked to ensure that you have **reviewed and enforced local policies for the deployment of face masks and face coverings.** The existing HMPPS policies for both face masks and face coverings remain in place and are accessible [here](https://pogp.hmppsintranet.org.uk/2020/10/12/face-masks/). Establishments must ensure that face masks and face coverings are available for staff and prisoners and are being worn at all appropriate times.

You must ensure that the current compartmentalisation controls around **vulnerable** prisoners are effective and should also review the risks assessment for and with individual staff members who are vulnerable in light of this increased level of risk.

Finally, the Prime Minister announced the role of **Daily Contact Testing (DCT)** to remove the self-isolation period for identified contacts. HMPPS in England currently has the ability to use both DCT to allow unvaccinated staff, and Risk Mitigation Testing (RMT) to allow vaccinated staff to return to work rather than remain isolated unless formally directed not to do so. RMT is also available in HMPPS Wales. Governors should work to **ensure understanding of and compliance with** these testing programs to limit unnecessary isolation periods. More details will be provided about changes to DC when they are confirmed. Daily Contact Testing can only be used for Delta and other variants of COVID-19. If a contact is a **suspected or confirmed contact of the Omicron variant, they must self-isolate, regardless of their age or vaccination status.**

**Risk and Regime Restrictions**

It is critical at this time that you closely monitor the risk at your establishment and that you respond rapidly and effectively when that risk assessment changes. Prisons must respond quickly to suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases, limit infection spread and protect impacted areas. Mixing and movement in regimes must be assessed and limited, and non-essential high-risk activities curtailed. Governors and PGDs are closest to the local operational risk so continue to be the most appropriate avenue to make defensible decisions. However, the weekly Covid Gold-led heatmap panel will continue to provide a national RAG rating for each establishment and risk assessment to guide this further, prompting action such as a regime review, an increase in controls or ceasing regime progression due to a Red rating. Changes to regimes must therefore be informed by your establishment’s RAG rating, with advice from an Outbreak Control Team (OCT) if relevant, and approved by the Prison Group Director (PGD) and notified to Covid Gold, e.g. any change to regime Stage, or a decision to suspend visits.

OCT recommendations that impact the system, such as the request to cease any new receptions or transfers or a need for mass testing resource support should come to Covid Gold for approval. Trade Unions and local Public Health partners should be engaged throughout in any decisions to regress or progress regime stages. Regime adjustments must be proportionate to the risk identified and this may therefore mean that movement *within* a regime stage to scale down a regime delivery or apply restrictions in only parts of a prison may be more appropriate than a wholescale regression to a restricted regime. However proportionate regression to a regime stage, such as at Stage 2 reintroducing social distancing, may also be justified if the risk is high and controls not sufficient.

With the increasing risk from this next potential wave of infection we cannot rule out further national intervention that may direct the regression of regimes to reapply social distancing or curtail activity. This will be closely assessed and communicated as required.

**Regime Mitigations**

Certain mitigations, such as additional pin credit and video calls will continue to remain available for sites that need to reintroduce or continue them over this period. It is recommended that sites **consider the further reintroduction or continuation of mitigations where restrictions are reintroduced** as a result of an outbreak and/or social visits are suspended for a period of time.

Prisons should continue to offer secure social video calls as set out in the interim secure social video calling [policy](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/secure-social-video-calling-interim-policy-framework). The policy allows the offer of one free call per prisoner/ young person per month, paid for centrally. In addition, the flexibility to provide additional video calls will be more widely available over the winter period.

As per the communications issued on regime mitigations on 19th August, where establishments require the reintroduction or continuation of any regime mitigations, they are able to request central support to do this via a business case to the ORSP (as per staffing support) if they do not have funding locally. This is now being looked at further in response to the potential impact of a further wave of infection with more information to follow.

It is vital to **prepare locally for future potential regime restrictions now.** Taking learning from previous waves of the pandemic, we are aware that local planning to deliver in cell and on wing activities, education and distraction materials was critical in reducing impact. Consistent access to family video calling and in cell telephony is also crucial to maintain important family ties. Moreover, regular contact with a keyworker and detailed wellbeing checks must be supported. The facilitation of this can make a vital difference and must be prioritised, particularly for high-risk groups.

**Exiting the National Framework**

Establishments and Governors will be aware of the work that has been underway over recent weeks to determine the appropriate time to exit the National Framework. The uncertainty surrounding Omicron, as well as the current COVID-19 and other winter operational risks are too finely balanced at this point to finalise that decision. Therefore, we will remain in the National Framework at this time, in command mode with establishments determining local decisions via their PGD and system decisions will continue to be made at a Gold level.

Guidance on managing the Winter period with wider risks and the required outbreak response requirements has been pulled together to support prisons at this time.