



Local Lockdowns: Social Distancing & Self-Isolation Supporting Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

Regulations restricting freedom of movement across the UK were implemented in late March 2020 to prevent/reduce the spread of Covid-19, including a period of full national lockdown (March-May). More recently, areas identified as having an increase in local transmission have been required to enter 'local lockdown' as part of Local Outbreak Plans. To effectively reduce/prevent the spread of Covid-19 in these areas, compliance to social distancing requirements is essential. Understanding the behaviours that support compliance is therefore key to the success of the prevention agenda.

This briefing paper aims to share the key recommendations on supporting the mental health of residents who are social distancing/self-isolating in areas of local lockdowns. A full review, which also includes supporting compliance to these restrictions, and an accompanying brief on supporting compliance, can be found [here](#).

As steps are actively taken to implement Local Lockdown Plans, consideration should be given to the widely acknowledged risk that social distancing/isolation place upon an individual's mental health and wellbeing. Social distancing clashes with the instinct to connect with others¹ which helps people regulate emotions, cope better with stress and anxiety, and increases resilience during difficult experiences². As such, requiring residents to comply with social distancing/isolation can place them at increased risk of several negative mental health outcomes, including depression, suicide, self-harm, anxiety, and alcohol and substance misuse³. Poor mental health will impact upon an individual's compliance, and as such compliance and mental health are intrinsically linked.

Local authorities should therefore ensure that adequate measures are taken to protect the mental health and wellbeing of all residents, particularly those most at risk of negative outcomes, as they take steps to support compliance to social distancing and self-isolation.

¹R. Baumeister & M. Leary, 'The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation', *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 3 (1995).

²J. Jetten et al., 'Advancing the social identity approach to health and well-being: Progressing the social cure research agenda', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47, 7 (2017), 789-802.

³S.K. Brooks et al., 'The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence', *The Lancet*, 395, 10227 (2020), 912-920; E.A Holmes et al., 'Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science', *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7, 6 (2020), 547-560.

RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS

An analysis of longitudinal data for the UK found that on average mental health in the UK worsened by 8.1% as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic⁴. A recent model published by the Centre for Mental Health predicts that in England up to 10 million people will need either new or additional mental health support including 1.5 million children and young people under 18⁵. The model also predicts that the majority of these needs, around two-thirds, will come from people with pre-existing mental health issues.

Whilst the whole population will be affected by Covid-19, the evidence suggests that the measures taken to control the spread of Covid-19, including social isolation/lockdown, might have a disproportionate effect on particular 'vulnerable groups'⁶, the impact is pronounced where multiple risk factors occur⁷. As such it is important to consider those groups considered at greatest risk and what proactive steps might be taken to mitigate any these risks.

Vulnerable groups

Personal

- Pre-existing mental health issues.
- Intolerance to uncertainty.
- Physical health issues.
- Alcohol and/or substance misuse.
- Social disconnectedness.
- Men and women aged 16-24 years.

Familial

- Bereavement and sickness within the family.
- Relationship stress and breakdowns.
- Domestic violence and abuse.
- Households with children aged 0-4 years.

Logistical

- Uncertainty around employment, income, food, and housing.
- Financial pressures and stress.
- Loss of employment/income.
- Homelessness.

Environmental

- Lack of access to community and mental health services.
- Working in health care.

Protective factors

The research reviewed identifies several principles that can protect against the risks posed to the mental health of residents as a result of social distancing/isolation upon mental health:

- Residents know exactly what to do and are confident that they can do it.
- Residents are motivated to change their behaviour and to maintain it for the duration.
- Vulnerable groups are identified, and their specific risks/needs considered.
- There is regular, open communication in times of uncertainty.
- Residents have access to essential goods, services, and practical support.
- Residents have access to mental health support and services.
- Residents can socially connect/engage with others.
- Residents are empowered to help themselves.

⁴J. Banks & X. Xu, 'The mental health effects of the first two months of lockdown and social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, 2020', Institute for Fiscal Studies.

⁵Centre for Mental Health, Forecast Modelling Toolkit (2020). Available online: <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/forecast-modelling-toolkit/> [Accessed 05.10.2020].

⁶E. A. Holmes et al., 'Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science', *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7, 6 (2020), 547-560.

⁷ESRC, Impacts of social isolation among disadvantaged and vulnerable groups during public health crises (2020). Available online: <https://esrc.ukri.org/news-events-and-publications/evidence-briefings/impacts-of-social-isolation-among-disadvantaged-and-vulnerable-groups-during-public-health-crisis/> [Accessed 28.08.2020].

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To inform the recommendations made within this briefing a review of the literature was completed, identifying risk factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood that residents complying with the requirements of social distancing and self-isolation will experience negative mental health issues.

Forecast local need

For local authorities to take a proactive, compassionate, timely, and effective response to helping local residents experiencing mental health issues, preparation is essential. This starts with forecasting, what the likely demand for services and support will be, reviewing current capacity, and devising a strategy to meet the increased need.

Recommendation: using the recently developed forecasting model (link provided in 'Useful tools and resources') enter local level data to estimate the levels of need for mental health support in your area. This includes understanding the likely demand that will arise from both those residents with pre-existing mental health issues and those who do not.

Example: work with local partners to collect and analyse the data, and then review the current provision and identify key gaps.

Identify vulnerable groups

Whilst the whole population are affected by Covid-19, research shows that measures taken to control the spread of the virus, including social isolation/ lockdown, might have a disproportionate effect on vulnerable groups. Considering how to mitigate any risks to their mental health is therefore key to improving outcomes.

Recommendation: consider the various groups within the community who might be particularly vulnerable and implement measures to limit negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.

Example: where households have experienced a loss of employment/income, provide financial support and information to alleviate any strain this might place upon themselves and their family.

Ensure continued access to support and services

People with existing mental health conditions may already be dependent upon local support and services, for example through regular appointments with practitioners or through drop-in centres which provide an opportunity to meet friends. Continued access is likely to be even more important in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic to avoid further exacerbation of mental health issues.

Recommendation: review ways of accessing mental health support and services, identifying any barriers as a result of social distancing, and implement interim measures to ensure continued access for those residents who need it. Ensure that residents are aware that support and services remain available and how to reach them. Consider what opportunities there are for evidence-based digital interventions for the prevention and treatment of mental health issues.

Example: establish contact with local providers of support and services and collaborate in finding ways to continue provision. If a particular service becomes unavailable, consider how to meet the need and communicate this to residents. Signpost to tools and resources, including information, resources, connectivity to others, and therapeutic programmes through apps, websites, online meetings and forums, telephone calls, and messages. Ensure that opportunities are also open to those with poorer digital resources/literacy.

Signpost to self-help resources to increase resilience

Covid-19 has presented many challenges, including the need for increased mental health support and services in the context of a reduced capacity to deliver this within the community. Empowering individuals to take proactive actions to protect their wellbeing is therefore essential. Where access to social networks and support are reduced/limited due to social distancing requirements, helping residents to connect socially with people via other means, for example online, can reduce any associated risks.

Recommendation: consider and communicate ways in which local residents could take active steps to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing, including having access to social networks and being encouraged to engage with others during periods of social isolation.

Example: create a communications campaign focused on mental health and wellbeing, to raise awareness of what steps can be taken by residents themselves, and provide the 'Top Ten Tips for Building Resilience at Home' infographic and information to support wellbeing. This is an evidence-based resource created by Hertfordshire County Council in partnership with Norfolk County Council and University College London (UCL).

Communicate regularly, clearly, and honestly

Uncertainty is a key component underlying many mental health disorders, including anxiety. Reports have shown that the uncertainty surrounding Covid-19 can impact negatively on the psychological wellbeing of residents. Whilst a degree of uncertainty may be inevitable in the current pandemic, regular communication can help alleviate the anxiety associated with this uncertainty and as such should be a key element of any strategy to address mental health issues in the local area.

Recommendation: ensure that residents are kept up to date with information, including the anticipated end date for any social distancing measures, what actions are being taken and why. If there is uncertainty, then communicate this and inform the residents when they are likely to receive further information and maintain contact even if there is no additional information.

Example: devise a communications strategy that details what information will be provided, when, by whom, and the channels it will be communicated through. Ensure that you don't solely rely on digital channels as there are likely to be residents who do not have access to online channels and/or sufficient IT literacy.

USEFUL TOOLS AND RESOURCES

For each of the recommendations you will find below a number of useful tools and resources, along with some general mental health resources and key references.

Please note that the following resources are a combination of those specific to Hertfordshire and ones that are more general. Local authorities may wish to review the support and services available in their local area and provide details of these to their residents.

General mental health resources

The following resources may be useful in developing an understanding of the various mental health issues discussed within this briefing paper.

What is mental health and wellbeing?

- **NHS**
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>
- **Mental Health Foundation**
<https://bit.ly/2FDGBD0>
- **World Health Organization**
<https://bit.ly/3ilpBL4>

Forecast local need

Mental Health Forecasting Model

This forecasting model for mental health was developed by the Centre for Mental Health, NHS Trusts, NHS England, researchers, physicians, and economists. Its primary purpose is to support local organisations to predict levels of need by enabling them to input local level data and estimate the likely levels of need for mental health support in their area. The model, and accompanying information, can be access via the link below.

<https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/forecast-modelling-toolkit>

Identify vulnerable groups

The mental health implications of social distancing and self-isolation will not be experienced equally. Once any vulnerable groups have been identified, understanding their specific risks and what steps might be taken to mitigate any risks is key. The following resources focus on three vulnerable groups - LGBTQ communities, BAME communities, and those who have experienced bereavement.

LGBTQ Communities

- **MindOut**
MindOut is a mental health service run by and for lesbians, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer people. They work to improve the mental health of LGBTQ communities.
<https://www.mindout.org.uk/>

- **Stonewall**
Information and support for LGBT communities and their allies.
<https://bit.ly/32HqXjO>
- **Hertfordshire MIND Network**
<https://www.hertsmindnetwork.org/online-lgbtq-group>

BAME Communities

- **Mental Health Foundation**
<https://bit.ly/2ZOaaK1>

Bereavement (general)

A range of support is available, specifically for bereavement during the Covid-19 pandemic:

- **Cruse Bereavement Care**
(grieving and isolation advice, online and over the phone)
www.cruse.org.uk
- **At a Loss**
(emotional support and advice on what to do)
www.ataloss.org
- **Childhood Bereavement Network** (supporting bereaved children)
www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

Bereavement (Covid-19 related)

- **Adults**
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/coronavirus/adults-bereavement-and-grief-during-coronavirus-156kb.pdf>
- **Children and young people**
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/coronavirus/coronavirus-bereavement-a-guide-for-young-people.pdf>
- **Parents and carers**
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/coronavirus/coronavirus-bereavement-and-childrne-guide-for-parents-and-carers.pdf>

Ensure continued access to support and services

Where can I go for help?

The main referral pathway for anyone with mental health issues is either self-referral or through their GP.

- **[Hertfordshire Partnership Foundation Trust \(HPFT\)](#)**
For professional or self-referral for mental health services.
- **[HPFT wellbeing service](#)**
For professional or self-referral for psychological therapy.
- **[Mind in Mid Herts](#)**
A provider of mental health services, with wellbeing centres in St Albans, Stevenage, Hertford and Welwyn Garden City.

- [Hertfordshire Mind Network](#)
An independent charitable providers of mental health services in Hertfordshire.
- [Healthy Hubs](#)
Visit your local Healthy Hub for free support to help you stay healthy and well.

For urgent help 24 hours a day:

- If someone's at risk of harm, call 999 or visit your nearest Accident and Emergency department.
- [HPFT NHS Single Point of Access](#) - for support in a mental health crisis.
- [Samaritans](#) - if you need someone to talk to, they listen. They won't judge or tell you what to do.

Workplace Health Champions

Hertfordshire County Council have recruited and trained a number of employees from across the organisation to take on the additional role of Workplace Health Champion, providing an additional point of contact for colleagues who wish to engage in health and wellbeing activities. Updated resources, including information on Covid-19 have been provided to the Workplace Health Champions and there are also three information webinars currently being delivered. Further information and a list of the current Workplace Health Champions can be found here: <https://bit.ly/32QnUFT>

Signpost to self-help resources to increase resilience

Top Tips for Building Resilience Whilst at Home (<https://bit.ly/30zxmwd>):

A number of factors have been shown to promote health and wellbeing and promote positive mental health. This evidence-based set of Top Tips have been developed into a resource for residents to promote resilience during lockdown and provides a good starting point. This resource should be promoted through relevant communication channels to ensure all residents can access this information.

- **Be up to date:** follow up to date guidance and advice about limiting exposure.
- **Be active:** find ways to keep physically active, e.g. gardening or home-based exercise.
- **Be connected:** identify who you need to stay in contact with to provide you with practical and emotional support and find new ways to connect with them. This could include family, friends and local community or faith groups.
- **Be prepared:** think about what you are going to need and make a plan. You can make daily, weekly, and monthly plans to help consider and get the things you need
- **Be in a routine:** develop a new daily routine that works for you, this could include regular waking up and bedtimes, planned mealtimes, and time to be physically active.
- **Be occupied:** continue with your current interests or explore new ones. You could try a hobby that you used to enjoy but haven't had the time for.
- **Be helpful:** find ways to support others. Whether it's a chat on the phone or volunteering to support people locally there are lots of ways to get involved with your community even from home.
- **Be relaxed:** find a relaxation or meditation practice that works for you and practice it once a day for at least 10 minutes.

- **Be heard:** talk to friends, family or community and faith groups about how you are feeling.
- **Be positive:** train yourself to actively look for the positives in the situation e.g. having some extra me time or being able to catch up with things you have been meaning to do.

Self-Help Information and Support

- **NHS - Every mind matters**
Get expert advice and practical tips, try the '[How are you?](#)' quiz or create a tailored self-care plan to support your mental health and wellbeing.
- **The Five Ways to Wellbeing**
Feel happier, more positive and able to get the most from life:



- **New Leaf College**
Free wellbeing courses and workshops.
- **NHS**
Online support for a healthy mind, including an [app library](#), self-assessment tools, help with [suicidal thoughts](#), information about conditions, and where to get help.

Communicate regularly, clearly, and honestly

General communications strategy guidance

The Local Government Association (LGA) Comms Hub, an online resource to support the development and delivery of effective communication.

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support>

Covid-19 related communications guidance

Simple guidance on communicating with teams, stakeholders and communities during Covid-19.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/a-leaders-guide-communicating-with-teams-stakeholders-and-communities-during-covid-19>

A range of communications templates and examples which have been collated by the Local Government Association (LGA) and councils around the country which can be adapted to your local context.

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/comms-hub-communications-support/coronavirus-covid-19>

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