



HM Government

# **Review of two metre social distancing guidance**

## Summary of review findings

24 June 2020





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## 2 Review of two metre social distancing guidance: summary of review findings

# Summary

1. Over the last fortnight, a review panel, led by the Permanent Secretary to No10 and including the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, the Chief Medical Officer, and the Chief Economic Adviser to HM Treasury, has considered the efficacy of the Government's social distancing guidelines in the context of the current prevalence of the virus. They have considered the scientific evidence, the economic impact of social distancing, behavioural responses and international comparators.
2. There are severe economic costs to maintaining 2m distancing. With a 2m rule in place, it is not financially viable for many businesses to operate; industry bodies, for example, have estimated that outlets in the hospitality sector could make only 30% of pre-Covid revenues with 2m distancing, as opposed to 60-75% at 1m. In sectors that are currently closed (including in accommodation, food services and recreation), over 1.75m jobs have been furloughed across the UK.<sup>1</sup> Many of these are at risk if reopening is not viable at 2m.
3. Some countries similar to the UK have recommended distances below 2m when prevalence has fallen and with other mitigations in place. France, Italy and Singapore recommend 1m, South Korea recommends 1-2m, and Germany, Australia and the Netherlands recommend 1.5m. Denmark and New Zealand have reduced their recommended distance from 2m to 1m with mitigations. Other countries remain at 2m.
4. The absolute risk of transmission between people is reduced as the prevalence of Covid-19 infection in the population declines. The evidence shows that relative risk may be 2-10 times higher at 1m than 2m without mitigations, and the potential for higher occupancy at 1m distancing will also affect risk. However, mitigations can reduce the risk at 1m, so that it is broadly equivalent to being 2m apart, noting that a precise and quantitative assessment of how much risk is reduced by mitigations is not possible.
5. Current guidance says that "where possible, you should maintain 2m between people". The guidance should change to state that 2m or 1m with risk mitigation (where 2m is not viable) are acceptable, and that businesses should set out the mitigations that they will introduce in their risk assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> HMRC, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics

# Review findings

## Scientific evidence

6. Physical distancing is one of a number of measures that can help to reduce the incidence of Covid-19. There is evidence that the risk of transmission increases by 2-10 times at 1m compared to 2m and the potential for higher occupancy at 1m distancing will also increase risk if there are no mitigations. However, mitigations may reduce the level of risk at 1m so that it is broadly equivalent to being 2m apart. This is reflected in Covid-secure guidance, which makes provision for when 2m distancing is not possible in sectors that are currently open.
7. Factors that affect risk include duration of exposure, direction (face to face vs. side to side), ventilation and, most importantly, the level of infection present in the population. The highest risk is in indoor, crowded, poorly-ventilated space for an extended period of time.
8. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has advised on 39 actions that can reduce the risk of transmission.<sup>2</sup> These include:
  - changing shift patterns so staff work in set teams;
  - improving ventilation;
  - changing room layouts to orientate people better, for example in restaurants;
  - increase cleaning and handwashing; and
  - encouraging the use of protective screens and face coverings.

## Economic and social impacts

9. There are severe economic costs to maintaining 2m distancing. Reducing from 2m to 1m would allow more people to return to work and increase businesses' capacity. With a 2m rule in place, it is not financially viable for many businesses to operate. Industry bodies, for example, have estimated that outlets in the hospitality sector could make only 30% of pre-Covid revenues with 2m distancing, as opposed to 60-75% at 1m.
10. 9.2m jobs have been furloughed across the UK, including over 1.75m jobs in sectors that are currently closed (including in accommodation, food services and recreation).<sup>3</sup> Some of these jobs are at risk if reopening is not viable at 2m, with the potential for sizable redundancies. Unemployment has severe negative social and economic impacts including on mental health and the risk of long-term economic scarring.

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<sup>2</sup> Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and Mitigating Measures, EMG-SAGE 4th June 2020  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/892043/S0484\\_Transmission\\_of\\_SARS-CoV-2\\_and\\_Mitigating\\_Measures.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892043/S0484_Transmission_of_SARS-CoV-2_and_Mitigating_Measures.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> HMRC, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics



11. More businesses would be viable if distancing is reduced to 1m. Even where businesses are viable at 2m, moving to 1m would significantly increase capacity. The actual increase in economic activity will depend on consumer demand.
12. The social, economic, and health impacts of changing the 2m guidance are not evenly distributed. People employed in closed sectors are more likely to be young, not have a degree, and to work in low-skilled occupations.<sup>4</sup>

## International comparisons

13. Countries similar to the UK recommend 1m (France, Italy, Singapore), 1.5m (Germany, Netherlands, Australia) or ranges starting at 1m (South Korea, Taiwan). They often mandate mitigations, most commonly the wearing of face masks in public settings (Germany, Italy).
14. Denmark and New Zealand reduced guidance from 2m to 1m with caveats. New Zealand maintained 2m with 1m only allowed in “controlled” environments where contact tracing was possible. In Denmark, 2m is still recommended in higher risk situations, including hospitals and with vulnerable people.

## Sector analysis

15. There are two risks that need to be managed in reducing distance guidance. First, the personal risk to individuals of contracting the virus in a setting and secondly, the onward rate of transmission across the community. Reducing risks to individuals through good hygiene and other measures can help address both risks. Gathering staff and customer details to facilitate test and trace may help control onward transmission.
16. The following mitigations should be applied across all settings to reduce risk:
  - maintain 2m where viable;
  - an unambiguous message to staff to stay home when symptomatic, or if a member of their household is symptomatic, and to get tested to allow contact tracing of positive cases;
  - staff minimising duration of contact at less than 2m with people outside their household;
  - maintaining hand hygiene and cough etiquette;
  - thorough and regular cleaning of shared areas, including toilets;
  - wearing face coverings when distances of 2m cannot be kept in indoor environments where possible;
  - recording staff contact details and working patterns to support test and trace.

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<sup>4</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, April 2020

17. The table below illustrates how businesses in different sectors might mitigate risk at 1m. This is based on typical premises and activities and there will be variation within sectors in how effectively settings can do this. For example, some theatres may be able to effectively reduce risk at 1m whereas others cannot. Individual Covid-secure risk assessments should therefore be used to assess and mitigate risk.

*Illustrative list of sectors grouped by likely potential to mitigate risk at 1m (but will depend on individual settings)*

Sector	Examples of mitigations (not exhaustive)	Value of sector /employment <sup>5</sup>	Workforce characteristics
<b>Likely to be able to mitigate risk</b>			
<b>Retail</b>	Capacity limits Contactless purchases Provide hand sanitiser Increased ventilation	£104bn 3.1m jobs	Young workforce with below average pay
<b>Construction</b>	Work in fixed teams Staggered breaks Increased ventilation Effective test and trace possible	£123bn 2.3m jobs	Older workforce, paid above average. Disproportionately White and male.
<b>Manufacturing</b>	Work in fixed teams Staggered breaks Remove face-to-face working Effective test and trace possible	£191bn 2.7m jobs	Older workforce, paid above average. Disproportionately White and male
<b>Potential to mitigate but wide variation between settings</b>			
<b>Hotels</b>	Digitise check-in processes Repurpose non-essential space Redesign food services Effective test and trace possible	£12bn 370,000 jobs	Young workforce with below average pay. High BAME
<b>Restaurants/ Pubs using table service or outdoors</b>	Pre-order via app / paper form Table and seating configuration Remove multi-use items (menus) Increased ventilation Potential for test and trace	£40bn 2.0m jobs (all food & beverage services)	Young workforce with below average pay. High BAME
<b>Cinemas</b>	One way system, exit row-by-row, spaced queuing, increased ventilation Pre-book, pre-pay only Effective test and trace possible	£0.6bn 18,000 jobs	No data

<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics, GDP low level aggregates; Annual Business Survey; Business Register & Employment Survey; Workforce Jobs series. Bfl Statistical Yearbook.

<b>Settings where further work may be required to mitigate risk</b>			
<b>Theatres</b>	One way system, exit row-by-row Screen between cast/audience Effective test and trace possible	£2.4bn 73,000 jobs (all performing arts)	Workers are clustered around major cities
<b>Hostels</b>	Configuration of beds Repurpose non-essential space Redesign food services Cleaning of shared toilet facilities	No data	No data
<b>Other bars and clubs indoors</b>	Capacity limits Remove multi-use items Handwashing at entrance / bar Potential for test and trace	No data	Hospitality sector has young workforce with below average pay. High BAME

18. Public transport presents a high risk owing to prolonged indoor contact between a high number of users from different households, although this may be mitigated in part by capacity limits, face coverings, screens, cleaning and ventilation. We recommend that 1m distancing with face coverings is allowed on public transport; increased capacity is necessary for economic growth, social activity and to facilitate more children returning to school. There are public service benefits of changing the current guidance. The review considered public services where increases in capacity may be possible over time with suitable mitigations in place. There is further work for departments to do in this area.

## Implementation

19. Current guidance states that “where possible, you should maintain 2m between people”. The guidance should change to state that 2m or 1m with risk mitigation (where 2m is not viable) are acceptable, and that businesses should consider and set out the mitigations that they will introduce in their risk assessment. A clear communications campaign explaining how to reduce the spread of the virus, and increase understanding of the guidance, including on how to reduce risk at 1m and what risk mitigations are, is essential to implement this change effectively. A suggested basis for communications to the public is set out at Annex A.
20. Businesses already need to complete a Covid-secure risk assessment in order to operate. This system can be used to implement any change in guidance. Government, HSE and sector leaders should continue to work together to provide clear advice on which measures could reduce risks, in particular at 1m. Businesses can innovate and apply advice to their individual situations.
21. The approach to which sectors are open or shut and what mitigations are needed at 1m should change according to factors including the prevalence of Covid-19. This could happen at a local level, based on JBC advice. New evidence about effective mitigations should also be taken into account.

# Annex A: 'How Covid-19 is transmitted and how to reduce risks'

Covid-19 is transmitted in three ways:

1. **Direct person-to-person contact** - if an infectious person breathes droplets on you or you pick them up through physical contact with an infectious person.
2. **Contact with a contaminated surface** - if you touch a surface contaminated with the virus and then touch your nose, eyes or mouth, you may be infected.
3. **Aerosol transmission** - fine droplets of liquid containing virus are breathed out, form an aerosol and are carried through the air. You may become infected if you breathe these in.

If you are further away from someone there's less risk of catching the virus from droplets or aerosol transmission. However, distance isn't the only thing that matters.

- Duration – the longer you are close to an infectious person, the higher the risk.
- Fresh air – the risk is lower if you are outdoors, or in a well ventilated area,
- Direction – the risk is lower if you are not face-on with the infectious person

The risk of transmission is small at 2m and where possible, **you should maintain 2m distance**.

If it is not possible to keep 2m distance, reduce the risk to yourself and others at 1m **by taking suitable precautions**:

- Limit the number of people or households that you come into contact with, e.g. avoid peak travel
- Sit / stand side by side or behind other people, rather than facing them
- Meet people outdoors, rather than indoors
- Keep interactions brief
- Wear a face covering on public transport, in shops or crowded indoor environments
- Increase ventilation
- Avoid loud talking or singing with others

**To minimise the risk of transmission via surface contact**, you should:

- Regularly wash your hands using soap and water or use hand sanitiser
- Avoid touching surfaces and do not touch your face
- Dispose of waste safely, including items such as paper face masks or gloves

**In all cases, you must not go to work or attend other public spaces if you are symptomatic, or a member of your household is symptomatic.**



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