

United Synagogue Covid Guidance to Member Synagogues with Additional Information for the Yamin Noraim 19th August 2021

Introduction

On 19th July 2021, England moved to Step 4 of the Government's roadmap out of lockdown. Guidance for other nations in the UK followed. Whilst our shuls have been open for services and programmes for many months, our activities have been restricted and we are excited by the opportunity to welcome back more members and continue the gradual return to normal communal life.

Whilst legal restrictions were lifted on 19th July, guidance remains in place. Legal restrictions are binary in nature, whereas guidance calls on all of us to be continuously assessing and forming sensible judgements based on the best information available to us.

Balancing the excitement, we recognise that Covid is going to be with us for the foreseeable future and that there are going to be more difficult periods with surges in virus prevalence to manage which will require local or general adaptations in our approach. We also have a responsibility to care for our fellow community members as well as take personal responsibility.

Whilst the vast majority of people who are 'double-jabbed' have good protection; not everyone is yet fully vaccinated, nor does vaccination provide perfect protection. It is now clear that there are some infections in double-vaccinated people and double-vaccinated people can still transmit the virus. And so, given the current high infection rate, the government and the Chief Medical Officer are advising us that we must remain attentive and proceed with caution. We also know that our members have a range of views about their readiness to return, and we need to factor that into our planning – supporting both those who are ready, as well as those who are more cautious.

Please ensure that you maintain awareness of the local pandemic conditions, the current levels of Covid infection, and the particularly high levels of prevalence of infection in school age children (which we expect to increase further when schools return in September) and younger adults.

This guidance also addresses the changes in self-isolation requirements introduced on 16th August. Please note that where the term double-vaccinated is used, it refers to people who have been vaccinated with an MHRA approved COVID-19 vaccine in the UK, and at least 14 days have passed since they received their vaccination.

***Please see the section below on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur ***

Aim

Our overall aims in this guidance are:

- *To encourage people back to in-person shul activity, ensuring they feel and are as safe as possible*
- *To offer them engaging, vibrant services and programmes and the opportunity to reconnect with their community*

Key Principles of this Guidance

- We will follow the government approach, whilst retaining the option to make more stringent recommendations or requirements, if needed.
- Aside from US Policy (see 'Must' below) each community should set its own policy in each area based on the profile of its members and their needs, its building and their local context, and taking account of the recommendation and options presented in this document.
- When making decisions communities should:
 - Aim to reach a consensus amongst decision-makers. Our communities, reflecting the population at large, are composed of people who are more and less ready for the easing of restrictions. Key decision-makers in this context are Honorary Officers and members of the Rabbinic team.
 - Keep local infection rate data and trends under regular review, together with advice from local public health teams (which must be adopted).
 - Consider membership survey data and take informal soundings.
 - Take into account the vulnerability (i.e. age) of the people expected to attend a particular service or event.
 - Take into consideration the views expressed by professional staff, service leaders and key volunteers.
 - Pace the release of restrictions rather than doing everything at once; adjust according to the nature of event, level of attendance, nature of your community and local pandemic conditions; and be ready to be more stringent if needed.
- In this document, areas described as 'Policy' are 'must do'. Areas described as 'Recommendation' are 'should do' and areas described as 'Option' are 'you could do'.

General policy points

- The risks of Covid have not disappeared.
- It is the responsibility of every individual to help protect the wellbeing of their fellow community members.
- Holding events outdoors is preferable to indoors, especially when attendance is expected to be high.
- Good ventilation is essential when indoors.
- Communities might provide multiple options if they can accommodate them (possibly within the same service, if you have a large enough, well ventilated space) to cater to members with different requirements.
- Communities should prepare updated risk assessments for this phase of the pandemic, when further significant changes are being made to shul practice.

Attendance

Policy (Must)

People must not attend if they:

- Experience any of the common symptoms¹ of Covid (cough, temperature, loss of smell/taste, headache, runny nose, sneezing, sore throat)
- Have tested positive and are within their self-isolation period.
- Have been asked to self-isolate/quarantine.

Close contacts

- If a person lives in the same household as someone who has tested positive and/or has been identified as a close contact by NHS Test and Trace they must not attend services or events on site. If the person is not double vaccinated, they must self-isolate in line with government requirements.

If the person is double vaccinated or under the age of 18 and 6 months, they are permitted to attend shul once they have received a negative result from a PCR test. If there is a delay in receiving a PCR test result and there is a particularly strong reason for the individual to attend shul (e.g., a simcha of a close family relative or yahrtzeit) Honorary Officers could employ additional measures to allow them to attend

In addition to taking a PCR test, for the 10-day period following being identified as a close contact, they must take a lateral flow test on the day they wish to attend shul and must not attend if the result is positive. (If they are planning to attend on Shabbat or Yomtov they should take the test the day before.)

Recommendations

- People should not attend if they feel in any way unwell (not only with Covid symptoms)
- Those who are immunocompromised should take advice before attending services
- Where it is necessary to manage capacity, communities should ask members to book ahead.

Options

- Consider additional mitigations for demographics or groupings with high infection rates (i.e. young people)

Demonstrating Covid status (vaccination, recent negative test result or proof of natural immunity)

(Shabbat /Yom Tov Guidance to follow)

Recommendations

- Communities should require those attending a simcha event, celebration or party on your site - or a similar community social event – to demonstrate their Covid status ((either vaccination, negative lateral flow test 24 hours before or proof of immunity) ahead of attending.

Options

- Where members express concern about returning, or when a high attendance is expected, communities could require attendees to confirm their Covid status (either vaccination, negative lateral flow test 24 hours before, or proof of immunity) as a requirement for entry for all or some services or event.
- Consider holding an additional service only for people with proven negative Covid status.

¹ <https://covid.joinzoe.com/post/new-top-5-covid-symptoms>

Ventilation

Policy (Must)

- There must be good ventilation indoors at all times and in all seasons.
- Ventilation can be measured using a carbon dioxide monitor. More information on this will follow.
- If the synagogue has an air-conditioning system that recirculates air (rather than bringing in a fresh air supply) it should not be used. Fans should also not be used.
- The following heating systems may be used. Traditional hot water radiator systems, underfloor heating, gas heaters and, in a ventilated space, fan convector heaters. However, communities should not use heating systems that recirculate air within the same space or move the air from one room to another.

Masks and social distancing

Over the period of the pandemic, we have set policy indoors of 2m social distancing. As the pandemic waned, we introduced the possibility of 1m+ social distancing, where communities needed this to accommodate the number of people that wanted to attend. 1m+ means at least 1m plus other mitigations – in our case, mask wearing and good ventilation.

As we move forward (and noting that we are now in a period of rapid growth of Covid infections), our policies require social distancing of at least 1m under certain circumstances and recommend it at all times.

In deciding how much social distancing to require, community leaders will want to consider local pandemic conditions and the community needs. It is important to note that 2m is more effective than 1m in preventing droplets reaching other congregants, and good ventilation is an essential element of managing the risk from both droplets and aerosols.

Clearly, we will all want to monitor the situation carefully as the current pandemic wave develops and as we approach the Yamim Noraim. We encourage a slowly changing, hopefully progressive approach whilst we learn together how to respond to the current phase of the pandemic.

Policy (Must)

- Indoors, at least 1m social distancing between households must be maintained, or masks must be worn.

Recommendation

- Communities should discourage handshaking and ask members not to greet each other with physical contact.
- Where possible, communities should retain at least 1m+ social distancing indoors, even if masks are worn.

Options

- For members who wish to apply more caution, communities could choose to have a mask-only service or event for those people who are more cautious about attending in person.
- Similarly, communities with large, well ventilated sanctuaries or halls could designate an area a 'mask-only' or 'socially distanced' zone, to give reassurance to those who might be fearful.
- Communities might also run some services and activities with increased social distancing.
- Communities could allow groups of 6 from different households to sit together but they must wear masks

- Communities that reintroduce singing indoors might wish to require mask-wearing and/or increased social distancing.
- Communities could choose to ask for masks to be worn in the communal areas of the building such as foyers and bathrooms
- In order to avoid crowding and mitigate risk, communities could reduce the overall capacity by an agreed percentage.
- Communities could introduce social distancing around particular groups that are more at risk of illness or more likely to be carrying the virus (i.e. large groups of unvaccinated young people).
- Increased social distancing could be applied at social events and those where food and drink is consumed.

Singing

Option

- Communities that reintroduce singing indoors might wish to require mask-wearing and/or increased social distancing.

Hand sanitising and cleaning

Policy (Must)

- All those visiting the site must use hand sanitiser on arrival
- Communities must ensure that the building is cleaned regularly with a particular focus on touchpoints such as door handles, handrails and bathrooms.

Options

- If local infection levels are high, communities should consider resuming daily cleaning.

Services

Recommendations

- Communities should avoid crowding around the Baal Koreh on the bimah.
- Communities should avoid use of shared items, such as books and shul tallitot. If this isn't possible, encourage the use of hand sanitiser before and after use.

Options

Consider requiring service leaders to produce a negative lateral flow test ahead of a service.

Kiddush and Food

Policy (Must)

- There must not be tables with shared food in bowls or on plates such as bowls of crisps, crackers and dips etc.
- Communities must avoid use of shared objects e.g., bottles, jugs.
- Hand sanitiser must be used on entry to kiddush.

Recommendations

- Communities should either serve food from a station or provide individually prepared plates, bags or boxes of food.

Options

- Communities could further mitigate risk by holding kiddush outside or by seating people around tables, where space allows.

Rabbinic hospitality

Policy (Must)

- It is essential that rooms are well ventilated when visitors are welcomed to Rabbinic homes.

Options

- Rabbinic families could take a more cautious approach by inviting smaller groups to meals indoors and avoiding 'revolving door' events when people come in shifts.
- No pressure should be placed on Rabbis and Rebbetzins to invite guests.

Youth and Children

Recommendations

- See above for recommended mitigations related to food, social distancing, mask-wearing and demonstrating Covid status.
- Communities should take note of the infection rates amongst young people in their area and adjust activities accordingly.
- Honorary Officers should consult youth directors and other professionals working with young people when setting youth policy.

Private Hire events

(Detailed policy to be published soon)

Policy (Must)

- Communities must put in place a risk assessment for private hire events and ensure that a named individual community representative is responsible for any measures required.

Recommendations

- Communities should require those attending a simcha, celebration or party on site to demonstrate their Covid status ahead of attending.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Policy (Must)

- The Baal Tokea must have taken a lateral flow test and received a negative test on erev yomtov in order to be permitted to blow the shofar. He must stand at least 2m from any other individual when blowing the shofar

Recommendations

- Communities should require those attending services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (when the numbers attending will be high) to take a lateral flow test on Erev Yomtov. Those who receive a positive result, must not attend and should book a PCR test for pre or post yomtov.

- Given the higher infection rates amongst children at this time, children's services and programming should be held in a separate building or apart from the main shul and outdoors where possible. Seated activities where a level of social distancing can be maintained are preferable.
- Honorary Officers should ensure that social distancing is maintained in youth services in order to minimise the risk of transmission.

Options

- Between services where possible the shul could be left vacant but well-ventilated to air.
- Communities could arrange for the shul to be cleaned in between services.

Reporting Cases

If there has been a confirmed case of Covid at a service or event, the Honorary Officers should inform the United Synagogue (Jo Grose, Communities Director, or a member of the Community Division team) without delay.

Queries

If you have any queries please email Jo Grose (jgrose@theus.org.uk), noting that responses may be delayed due to the high level of enquiries.