

Protocol for dealing with Outbreaks of Covid-19 in Homeless Services

Background

The Housing Executive has been working with Homeless Service Providers and the Public Health Agency to adopt a co-ordinated response to address the impacts of Covid-19 on homelessness in Northern Ireland. Covid-19 Guidance for Homeless Service Providers in NI (The Guidance) has been published developed jointly by the Department for Communities (DfC) and the Department of Health (DoH) with input from the Housing Executive and other statutory partners and agencies. The Guidance has been updated throughout the pandemic to reflect changing requirements and including actions if either staff or service users develop symptoms of Covid-19, arrangements for testing and isolation requirements etc. Supporting People have issued the Supporting People Programme: Covid-19 Contingency Plan. This protocol should therefore be read in conjunction with the Covid-19 Guidance for Homeless Service Providers in NI and the Supporting People Programme: Covid-19 Contingency Plan.

It should be noted that this protocol is intended to be an iterative document. Version one was put in place to cover the Christmas period – the protocol has now been updated to reflect day to day business reporting arrangements. All other details and requirements remain the same. The protocol will be subject to further review if necessary.

Need for Protocol

This protocol has been developed to enable prompt and effective responses to instances of **outbreaks** of Covid-19 in homeless Services (the definition of an outbreak is 2 or more confirmed cases (either staff or service users) in a 14-day period – NB two confirmed cases may have different signs & symptoms, or no symptoms at all, but should still be considered an outbreak.

The Protocol details roles and responsibilities (including appropriate personnel within PHA and NIHE), specific actions to be undertaken in response to an outbreak and reporting requirements.

In the event of an outbreak the Provider¹, Housing Executive and PHA will immediately implement the measures contained within this Protocol to mitigate the risks or impacts.

Application of the protocol should ensure:

- outbreaks are identified and reported promptly
- contingency measures/actions are considered early (with alternative arrangements put in place as necessary)
- positive cases and those required to self-isolate and infection control measures are implemented promptly as per guidance
- Ultimately that Providers' are supported to ensure continued operation of their services in a safe manner that reduces risk to both other service users and staff.

¹ This may include a Hostel, Single let Provider, B&B/non-standard accommodation provider

Procedure in event of an outbreak (see definition of outbreak above):

- The Provider should contact the PHA via the duty room contact number at 0300 555 0119 (Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm) or 028 90 404045 (out of hours) which is the first on call public health doctor via ambulance. The PHA will provide advice and infection prevention & control guidance to the Provider. Providers should follow all guidance from PHA in terms of infection control, isolation requirements and testing if applicable. In instances where there may be an outbreak (that is two or more confirmed cases (among staff or service users)) or a cluster of infections (ie outbreaks that are connected) - a risk assessment will be carried by the Homeless Nursing Team and /or Health Protection Duty Room Team.
- Once the Provider has reported to the PHA, the Provider should immediately contact NIHE both Homeless Services and Supporting People (see contact details in appendix 1) to confirm the detail of the outbreak and actions they are taking and seek NIHE advice as required. The frequency of provider updates to Homeless Services and Supporting People will be agreed. Single let and non-standard accommodation Providers should contact NIHE Homeless Services in the first instance to seek advice (who will in turn contact PHA if necessary).
- The Public Health Agency has provided a point of contact for homeless providers: Deirdre Webb, Assistant Director of Public Health Nursing (deirdre.webb@hscni.net, phone: 079 20186497). In the case of an outbreak Deirdre Webb, in conjunction with the Housing Executive (Homeless Services and/or Supporting People as appropriate) will determine necessary action and whether it is necessary to convene a full meeting of the Contingencies Group.
- Where necessary the Contingencies Group will be convened. The group will consider the risks to service continuity and any necessary service restrictions/ amendments/supports which may need to be put in place in line with Provider contingency plans e.g.
 - Adherence to infection control requirements/guidance (PHA with Provider e.g. taking into consideration individuals willingness to comply with requirements/guidance)
 - temporary suspension of referrals (SP/Homeless Services)
 - implementing service restrictions as advised by PHA which may include suspension of referrals, isolation of all clients, restriction of move-on of clients etc (Provider with PHA guidance/support)
 - requirement for support from alternative service providers (e.g. food for individuals isolating, assistance with staff cover etc)
 - necessity to relocate service users to alternative accommodation (as last resort)
- Where necessary the Contingencies group will seek to put in place measures and

contingencies to facilitate any necessary service amendments e.g:

- Infection control guidance and support from Homeless Nursing Team (PHA)
 - Ensuring alternative temporary accommodation is available where referrals are temporarily suspended (Housing Services)
 - Signpost Providers to support from alternative service providers to facilitate ongoing operation of the service (using Principles of Mutual Aid)
 - Ensuring alternative accommodation is available in the event of service closure for both positive cases and/or those required to self-isolate (Housing Services)
 - Coordinating arrangements in the event of service closure / necessity to relocate service users (Housing Services/Supporting People/Operational teams/Providers as appropriate)
- Details will be shared with the Multi-Agency Group which meets weekly (comprising representatives of the PHA, Departments for Communities and Health, NIHE, CHNI and the homeless provider sector) who are responsible for assessing the overall surge level within the homeless sector.

Appendix 1:
Key Contact Details are included below:

| Contact | Phone Number / Email |
|---|--|
| PHA - Duty room (Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm) | 0300 555 0119 |
| PHA - (out of hours) - first on call public health doctor via ambulance control | 028 90404045 |
| Deirdre Webb (PHA Homeless Lead) | 07920186497; deirdre.webb@hscni.net |
| NIHE Homeless Services Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm (except public holidays) | COVID19homeless@nihe.gov.uk |
| Out of Hours (Mon-Fri after 5pm / Weekends and public holidays) | 03448 920908 |
| NIHE Supporting People Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm | Belfast Region Peter Quinn peter.quinn4@nihe.gov.uk |
| | North Region Imogen Orr imogen.orr2@nihe.gov.uk |
| | South Region KellyMcGrath kelly.mcgrath@nihe.gov.uk |
| Out of Hours – please report to NIHE Out of Hours as above | |