



An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health

Guidance for drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a major impact in Ireland and globally. Progress has been made on suppressing the virus due to the huge effort of our citizens. **By working together, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease.** We all must continue to do everything possible to avoid the virus spreading.

Covid-19 has created a time of uncertainty and anxiety for the Irish population. The restrictions on social interaction, the requirement for self-isolation and the restructuring of services, are particularly difficult for those accessing drug and alcohol services and supports.

Covid-19 presents a major threat to public health, in particular for those who are medically vulnerable or older. This includes people living with drug and alcohol addiction who may experience poor physical health and weakened immune systems.

The Government has set out a plan for living with Covid-19, [Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021](#). **A key priority is to protect, safeguard and support health, social care and other essential services.** The safe resumption of drug and alcohol services, including community-based services, residential programmes and recovery support groups, is a component of this.

Government recognises the vital role played by drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes in reducing the harms of substance use and supporting rehabilitation and recovery. Support groups and programmes help individuals to build their recovery capital and to avoid relapse into harmful patterns of substance use.

This guidance on the safe operation of drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes **is a complement to the Government plan for living with Covid-19, including levels 3 and 4.** It also builds on Covid-19 [resources for addiction services](#) and [guidance for vulnerable and at risk groups](#).

The guidance applies to the following drug and alcohol services

- **support and recovery groups** for people and families who live with drug and alcohol addiction (including gambling addiction), eg self-help/fellowship groups, peer support, family/parent support
- **community projects** providing services and supports for people who use drugs, eg drug rehabilitation CE programmes, harm reduction/advocacy training
- **treatment programmes** (non-residential) for people with drug and alcohol addiction, eg counselling, stabilisation, therapeutic communities, aftercare

Important points to note

Protecting public health is a **shared responsibility of convenors, leaders and participants in support groups and programmes**.

It is recommended to **hold meetings and deliver programmes online or outdoors** where this is possible, without diluting the benefits for participants.

Where it is decided to host a face-to-face group/programme meeting, organisers are advised to **undertake a risk assessment to ensure the health, welfare and safety of participants**. See here for sample [risk assessment prompt sheet](#)

Individuals at [higher risk from Covid-19](#), or in close contact with such individuals, should avoid face-to-face group/programmes meetings and instead attend meetings that are conducted online.

Employees and volunteers who convene groups and programmes **should follow the [Return to Work Safely Protocol](#)**, and have access to training and personal protective equipment

General public health guidance

Drug and alcohol support groups and programmes should adhere to general public health advice regarding hygiene and social distancing, including the following:

- Frequent handwashing
- Cough and sneeze etiquette
- Sanitise equipment before and after use
- Social distancing of two metres
- Wear a face covering in indoor environments
- Reduce the number of social contacts
- Restrict movements for 14 days if a close contact of someone with Covid-19 or if returning from travel to a country not on the green list
- Self-isolate if experiencing symptoms of Covid-19 and contacting your GP immediately

See here for details of [public health advice on Covid-19](#)

Facilities and attendance at support groups and programmes

Facilities used to host groups and programmes should be for exclusive use, where possible, and not shared with other users

Where **community or commercial facilities are used on a sessional basis**, there should be separate entry and exit points, management of queues to avoid congestion and thorough cleaning of rooms and toilets before and after use.

Facilities should be **airy and well ventilated** as far as is possible

The recommended **maximum number of attendees at level 3 is 15 people (including leaders), with 2 metres social distancing**. The maximum number may be reduced at level 4. (Face coverings should be used where social distancing of 2 metres is not possible due to space constraints.)

Attendance at multiple groups or programmes, by leaders or participants, should be avoided to reduce social mixing between groups and programmes

Support groups and programmes should **last a maximum of 115 minutes** (1 hour and 45 minutes)

[Public health posters](#) should be prominently displayed

Responsibilities of convenors and leaders

- Convenors and leaders should put in place a plan to communicate this guidance and general public health advice to participants in support groups and programmes
- Convenors and leaders should receive training in Covid-19 preparations either through their employer/service provider or through a third party
- A Covid-19 officer should be appointed for each support group and programme, who would be responsible for ensuring that Covid-19 guidance is adhered to
- The Covid-19 officer should be recorded on booking forms for facilities
- The names and contact details of all participants should be recorded; ideally this should be done in advance of a group or programme event, to manage attendance
- A health questionnaire should be circulated to all participants in advance; where this is not possible, a temperature check should be conducted for participants
- Where the recorded temperature is over 37.5 degrees, participants should not be allowed to attend the group/programme
- No refreshments should be provided at a meeting/programme;
- All chairs, doors and handle should be sanitised before and after every meeting/programme
- There should be no sharing of equipment or books at a meeting/programme

Responsibilities of participants

- Participants should adhere to the general public health guidance
- Participants at higher risk of Covid-19 should not attend support groups or programmes
- Participants should complete a health questionnaire in advance where possible
- Individuals should wear a mask in communal areas and on arrival and departure
- There should be no congregating before or after a meeting/programme
- Participants should bring their own water

Tracing and isolation procedures

- Have procedures in place for isolating a person who develops Covid-19 symptoms
- Maintain a log with details of leaders and participants to facilitate contact tracing
- Inform all participants if an individual subsequently reports symptoms of Covid-19
- Advise participants to restrict movements if close contacts of a positive case of Covid-19
- Give participants details of HSE Live helpline 1850 24 1850 for support

Communicating and monitoring the guidance

The Department of Health has developed this guidance following consultation with public health officials and providers of drug and alcohol support groups and programmes. It forms part of its framework for the restoration of drug and alcohol services. The guidance should be considered interim, and is subject to ongoing review and updating to reflect public health advice, Government decisions on restrictive measures and emerging issues.

The Department is responsible for communicating the guidance to relevant stakeholders. The Department will work with drug and alcohol task forces, sectoral oversight bodies and HSE addiction services to assist drug and alcohol support groups and programmes to implement the guidance and to identify any issues of concern.

Advice and resources for people affected by drug and alcohol during Covid-19

People who use drugs and/or alcohol may be at greater risk from Covid-19. The Department of Health and the HSE has produced advice on harm reduction. Drug and alcohol services continue to be available. Information on these resources is available on [Drugs.ie](https://www.drugs.ie). The HSE Drug and Alcohol Helpline **1800 459 459** is available Monday – Friday, 9:30 am – 5:30pm; or email helpline@hse.ie.