

# Staying home during periods of high Covid-19 community infection

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 15 Rhagfyr 2020  
Petitions Committee | 15 December 2020

Reference: RS20/14687-5

**Petition Number:** P-05-1070

**Petition title:** Advise all people who are extremely vulnerable or previously shielding in Wales to stay home, not work, during periods of high Covid-19 community infection.

**Text of petition:** Consider the welfare and genuine fears of extremely vulnerable people relating to Covid-19 during periods of high community infection rates. Many extremely vulnerable people in Wales are terrified of going out each day to work for up to eight plus hours in what we all know to be unsafe environments.

Failing to recognise that many of us work in enclosed areas with a significant number of other individuals and minimal ventilation. We cannot reduce contacts, and although masks will reduce virus contamination, it will not stop transmission, such as hospital acquired infections and aerosol particles of Covid-19 which remain suspended for hours in enclosed spaces. We are terrified and frightened and risk serious mental health issues and physical injury or death from Covid-19.



# 1. Background

Shielding was initially introduced in March 2020 and people identified as medically extremely vulnerable received letters from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for Wales, or their GP, advising them to stay home to 'shield' so that they could be protected from Covid-19. A list of the relevant conditions is available in the Welsh Government's [shielding guidance](#).

Shielding ended in Wales on [16 August 2020](#), but the Shielding Patient List is being maintained so that the Welsh Government can write again to this group with any updates or if the advice on shielding changes.

A [letter](#) from the CMO was sent to those on the Shielding Patient List in October 2020 providing the latest information and advice.

Welsh Government '[Guidance on protecting people defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable from Covid-19 - previously known as 'shielding'](#)' (November 2020) explains why people have not been asked to shield again in response to an increase of Covid-19 cases. The guidance states that since the introduction of shielding, many new safety measures have been introduced in communities and workplaces, which have reduced the need for such restrictive advice. The guidance also states:

Asking people to shield at home for a considerable amount of time can cause harm to mental and physical health and so we will not ask people to shield again unless it is absolutely necessary.

## Work and employment

The Welsh Government [guidance](#) and a [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document provide information on work and employment for those defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable from Covid-19.

Where possible, the Welsh Government states that such individuals should work from home. Employers are under a duty to [take all reasonable measures to minimise the spread of coronavirus](#), and therefore if a person cannot work from home, they can still go to work. An employer should be able to explain to staff the measures they have put in place to keep employees safe at work.

A [workplace risk assessment tool](#) has been developed by the Welsh Government to help people who are working to see if they are at higher risk of developing

more serious symptoms if they come into contact with coronavirus. It helps people to consider their personal risk factors for coronavirus and suggests how to stay safe. Those who were previously shielding are automatically scored 7 and placed in the Very High Risk group in the tool, which recognises the range and complexity of conditions in this category. This approach recognises that these people will need a further discussion with their line manager to consider their personal risk and workplace setting, this may also need to involve Occupational Health to determine if it is safe to return to work.

All businesses must take all reasonable measures to minimise exposure to coronavirus by ensuring a 2 metre distance is maintained between workers in the workplace (if they can't work from home). The Welsh Government has issued [guidance to employers on taking measures to make the workplace safe](#).

The Welsh Government has urged employers to be as flexible as possible with regards to individuals' personal circumstances during the pandemic.

If an individual's doctor has advised that they should not return to work due to their health condition, they will need to provide a fit note for the purposes of claiming Statutory Sick Pay.

## 2. Welsh Government action

Correspondence to the Committee from the Minister for Health and Social Services dated 26 November 2020 states that when the CMO wrote to everyone on the Shielding Patient List in Wales in October 2020, emphasis was placed on minimising contact as far as possible with others.

The Minister notes that when the Welsh Government initially advised people who are extremely vulnerable to take shielding measures at the start of the pandemic, the position was very different as there were no measures in any sector of society to reduce the spread of the virus and no rules or regulations in place. The Minister goes on to say that now there are consistent measures in place, asking people to shield at home again is not the best option "as it could cause more harm to people's mental and physical health".

The Minister acknowledges that people will have concerns for their health and safety at work, but in those circumstances the first conversation that people should have is with their employer, and refers to the [risk assessment tool](#) mentioned above. If people remain concerned, the Minister advises that concerns can be raised with union safety representatives, or ultimately with the

organisation responsible for enforcement in the workplace, either the Health and Safety Executive or local authority.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.