Guidance:

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Risk Assessment in Village halls

Introduction

Before you can consider opening your village hall, it is essential that you undertake a COVID-19 risk assessment. This short document offers guidance on the process. It should be considered alongside current information from the Scottish Government regarding Coronavirus (COVID-19).

Who should conduct the risk assessment?

This should be someone from the village hall committee, and if applicable, carried out in consultation with any staff that you might employ. You can seek additional advice from Bavs using the website enquiry form on the guidance and information for village halls page.

The steps involved

Risk assessment involves the following five steps:

1. Identify the hazard (in this case, risk of infection from COVID-19)

2. Decide who might be harmed and how

3. Evaluate the risk and decide upon safety precautions

4. Record and share your findings

5. Monitor and review your safety precautions

The aim, once you have evaluated your hazard, is to try and eliminate the risk altogether. Where this is not possible, then measures must be introduced to reduce the risks as far as reasonably practicable.

Each of these steps is considered below. Some will not take very long at all, indeed, you may already have all the knowledge and information you need. Other steps, however, will require some serious thought and planning.

Step one: Identifying the hazard

We know that COVID-19 is transmitted by breathing in droplets from an infected person (who may or may not be showing symptoms), and through passing droplets by hand-to-mouth from contaminated surfaces.

It may seem obvious, but given these methods of transmission, you should make a note of all the normal activities that are likely to take place at the hall (and if applicable, which particular rooms are used). You can base this on past use, and also on the result of your consultations with user groups about future hall use. Think too about how people are likely to behave during such activities (Remember, to be accurate a risk assessment must take account of real-world behaviour).

From this list you will be able to identify which activities (and it is likely to be all of them) present a COVID-19 risk. But most importantly, you can also identify any possible high-risk activities.

Step two: Deciding who might be harmed and how

Use the information from step one to decide who might be harmed. Think about everyone who is likely to have reason to visit the hall, even if just for a short time. Clearly this will include all users, but it is likely to also include any contractors (cleaners, maintenance or trades people etc.), hall keyholders, caretakers, and of course your village hall committee members.

Try to decide roughly how many people might normally be present for each activity or group; and approximately what your overall numbers might be (if in doubt base your estimates on maximum capacity) in a certain time frame. Given the role of the village hall within your community, under normal circumstances a considerable number of people over might pass through its doors in any given week.

Next consider how people might be harmed. We know already the way in which COVID-19 is transmitted; and from step one, you will know what type of activities take place in the hall. But the level of harm caused by COVID-19 can be extremely serious. Indeed, although most people do recover, we are all too aware that it can be fatal. What's more, some people are more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others.

At this stage of your risk assessment, you should now have a clearer picture of:

- The type of activities that could take place in the hall

- The rooms used

- The role of those who visit the hall

- The approximate numbers of people who normally use the hall (per week or month)

- Who might be considered at high-risk (e.g. those participating in activities that involve physical contact, high numbers or include members of more vulnerable groups such as the elderly).

Step three: Evaluating the risk and deciding upon safety precautions

Although the risk of infection in the general community is reducing all the time, it has not yet been eliminated. Also, there is still no vaccine or cure. As such COVID-19 remains a serious risk; and Health Protection Scotland's Information and Guidance for General (Non-Healthcare) Settings remains current. Putting this together with the results of step two, your evaluation of the risk in respect of the hall is unlikely to be anything less than serious.

So given this evaluation, what safety precautions should you consider?

If your users are mostly from vulnerable groups, if you do not think you can introduce effective safety precautions, or if you simply wish to eliminate all risk, then you may decide to remain closed for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, if you intend to open when the government sets a date for doing so, then a range of safety precautions will be needed.

These can be summarised under the following headings:

- physical distancing

- increased regular cleaning

- personal hygiene

- information and guidance

Below are some examples of safety measures you may wish to consider, but this list is not meant to be exhaustive.

Physical distancing
Start by sketching out a plan of the building, and identify access points, pinch points, and other heavy use areas. Using this, then consider introducing the following measures:

- Refuse to hire the hall to any groups who you believe will engage in high-risk activities (i.e. where they may struggle to take the necessary physical distancing precautions)

- Restrict the maximum numbers allowed in any one room to facilitate 2 metre physical distancing. This could be as low as zero (i.e. closing some rooms to all use).

- Marking the floors in rooms, corridors and entrances with 2 metre guides (for example to queue for the toilet, or to space out tables and chairs)

- Limiting hall use to one group at the same time (even where you have more rooms).

- Implementing a one-way flow system to access all or parts of the building.

- Encouraging user groups, where applicable, to take their activity outside.

Increased regular cleaning
- Ensuring all floors, table-tops, door handles, toilets and other regularly used surfaces are cleaned daily with a suitable disinfectant.

- Ensuring that rooms are cleaned between hires (which will likely mean a longer handover to the next group).

- At regular intervals, conduct a deep clean of the premises, including walls, floors, doors, windows, rails, dispensers, toilets, sinks etc.

- Insisting that groups clean to your agreed standard, any equipment stored at the hall that they have used (regardless of ownership), immediately their session ends.

- Where food and drink (such as bottled water) is allowed, insist groups bring and remove all their own provisions, cups, plates and utensils.

Personal hygiene
- Make alcohol-based hand sanitiser available at entrances and elsewhere; and insist that all hall users make use of them.

- Make liquid soap and hand towels available at all sinks.

- Consider asking visitors to wear a face covering in certain circumstances (e.g. when working in proximity to older or other vulnerable people).

Information and guidance
- At all entrances, display signs warning anyone who has COVID-19 symptoms (state what they are) not to enter.

- Display posters regarding physical distancing.

- Display posters encouraging regular handwashing.

- Display posters asking people to catch coughs and sneezes in disposable tissues.

- Give guidance to users about your COVID-19 safety precautions; and to cleaners, caretakers, key holders and committee members etc.

- Insist user groups take the contact details of all their attendees.

Step Four: Record and share your findings

Although you are only required to record your risk assessment in writing if you employ five or more people, it is still advisable to keep a written record. This will also help you to draw up **information, guidance, criteria or conditions of hire for hall users**.

You should also share your key findings, in the form of a summary of the safety measures you are taking, with users and other visitors. This can be a clearly displayed notice, or a single sheet of guidance (recommended for anyone who is seeking to hire the hall).

Step Five: Monitor and review

Once you have reopened, you will need to monitor the effectiveness of your safety measures. You should seek feedback after each hire, or after each session for regular users (reducing the frequency if there are no issues). It will also help to include in your hiring conditions an undertaking for users to report any problems in respect of COVID-19 safety measures.

Where you receive reports of non-compliance or problems with safety measures, these should be investigated and recorded. Where appropriate, you should then take measures to avoid a repeat of the problem.

In the event that anyone using the hall develops symptoms of COVID-19, then if groups have taken contact details of all their attendees (including times and dates), the groups can pass this information to the contact tracers for Test and Protect. (Please follow this link for Information on getting tested in Scotland).

Conclusion

Your COVID-19 risk assessment is a crucial step in any re-opening plan. This guidance here will be helpful to you, as will any risk assessment template that you use (see the Bavs template). However, its outcome has to be relevant to, and based upon, the real circumstances at your hall. So please do not start introducing safety measures without first going through the risk assessment process.

Further information

The Health and Safety Executive has published general advice on risk assessment in relation to Coronavirus (COVID-19).