



Guidance on searching people and their belongings whilst maintaining physical distance

Background

With the risks associated with transmission of COVID-19 expected to be present for some time there may be the need for sites to adapt their security processes or put in place additional measures to help ensure the safety and wellbeing of their staff and customers/visitors. This note sets out some of the adaptations or additional measures that sites might want to adopt when implementing processes to search people and their belongings for concealed threats, whilst maintaining physical distance.

Key principles

In an effort to address a wide range of operational scenarios, this guidance note highlights potential points along a visitor journey where interactions between security staff and visitors might take place and makes recommendations for how existing processes could be adapted at each point. The key principles that apply throughout are based on an understanding of COVID-19 transmission modesⁱ (contact with respiratory droplets through the air or fomites) and include: reducing the demand for screening measures; minimising physical contact and proximity; use of personal protective equipment; and taking infection prevention precautions.

With the significant and unique risks that COVID-19 presents, the balance between safety risk and security risk will need to be reassessed and will likely influence security priorities. As such it is recommended that sites review their operational requirement for searching people and their belongings, considering the items that the search process is aiming to detect, anticipated demand, available security resource, space constraints and the latest government guidelines. Adapting security processes to address COVID-19 related safety priorities may have some impact on the level of security assurance achieved; it is important that such trade-offs are understood and accepted.

1. Advance communication

Communicating any policy or procedural changes or recommendations to visitors in advance of arrival will help reassure and inform visitors about their safety and security at your site, enable and encourage compliance with the procedures, and provide a deterrence message to potential perpetrators.

These communications should be delivered using a layered approach and provide consistent messages. Such information can be communicated through website/online notices, pre-visit email, ticketing information, signage or any other usual communication channels. Messages may include:

- Asking visitors not to visit if they feel unwell, are exhibiting any of the symptoms associated with COVID-19 or have had recent contact with anyone that has.ⁱⁱ It may be possible to put a policy in place that allows a site to refuse access to anyone who appears to have symptoms.

If such a policy is to be put in place consideration needs to be given as to how this is managed and implemented. It should also be communicated to visitors in advance.

- Encouraging visitors to only bring with them what they really need for their visit, and only to visit if it is essential.
- Making visitors aware (to an appropriate extent) of any new measures, why they have been put in place (e.g. protection of staff and visitors) and the impact these might have on their visit (e.g. longer visit or queuing times). It is important to provide this informative and reassuring messaging without the detail that might enable a perpetrator to circumvent measures or exploit new vulnerabilities.
- Advising visitors of times when it is expected to be less busy with the aim of smoothing demand.

2. Approach to search area

It is expected that government recommendations around some level of physical distancing (often referred to as “social distancing”) will be in place after sites are able to welcome visitors. It is therefore likely that visitors will need to keep physical distance between themselves and others when queuing to enter the site or go through any security process. They may also need to maintain physical distance throughout their visit. Signage and floor markings can greatly assist in communicating what is expected of visitors and encouraging compliance. It may be possible to create a one-way flow of visitors and provide separate entrance and exit points.

Consideration may need to be given to the amount of space provided for queueing, and how it is configured. A larger, less compact queue may present different security risks, so it is important that any security personnel monitoring the queueing area are able to maintain a high level of situational awareness and security control, rather than just policing the distance between visitors.

3. More screening, less search

The greatest chance of COVID-19 transmission will occur when people are in close physical proximity, such as is the case when a security officer is conducting a manual search of a person and /or their belongings. It therefore must be a principal aim of any new or adapted measures to reduce the frequency and duration of these searches if possible. This can be achieved by **shifting the focus of the process onto screening for threats and searching only in instances where a threat is suspected.**

- Screening by observation
 - An initial level of screening could be carried out by general observation / risk assessment e.g. deciding no further action is required for bags below a certain size or people not wearing bulky or loose clothing.
 - This concept could be supplemented by the use of dedicated, trained and experienced behavioural detection officers.

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- Use of existing technologies
 - The sensitivity of a walk-through metal detector can be adjusted so that small metal items (e.g. keys, coins, belt-buckles, jewellery) would be unlikely to cause an alarm, albeit this could mean that small metallic threats e.g. blades/small weapons might not be detected. Any sensitivity adjustment therefore needs to be considered in conjunction with a review of threat detection priorities.
 - Where pocket contents are to be divested visitors could be asked to place items in their bags, or be provided with individual transparent bags, to minimise the contact with surfaces that are reused (such as trays) and minimise handling by security officers.
 - Any individuals who trigger an alarm on a walk-through metal detector (regardless of the sensitivity settings that are used) can be asked to divest of items that might have caused the alarm and then walk through again. Zonal indicators on the walk-through metal detector may provide information regarding the approximate location of items that need removing.
 - Bag x-ray systems can provide a good solution for screening bags and other belongings for a wide range of threats. Where x-ray systems are already in place but not used to screen all bags and possessions, consideration should be given to expanding their use to screen a greater proportion of items. The effective implementation of x-ray technology at sites where it is not currently in use would require careful consideration.
- Use of new screening technology
 - A number of new discriminative metal detectors are emerging onto the market. These have been designed to alarm predominantly on metallic threats and ignore signatures from benign metallic objects. It must be noted, however, that currently available products have primarily been designed to detect larger mass-casualty threats and will not detect smaller metallic threats e.g. blades/small weapons. Use of this technology must be considered in conjunction with a review of threat detection priorities.
 - Stand-off threat detection technologies (such as those using imaging or non-imaging millimetre wave) allow the operators to maintain physical distance between themselves and the person being screened.
 - A number of new bag screening technologies, seeking to screen bags automatically for large threats, are currently in development but are not yet commercially available.

Increasing the reliance on screening, by any of the ways described above or otherwise, is likely to reduce the range of threats that the process is able to detect. It is therefore vital that any of these measures are considered in conjunction with a review of threat detection priorities and the wider operational requirements.

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Regardless of the emphasis placed on screening for threats there will always be instances where searches of people and their belongings are required. Below are some of the things to consider when staff do need to conduct a search.

4. Personal Protective Equipment and Infection Prevention and Control measures

The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) can limit the spread of COVID-19. Use of a system of PPE including masks (medical or otherwise), gloves, eye protection and overalls could be considered.ⁱⁱⁱ Incorrect or inappropriate use of PPE introduces other risks (such as self-contamination, a false sense of security and neglect of other preventive measures) which the site needs to consider fully.

If PPE is to be used, training in its correct, safe and effective use should be given to all staff. PPE should be changed regularly (e.g. gloves should be changed between each search) following the correct procedure and disposed of safely.

Whether or not PPE is used, all staff should be encouraged to wash their hands regularly and practice good respiratory hygiene. Handwashing facilities and alcohol-based hand gel should be readily available, and their regular use is strongly advised.

Where surfaces (such as trays or tables) are used in the search process, they should be cleaned (using suitable materials) after each use, or disposable coverings used and changed after each use. Any cleaning materials or disposable coverings should be disposed of safely.

5. Reducing physical contact

Procedures such as those suggested below can be used to reduce physical contact between a security officer and visitor in the instances where a physical search is deemed necessary.

Bag search procedure options:

- A. The visitor places their bags and belongings on a table and steps back; the security officer then steps forward and conducts a manual search of the items.
- B. The visitor places their bags and belongings on a table with all fastenings opened and steps back; the security officer then steps forward and inspects the items with the aid of visual inspection tools (e.g. sticks, probes, torches) but without touching.
- C. The visitor opens their bag and unpacks items onto a table stepping back once complete; the security officer then steps forward and visually inspects the items. Once the officer is satisfied with the search, the visitor steps forward and re-packs their own bag.

Person search procedure options:

- A. The security officer conducts a manual search of the visitor from behind (thus reducing face to face contact). As with all manual searches, the security officer should explain the process before starting and seek the visitor's consent.
- B. A hand-held metal detector could be used to search the individual for metallic items, again from behind if preferable. If the hand-held metal detector alarms, the visitor should be asked to remove items from that area and the area should then be re-checked.

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Visitors with additional needs may require more detailed explanation, the process to be modified or the provision of alternative search arrangements (e.g. a separate search area).

The bag and person search procedure adaptations set out above offer different levels of security assurance and personal safety. Each individual site needs to select the balance between these factors that is most appropriate for their site, operation, staff, visitors and business.

6. Response procedures

If any prohibited or threat items are discovered during the screening or search processes, the actions to take should be clearly defined and communicated to all staff. Handling instructions, for example, might need to be modified.

ⁱ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/primary-care/about-covid-19/>

ⁱⁱ These specific instructions are based on the latest government advice on COVID-19 (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>) at date of publication and may be subject to change.

ⁱⁱⁱ The use of PPE should be considered in line with latest government guidelines (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>)

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