

Covid-19 Risk Assessments From April 2023 – Options Appraisal

The ONS Covid-19 Infection Survey has now been ‘paused’. This deprives BuDS (and the rest of Government and academia) of the most reliable source for Covid-19 prevalence in the UK and Bucks.

Options

1. Cease risk assessments altogether.
Covid-19 remains a significant public health issue, and is a critical issue for many clinically vulnerable disabled people. Only one person in BuDS’ Covid-19 chat group supported this option. No-one within BuDS has suggested ending the risk assessments, although some have suggested that a fortnightly or monthly risk assessment was more appropriate than a weekly report.
2. Continue risk assessments using alternative data
This was the option supported by over 95% of people in the BuDS Covid-19 chat group, and also by the expert volunteers in the Covid-19 project team.

Recommendation

That BuDS continue to produce regular Covid-19 risk assessments from April 2023 using the best available data, and making the limitations of that data clear.

Timing

The majority of respondents in the BuDS Covid-19 chat group supported a fortnightly or monthly risk assessment, and this has also been suggested within BuDS. The suggestion has pros and cons:

Pros:

- Potentially requires less work to produce
- Avoids overloading charity comms with Covid-related information (although trustees have agreed that the issue is that other projects are not communicating enough)
- Reduces the charity’s exposure to a potentially controversial issue

Cons:

- The purpose of the risk assessment is to give disabled and clinically vulnerable people the information they need to keep themselves safer in the week ahead. Covid levels rise and fall very quickly, and there is a real danger that a less frequent risk assessment will not meet this primary purpose. A less frequent risk assessment inevitably would have to look backwards at historic Covid levels, rather than deal with current Covid risks. This suggests that a less frequent risk assessment could not be an actual risk assessment
- A less frequent risk assessment might not save any time to produce as there would be far more data to process. A plausible scenario might be that Covid-19 volunteers would be unavailable for other work (e.g. Comms) for the week of the Covid-19 publication, rather than only for one day per week as at present

- The weekly risk assessment reaches an average of 2000 people every week, and is often the most read information from BuDS. This wide reach positively influences social media algorithms to present other BuDS messages to readers of the risk post. Discontinuing the weekly risk post might therefore adversely affect the performance of all BuDS social media
- BuDS is a recognised specialist in Covid-19 information and has made significant real-world contacts through the publication of the risk post. Discontinuing the weekly risk post will weaken that position

Recommendation

That BuDS continue to publish a weekly Covid-19 risk assessment.

Format

The full risk assessment article currently published on the website includes the following:

- Headline news about changes to the Covid risk, including changes to BuDS' own risk assessment scale
- Important updates about the pandemic as necessary
- Standardised messages about how to keep safer
- The risk in Bucks – data personalised to Bucks locations
- Statistical updates for deaths, hospitalisations, and vaccinations in Bucks
- Standard message about how BuDS can help
- Graphic summarising the headline news
- Graphs of important data

These articles typically are between 2000 and 2500 words.

Between 1000 and 2000 people see the headline graphic every week, even if they do not read the full post. Between 15 and 20 people access the webpage from social media each week, but we do not know how many people read the article as we do not have analytical software on the website yet. Around 100 people every week read the full article to some extent from social media.

Options

- A. Continue to publish one long article (with a headline graphic) as at present
- B. Publish four or five shorter articles dealing with individual topics – Covid-19 risk, the risk in Bucks, deaths, hospitalisations, and vaccinations. A summary graphic could bring together the headlines from all of these areas.
- C. Publish one short article (with a headline graphic) which summarises all the changes but links to original data sources rather than provide personalised summaries. For example, the article might include the headline “vaccinations in Bucks remain at a standstill” and include a link to the NHS data, but not give any specific data or analysis in the article
- D. Publish a short weekly risk assessment dealing only with Covid-19 prevalence changes, and a monthly bulletin with deaths, hospitalisations, and vaccinations data.

Option	Pros	Cons
A: One long article as at present	<p>Format and work processes are already in place</p> <p>Familiar format for regular readers</p> <p>Brings all the information together in one article</p> <p>Successfully reaches thousands of people every week</p>	<p>Is very long and thus off-putting to many readers</p> <p>Has a small current readership</p> <p>New content would need to be worked out, and this is a significant piece of work in itself</p>
B: Four or five shorter articles	<p>Work processes are already in place</p> <p>Individual articles are shorter and may be less off-putting to readers</p> <p>People can choose to read about the topics they are interested in, and not be presented with information they didn't want</p> <p>Gives the opportunity to give a more thorough commentary on each topic</p> <p>Each article can be separately promoted on social media, potentially widening the reach and readership</p>	<p>New format(s) and content would need to be worked out, and this is a significant piece of work in itself</p> <p>Four or five separate webpages will need to be created each week, rather than one</p> <p>The time needed to create the articles and publish them on social media will be significantly increased</p> <p>A keen or academic reader will need to jump between web articles to see all the information</p> <p>Publicising each article individually on social media will increase the impression of 'Covid overload'</p>
C: One short article with links to original data	<p>Work processes are already in place</p> <p>Article will be short and summarise all the issues in one place</p> <p>Could be promoted on social media with a headline graphic directly linked to the article's conclusions</p>	<p>New format(s) and content would need to be worked out, and this is a significant piece of work in itself</p> <p>No saving of time as data access and interpretation will still need to be done, even if it is not shown</p> <p>Keen and academic readers will need to generate their own data tables and graphs</p> <p>Loss of accountability and transparency through not 'explaining our workings'</p> <p>Dilutes effectiveness of the risk assessment as people will just have to believe what they are told, rather than being shown the data</p>

<p>D: Short weekly risk assessment and monthly Covid bulletin</p>	<p>Work processes are already in place</p> <p>Weekly risk assessment would provide continuity and reassurance for current readers and fulfil BuDS' pledge to be there for disabled people for as long as the pandemic lasts</p> <p>Short weekly risk assessment with headline graphic would provide the essential data needed for people to keep themselves safer without overloading them with other data</p> <p>Monthly Covid bulletin would be a new publication which could build its own audience of people interested in monitoring the data</p> <p>Taken together, the weekly risk assessment and monthly bulletin would maintain BuDS' reputation and credibility in this area</p>	<p>New format(s) and content would need to be worked out, and this is a significant piece of work in itself</p> <p>Limited saving of time as some data access and interpretation will still need to be done, even if it is not published weekly</p> <p>Monthly bulletin would be additional work, and could only provide historical data and analysis</p> <p>Keen and academic readers will not have as full access to data as at present</p>
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Analysis

- BuDS does not have the capacity to deliver option B, and therefore it must be discarded
- Option C requires a significant investment in changing the format and content of the current risk assessment, and delivers a product which does not meet acceptable standards of transparency and accountability. Therefore it must be discarded
- Option A represents continuity and minimises the amount of work needed to introduce change. However, it also perpetuates the current disadvantages of a very long and, to many, off-putting publication
- Option D allows both continuity and evolution of BuDS' publication of Covid information. It addresses the current disadvantages of a very long single publication. However, it has the highest opportunity cost because the format and content of both publications (the weekly risk assessment and the monthly bulletin) have to be created.

Conclusion

Option D is objectively the best solution overall, but BuDS may lack the capacity to put it into place. If so, Option A remains the only viable option.

Recommendation

BuDS should adopt option D and publish the new shorter risk assessment post from the first week of April, with the new bulletin being published in the first week of May, covering April's data.