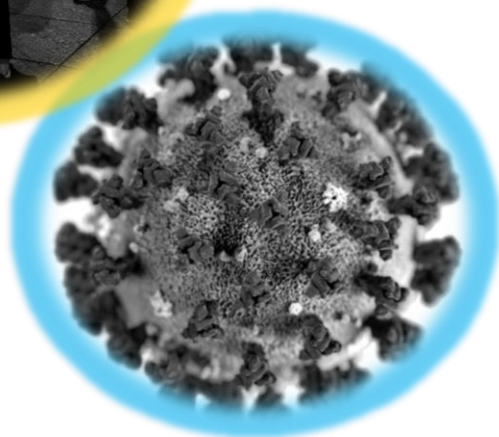# A rapid assessment of opening up nightlife whilst containing COVID-19 and preventing violence:
Executive summary

Uned Atal Trais
Violence Prevention Unit

Authors

Hayley Janssen[1], Katie Cresswell[2], Natasha Judd[2], Karen Hughes[1], Lara Snowdon[1+3], Emma Barton[1+3], Daniel Jones[3] and Mark A Bellis[1].

[1] Policy and International Health, World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Investment for Health & Well-being, Public Health Wales

[2] Public Health Collaborating Unit, School of Health Sciences, Bangor University

[3] Wales Violence Prevention Unit

Acknowledgements

Contact details

Lara Snowdon, Violence Prevention Programme Lead

Floor 5, 2 Capital Quarter, Tyndall Street, Cardiff, CF10 4BZ

E: PHW.ViolencePrevention@wales.nhs.uk

W: www.violencepreventionwales.co.uk

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Overview of the Wales Violence Prevention Unit

**Uned Atal Trais
Violence Prevention Unit**

The Wales Violence Prevention Unit was established with supported funding from the Home Office in 2019. The core team comprises members from police forces, the Police and Crime Commissioner teams, Public Health Wales, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and the voluntary sector.

The Unit is committed to taking a public health approach to violence prevention. This approach challenges the notion that violence is inevitable and instead shows violence can be predicted and prevented like any other health problem. The Unit seeks evidence to understand the causes of violence and what works to prevent it and use this evidence to develop interventions focused on these root causes. These interventions are evaluated before effective projects and programmes are scaled up to help more people and communities across Wales through a whole systems approach to violence prevention.

The Wales Violence Prevention Unit is working with partners to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 response measures on violence in Wales. Data indicates that during the COVID-19 restrictions, violence in public spaces has decreased. However, there is evidence that nightlife can exacerbate the risk of violence, including person-on-person and sexual violence. The unit has conducted this rapid research in partnership with Public Health Wales to support the work of Welsh Government and other agencies in re-opening nightlife safely and preventing violence.

1. Introduction

At a time of national and international emergency, the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has resulted in closures and restrictions on nightlife environments around the world including Wales (see Box 1).

> **Box 1: Closures in Wales**
> On 20th March 2020, Welsh Government ordered the closure of pubs, clubs, restaurants and other businesses in Wales to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

After months of control measures, many countries are now in the process of re-opening their nightlife economies. As these restrictions are gradually lifted, we face the challenge of how to safely re-open the night time economy (NTE) whilst minimising risks of COVID-19 transmission, protecting night time industries and ensuring the 'new normal' of nightlife does not exacerbate other public health problems, particularly violence.
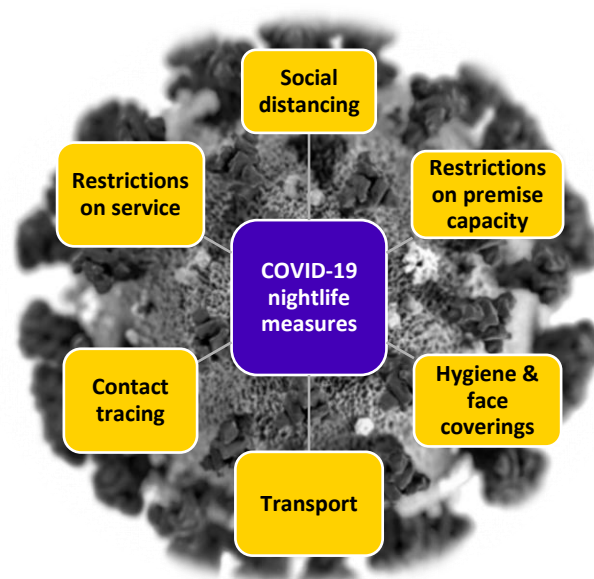
The NTE provides important social and economic benefits [1], yet can also carry a host of public health problems including intoxication, drug use, high-risk sexual behaviour, violence and crime [2–4]. Added to this is now the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Thriving nightlife environments are typically characterised by crowding, noise, intoxication and close social interaction; conditions that facilitate the transmission of infectious diseases such as COVID-19. The measures necessary to reduce the risk of transmission (see infographic below) will fundamentally change how nightlife environments can operate. In turn, these changes may have repercussions for risks of violence and other public health and criminal justice problems in NTEs. During the COVID-19 nightlife restrictions, there were reported reductions in drug and alcohol-related accident and emergency (A&E) admissions and associated violent injuries [5–7]. However, other reports suggested a rise in home drinking and domestic-violence [7,8]. It is therefore, important to identify the potential impacts on violence that COVID-19 related changes to nightlife may elicit, so that mechanisms to minimise and prevent such impacts can be proposed.

2. Aim

This rapid applied public health research aims to assess the evidence and emerging best practice to inform the re-opening of nightlife in Wales (Summer-Autumn 2020) following COVID-19 restriction measures to help contain current and any resurgent COVID-19 and prevent violence. In addition, it adds to the global evidence base on infectious disease control and violence prevention/safety in the NTE.

3. Methods

A rapid evidence review was conducted from 1st - 31st July 2020 including published literature, news articles, policy documents and interviews with key stakeholders in Wales, elsewhere in the UK and internationally. This briefing summarises key findings from the review and key considerations for health, criminal justice, the NTE industry and third sectors. It presents some key examples of how nightlife has been re-opened in different countries (see Section 4.1) and their experiences (see Section 4.2); outlines examples of how measures to reduce risks of COVID-19 may impact on risks of violence (Table 1, Section 4.3); and provides some
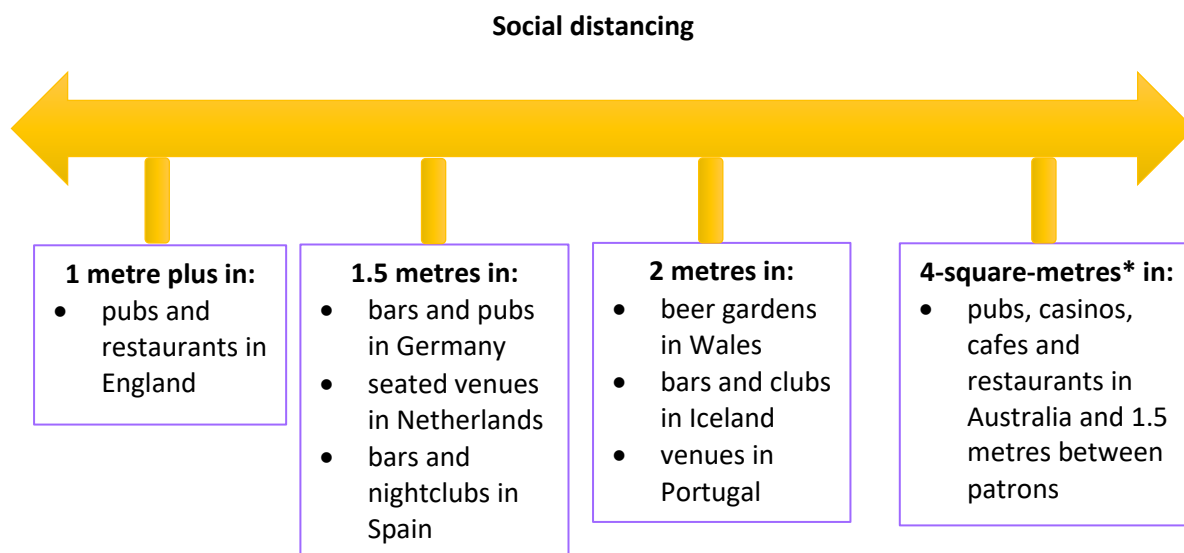

COVID-19 nightlife measures:
- Social distancing
- Restrictions on premise capacity
- Hygiene & face coverings
- Transport
- Contact tracing
- Restrictions on service

key considerations for opening up nightlife in Wales (see Box 2, Section 5).
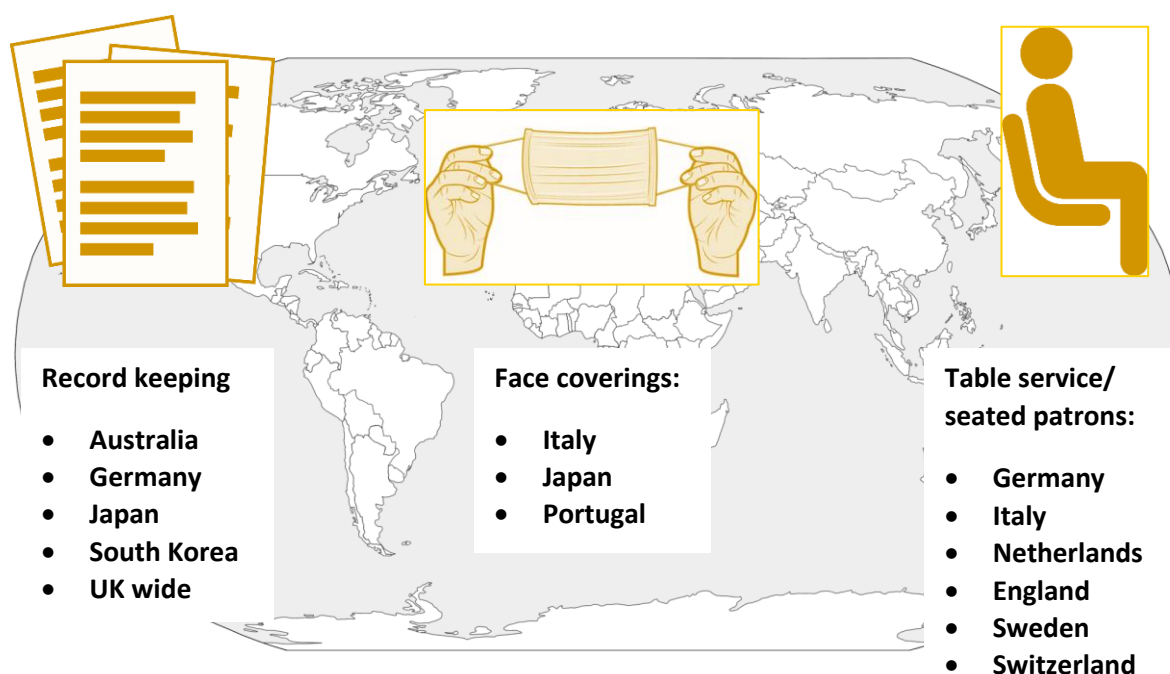
4.   Key findings

4.1. International COVID-19 restrictions on nightlife

The infographics below provide examples of when and how nightlife has been re-opened in different countries and some of the key regulations that have been implemented by authorities, using data gathered from grey literature, news articles and government websites [9–20].

Social distancing

1 metre plus in:
- pubs and restaurants in England

1.5 metres in:
- bars and pubs in Germany
- seated venues in Netherlands
- bars and nightclubs in Spain

2 metres in:
- beer gardens in Wales
- bars and clubs in Iceland
- venues in Portugal

4-square-metres* in:
- pubs, casinos, cafes and restaurants in Australia and 1.5 metres between patrons

* helps to determine the maximum number of people who can be on a premises.

Record keeping

- **Australia**
- **Germany**
- **Japan**
- **South Korea**
- **UK wide**

Face coverings:

- **Italy**
- **Japan**
- **Portugal**

Table service/ seated patrons:

- **Germany**
- **Italy**
- **Netherlands**
- **England**
- **Sweden**
- **Switzerland**

Other restrictions have included capacity limits, earlier closing times, and no dancing or loud music. A full breakdown of the restrictions with effective date can be found in Table 2 in the Full report.

4.2. International experiences of COVID-19, violence and managing the re-opening of nightlife

Many countries are in the early stages of re-opening nightlife environments following COVID-19 restrictions and evidence on the implications and management of this for the risks of violence and COVID-19 transmission is currently very limited. However, much can be learnt from the experiences reported by the media and key stakeholders. The following examples raise some pertinent issues for consideration in Wales. For full case studies refer to the Full report (see Section 4.2).

Transmission of COVID-19 in pubs and clubs

Several examples have already emerged of the transmission of COVID-19 between customers in pubs and clubs. For example:

- In Seoul, **South Korea**, shortly after the re-opening of nightclubs there was a clustered outbreak of coronavirus linked to a 29 year old man who had visited multiple nightclubs [21]. These nightclubs accounted for more than 160 cases with subsequent community transmissions. Despite venues being required to collect patrons' contact details, public health authorities found information for tracking was insufficient and sometimes false, making contact tracing very difficult [21]. Young people moved around a lot and had multiple contacts over the course of a night out. As a result of the outbreak, nightclubs and bars were ordered to shut down indefinitely.

- In New South Wales, **Australia**, 30 individuals tested positive for COVID-19 after visiting, or being in close contact with someone who visited, a single pub. Patrons of the pub were advised to self-isolate for 2 weeks and get a COVID-19 test [22–24]. In response, the NSW government introduced a reduction in the number of patrons on a group booking from 20 to 10, and capped venues at 300 patrons [24–26]. All venues are required to take contact details and register a COVID-19 Safety Plan [27]. Venues containing an excess of 250 customers are required to have a marshal onsite to enforce safety guidelines [24,26].

Potential for loss of previous violence prevention gains

- In New South Wales, **Australia**, there are some concerns that hard-won violence prevention measures are being lost in the drive to re-open the NTE [28]. In Newcastle, NSW, restrictions were placed on licensing hours to prevent violence in the NTE resulting in substantial and sustained reductions in violence [29,30]. There are reports that police have been urging politicians not to open nightlife due to the additional stresses on frontline officers; not just dealing with violence, but now the issue of COVID-19 whereby the police have been required to shut down a number of large gatherings, inside and outside pubs [29,31].

Illegal parties and raves associated with violence and demand on services

During lockdown, and whilst lockdown measures are easing, a number of illegal parties and raves have occurred across Europe and the UK with links to violence, organised crime and a potential surge in COVID-19 cases. For example:

- In **England**, there have been numerous illegal parties and raves, where attendees are failing to practice social distancing measures [32–34]. Whilst the spreading of coronavirus at illegal raves is a major health concern, such parties have resulted in violent behaviour, particularly towards the police, and in some cases leading to hospitalisation [32].

- In Greater Manchester, **England**, a number of illegal raves have been linked to organised crime, specifically the gangs that control the drug supply to the north-west of England [35].

- In **Wales**, a beach party resulted in confrontation between attendees and residents due to the breach of COVID-19 regulations [36,37]. Police, the ambulance service and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution were called to the scene [36].

- In the **Netherlands**, illegal parties have been reported in woods and other outdoor spaces and there are concerns over the lack of social distancing and transmission of COVID-19 [38].

- Other countries reported to have been experiencing similar issues due to illegal parties include **Spain, Portugal and Germany** [39].

Whilst such problematic issues have been raised, there have also been some examples of good practice, which may also help to inform safer re-opening of nightlife settings:

Partnership approach to reducing the spread of disease and preventing violence

- In the Hague municipality, **Netherlands**, a successful partnership between police, bars and restaurants has resulted in the successful management of restrictions and has prevented the spread of COVID-19 and violence in the NTE [38]. Businesses have been implementing the restrictions with close consultation from the police and in instances where issues have arisen, such as individuals or groups threatening to disturb order, have been able to contact the police for a quick response [40]. A police team have been working full-time with businesses to provide sufficient support, which has involved making appointments, supervising and, finally, enforcing [40]. This partnership approach in The Hague has led to potentially volatile situations being de-escalated and the smooth running of the trade, with only a limited number of large fines (n = 3) being given to premises for their mismanagement of restrictions compared to other areas in The Netherlands such as Amsterdam receiving many fines (n = 130) [38].

Consistent messaging to the public

- In Liverpool, **England**, £445,000 has been allocated from the 'Re-opening High Streets Safely Fund' for use on creating a European style city centre with outdoor dining and drinking to meet with social distancing requirements and additional measures such as signage, street markings and marketing campaigns [41]. In addition, pop-up cycle routes have been planned to promote the use of bicycles as a safe way to travel [41]. A number of further steps have been taken to prevent issues occurring in the city centre including safety messaging urging the public to check with restaurants and bars before visiting, table service in operation, no live entertainment, dancing in groups or loud music, and spot checks by the council to ensure that businesses are complying to health and safety restrictions [42]. Following the re-opening of nightlife in Liverpool city centre on 5th July, there have been only limited issues reported.

4.3. Impacts of COVID-19 on nightlife violence and policing

As a result of COVID-19, significant changes are necessary in order to safely re-open the NTE whilst avoiding further transmission of the virus. These changes may have repercussions for violent, anti-social and criminal behaviour. It is important to identify the potential impacts on violence that changes to nightlife may elicit, so that mechanisms to minimise and prevent such impacts can be proposed.

An extensive framework (see Appendix 1 in the Full report) has been created to address the current COVID-19 restrictions and the implications they may have for violence in the NTE. The framework follows the varying stages of a night out, from the home environment before entering the NTE, to exiting the NTE on the journey back home and after parties. At each stage of the night out: the implications of several COVID-19 restrictions for the NTE are described; the potential impacts that these implications have on nightlife violence are then explained; and following this, evidence-based suggestions to prevent and mitigate the impacts on violence are proposed. The main findings are presented below (Table 1) and have informed the considerations (Box 2).

Table 1: Measures to reduce risks of COVID-19 and their impact on risks of violence

Restriction	Positive impact on violence	Negative impact on violence
Social distancing	• Reduces the potential for crowding inside venues and in turn may; reduce sexual harassment, assault and other forms of violence [4,43–45] • Make it easier for staff to determine whether customers are intoxicated and therefore should be refused service [46].	• Reduced capacity limits inside venues may result in multiple queues and potentially crowding outside venues and in surrounding areas and in turn may result in violence [44,47,48] and conflict between nightlife patrons if some individuals chose to disregard social distancing rules. • Individuals may be more inclined to disregard COVID-19 measures including through violent behaviour due to alcohol intoxication [49,50]. • Social distancing measures may be used by perpetrators of domestic abuse to isolate and control victims. This, combined with alcohol use in the NTE could worsen impact of domestic abuse for victims. There may be fewer people around during the NTE to recognise potentially harmful situations such as domestic violence or sexual assaults and therefore, less opportunity for bystander intervention – the ability for others to ACT (Assist, Call for help, Tell someone) [51,52].
Restrictions on premise capacity	• Reduces crowding inside venues (*see social distancing – positive impact*).	• Encourage people to spend more time partying and consuming alcohol at home before entering the NTE. Individuals who pre-load are more likely to be involved in violence [53]. • Some nightlife users may search for alternative venues to host parties or raves, such as parks, beaches and vacant buildings, where they do not have to adhere to capacity restrictions. These unmanaged, illegal events are difficult to control and are often associated with violence, sexual assault and drug dealing [54–56].

		• Individuals may be required to wait longer than normal when entering a venue due to capacity restrictions. This may cause frustration, which could result in aggression or violence [57].

Restrictions on service	• The need to reserve seats at nightlife establishments requires efficient planning of the night out. This may provide individuals with a sense of control and security.
	• Having tables for all patrons inside venues may reduce consumption rates as they can put their drink down.
	• Staff to patron ratio inside premises may improve, allowing for more efficient service. This may allow staff to effectively monitor excessive drinking and aggression levels [46].
		• Table service only may encourage:
		  o Groups to buy in rounds, which is associated with greater intoxication due to increased consumption of alcohol.
		  o Individuals may buy more alcohol than usual at once because they are unsure when their server will be able to come back.
		  o Patrons becoming more intoxicated than intended, increasing the risk of violence associated with alcohol [58].
		• Frustration due to slower service in the NTE may result in racist abuse, as many people who work in convenience stores or service stations, taxi firms, takeaways and fast food outlets are from minority ethnic communities. These staff members experience racially motivated verbal and physical abuse from customers [59]. Since COVID-19, racist abuse and discrimination against people of Asian descent has increased [60].

Hygiene and face coverings	• No evidence identified	• Conflict may arise between nightlife patrons whom do and do not chose to disregard hygiene rules or chose not to wear a face covering, • Individuals are not easily recognisable, which may encourage individuals to engage in violent, anti-social or criminal behaviour. Disguised offenders are more likely to cause serious physical harm and attack more people [61]. • People's mouths cannot be seen. Therefore, it may be difficult to understand people, especially considering the high noise levels of a nightlife environment. A reduced ability to hear and understand individuals may result in miscommunications or frustration, leading to aggression [57]. • Currently, live music acts are not permitted to perform and music volume may be reduced inside venues to prevent loud singing and potential COVID-19 transmission. A lack of entertainment, as a result, may induce feelings of boredom, which can lead to hostility and increased alcohol consumption [62,63]. These factors may lead to increased aggression and violence [58].

		• Most transport companies (taxis, buses, trams and trains) in England are refusing to carry people without face coverings. People may also avoid public transport for fear of infection. In both instances this may lead to individuals walking home alone, putting themselves at risk of violence and sexual assault [64]. • Some transport companies (e.g. in Wales) have made wearing face coverings compulsory. Frustration or conflict may occur between drivers and passengers if face coverings are not worn. In addition, those refused transport may result in some individuals walking home alone and thus may be at increased risk of sexual violence [4].

Transport	• No evidence identified	• Public transport services and taxi marshal schemes have been largely reduced as a result of COVID-19, which may result in:
		    o Conflict and violence between congregations of nightlife patrons competing for limited transport facilities [65].
		    o Congregations of people on the streets as nightlife establishments close, increasing the potential for violence [47].
		    o The likelihood of individuals engaging in traffic risk behaviours such as driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol or accepting a lift from a drunk driver [43]. This behaviour is likely to increase with further reductions to public transport provisions as a result of COVID-19.
		    o Individuals walking home and putting themselves at risk.
		    o Individuals driving home and putting themselves and others at risk.
		
		• A lack of public transport in areas where illegal parties are held may result in people walking home under the influence of alcohol/drugs or accepting lifts from strangers, which presents a risk to themselves and others and may be a risk factor for sexual violence [4].

Health checks and contact tracing	• Individuals may be less inclined to engage in violent behaviour if their contact details have been recorded.	• Having to provide personal details and information may cause some individuals to become frustrated. If an individual does not choose to comply and is refused service as a result, this frustration may escalate with frustration leading to aggression [57]. • Illegal and unmanaged parties may not consider the need for contact tracing and therefore may not take contact details. There will be no record of attendees.

5. Considerations for re-opening nightlife following COVID-19

As the NTE resumes following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions in Wales, there is the potential for clustered outbreaks of COVID-19 and a rise in anti-social, violent, and criminal behaviour. For the NTE re-opening, a focus on multi-agency collaborative working, effective training for staff and consistent messaging on staying safe is favourable to prevent violence, minimise the spread of COVID-19, and the associated impact on emergency services. Going forward, these measures remain pertinent for providing a safe, happy and healthy nightlife experience.

A number of considerations are proposed from the findings for the planning and re-opening of nightlife in Wales (see Box 2). These considerations are intended for a variety of organisations including health, criminal justice, the NTE industry and third sectors and have been developed to ensure that any future recommendations are fit for purpose and appropriate to help contain current and any resurgent COVID-19 and prevent violence. Furthermore, any changes in process or practice should be evidence-based and appropriately evaluated in a multi-agency forum.

Box 2: Considerations for re-opening nightlife whilst containing COVID-19 and preventing violence
1. **Partnership working -** Consider a multi-agency approach whereby night-time businesses, criminal justice, health and local authorities work collaboratively to manage the re-opening of nightlife including monitoring multi-agency data to identify trends in violence. Multi-agency working to prevent violence and manage nightlife environments is already well-established in Wales and enhancing this approach will be fundamental in safely re-opening the NTE. Collaboration between multiple agencies will allow the most effective procedures to be put in place in order to prevent violence, and for quick intervention should clustered outbreaks of COVID-19 occur [46,66].
2. **COVID-19 revised training -** Consider implementing a revised training programme for staff which take account of face coverings, social distancing, queue handling, outside drinking, contact tracing, and other COVID-19 and violence prevention measures to ensure that their understanding, knowledge and approach is consistent. In addition, how to de-escalate incidents using strong and clear, verbal skills and other gestures. New risk assessments covering changes to processes and practices in line with COVID-19 restrictions may also help to mitigate the spread of the virus and violence. It is thought that COVID-19 training is a vital part of preparing the NTE for re-opening due to the number of changes to processes and practices [64]. Additionally, continuing to train, and re-train, industry staff in areas of conflict resolution and responsible beverage service can help to prevent violent incidents from occurring [46,66]. Training staff to utilise strong and clear verbal skills and other gestures to de-escalate situations may be an effective approach to prevent violence and risk of infection, particularly as staff may be wearing face coverings making It harder to hear and understand [66]. Communication between multiple local establishments about anti-social behaviour or violent incidents as they occur can also prevent violence from escalating by allowing nearby door staff to contain incidents, deny entry to the patrons in question and alert the police if necessary [46].
3. **Queue and crowd management -** Consider having a high visibility of official figures patrolling the streets with flow management measures outside to disperse large crowds and help manage queues.

International experience suggests that problems of anti-social behaviour and violence have been more apparent in the streets around nightlife areas than within licensed premises themselves [44,46–48,67]. Restricted venue capacity may lead to crowding and queueing in the streets, increasing the risks of confrontation. Therefore, a focus on the most appropriate avenues for dispersing crowds and managing queues may be beneficial.

4. **Consistent messaging on restrictions, behaviour and staying safe -** Consider providing clear, consistent and timely messaging to the public on COVID-19 restrictions and behavioural expectations on entry and inside premises, and what the repercussions are if they are not followed, particularly in in areas where hearing may be harder, visibility poorer and people may be intoxicated. In addition, safe messaging for the public regarding alcohol consumption, sexual violence prevention and drink/drug driving.

Clear, consistent and timely messaging about restrictions and staying safe has been identified as a key factor in preparing the public for visiting the revised NTE and for minimising violence [12,64,68]. Prompts may include: alcohol cleaner sprayed on hands of patrons during entry into premises, clear messaging on walls visible in ambient lighting, and social distancing signage in toilets/urinals. Collaborative working will allow messaging to remain consistent across agencies. Messaging could be provided through multiple platforms to gain mass viewings, including signage, social media, online advertisements and alternative avenues (e.g. art and music).

5. **Hygiene and hand washing-** Consider providing easy access to hand sanitiser and washing facilities in the premises which avoids in-premise congestion.

Accessible 'hygiene stations' may lead to reduced anxiety and less frustration, conflict and/or violence between people waiting in long queues [57], in addition to minimising COVID-19 transmission.

6. **Pinch points (takeaway food and off licence venues) -** Consider ensuring the safe management of takeaway food and off licence venues including management of social distancing and crowds inside and outside premises.

Measures including security staff, clear signage and flow management to encourage social distancing rules and behavioural expectations inside and outside takeaway food and off licence venues may reduce crowding and associated violence [47].

7. **Safe transport -** Consider providing messaging to the public on carrying a face covering and money for travel home, whilst ensuring there are adequate night services, taxi marshals, and good street lighting for people walking home.

Taxi marshals have proven to be highly effective in towns and cities (including in Wales) in reducing illegal 'pick ups', controlling taxi queues, improving the safety of vulnerable persons and dealing with confrontational situations [69].

8. **Track, Trace and Protect -** Consider maintaining records and contact details of staff, customers and visitors to share with the NHS Wales Test, Trace, Protect service when requested.

Supporting contact tracing by keeping a record of all people on site, preferably from a form of ID, will not only help to identify people who may have been exposed to the virus and are asymptomatic (i.e. are not yet displaying symptoms) [70] but may help to reduce violence in managed nightlife establishments. Patrons may be less likely to engage in violent or criminal

behaviour if nightlife establishments have access to their contact details, making them identifiable. However, some countries have been experiencing issues whereby customers provide incorrect or incomplete information [21].

9. **Illegal parties/raves -** Continue to gather intelligence on planned illegal parties/raves to prevent their occurrence.

   While nightlife violence in Welsh towns and cities is currently low due to a number of factors associated with the lifting of restrictions [68], there have been reports of weapon carrying, organised crime and sexual violence at illegal parties and raves [35,54,64,71]. Illegal parties and raves present a large risk for COVID-19 transmission, especially as contact details are not likely to be taken, leaving no record of attendees to support contact tracing. Therefore, a focus on tackling such events to minimise the related issues may be beneficial. Monitoring of social media [67] and appealing to local communities may help police officers to gain intelligence on locations of upcoming raves, allowing pro-active, preventative measures to be taken. However, a heavy focus on illegal parties may result in more police being deployed to rural events, resulting in a reduced presence in towns and cities.

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