

Why social distancing matters more now than ever before

Written by Helen Iliff and Baroness Finlay

From tomorrow, the government will no longer be advising vulnerable people to shield. As someone who has been shielding since March, the anxieties around going out and integrating back into day to day life are very real. Seeing local lockdowns being introduced in many parts of England have done little to reassure me that it is now safe.

Whilst local lockdowns are being introduced, there has been no guidance for those shielding and whether local shielding guidelines may be introduced. The support is ending and people are going to need to go back out again. As a society, we recognise the need to keep each other safe by maintaining ongoing social distancing. This is particularly important now as those most at risk start to reintegrate back into daily life.

It cannot be overstated how vital it is that vulnerable people and those who have been shielding feel safe leaving their homes again. This won't be an easy task, but we have a duty to one another in this pandemic, to make people feel as safe as possible and to know that others around you in social settings will respect their right to want to social distance. This is why I'm so pleased to see the #DistanceAware initiative gather national support.

The Distance Aware initiative was launched in Wales with the support of Welsh Government to enable individuals and organisations to self-identify as wanting others to maintain distance where possible. It has seen an overwhelmingly positive response with nationwide interest and endorsement. Today, we are incredibly proud to announce that the Department for Health and Social Care and Her Majesty's Government have formally backed the initiative too.

The initiative has been supported by many charities; with Kidney Care UK, Lymphoma Action, Marie Curie UK and We Print Lanyards just some of the organisations providing access to badges and lanyards through their websites. This week, one of the UK's leading national supermarkets ASDA has announced its intention to endorse and support the #DistanceAware campaign too.

The anxieties around distancing make self-identifying by organisations a way of reassuring employees and customers that they understand the importance of distancing and promote it in their spaces. This will give people confidence going back into these spaces in the coming weeks and months.

This simple symbol to prompt distancing, and take forward the #DistanceAware initiative, consists of a double ended arrow on a shield background. There is no text present as it was felt that may encourage someone to come closer to read it.



This use of polite prompts enables the public to positively reinforce this ongoing message. The scheme is open and inclusive not just for those who have been shielding, reflecting the wider societal need to maintain this key public health intervention. There are also a number of different colours available to ensure accessibility to all who wish to engage.

August is going to be a very difficult month for many, as shielding guidance comes to an end. All we hope is that this initiative continues to promote ongoing social distancing and reminds us that we can all do our part in helping to keep each other safe.