



# Ascension COVID-19 Response Level Protocol

## Further Guidance

### Summary

The world is facing a pandemic unlike any other in living memory. This will affect most, if not all of the world, to varying degrees. It will test all within society and therefore needs a whole of society response.

As such the Ascension Island Government (AIG) has developed the Ascension COVID-19 Response Level Protocol. This sets out the actions and public health measures that will be put in place whilst the COVID-19 pandemic remains ongoing.

Whilst some of the measures will be familiar to those who have been watching the news and seeing how other countries are reacting to this pandemic, these measures are Ascension specific. They have been developed with the sole aim of effectively managing and suppressing a COVID-19 outbreak on Ascension.

The AIG recognises the importance of sharing this protocol, its conditions and what it all means ahead of time, to prevent uncertainty and anxiety amongst those living on Ascension.

Being prepared will allow all members the public, and island organisations big and small, to take swift, decisive and collective actions to reduce the transmission and spread of the virus, and in the process save lives.

The protocol is therefore being made public so that all members of the community are informed as to what is expected of them, when this is to be expected, and why the measures being put in place at various stages of an outbreak are so important.

The principle of the protocol is to identify, isolate and, where practical, test suspected cases of COVID-19 as soon as possible. Doing so will provide the best opportunity to stop the onward transmission of the virus to others within the community. If this is done early and successfully, it will give the island the best chance to manage an outbreak of COVID-19 effectively.

Whilst understandably disruptive to the normal pattern of life, if implemented successfully these measures will ensure the least amount of impact for the least amount of time necessary is experienced by all.

### Background

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a significant threat to individuals and communities worldwide, and equally so on Ascension.

In order that the AIG, island organisations, critical services and the public are suitably prepared for an outbreak on the island, the AIG have prepared the Ascension COVID-19

Response Level Protocol. This sets out the public health measures that will be put in place according to the level of outbreak being observed within the community.

This protocol has been informed by several assumptions regarding the current understanding of COVID-19<sup>1</sup> and the effectiveness of social distancing measures<sup>2</sup>, which in turn have been informed by analysis of the spread and management of COVID-19 elsewhere in the world.

A definition of the terms used in this guidance, and in the protocol, can be found at the end of this document. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses terms that differ slightly, and have different legal status, from those used on Ascension. In recognition of the portion of the Ascension population who fall under the US Air Force (USAF) operation on the island, key CDC definitions have also been included at the end of this document.

## How does the protocol work?

The protocol is the island's plan to deal with the threat posed by COVID-19. Each step, or level, within the protocol is an escalation of the last, reflecting the escalating risk an uncontained COVID-19 outbreak poses to the island and our community. Each level provides for further public health measures to be put in place so that the AIG has the best tools possible at its disposal to retain, or regain, control over an outbreak.

Like other viruses, COVID-19 can be spread from person to person. When a person who has COVID-19 coughs, sneezes or talks, they may spread droplets containing the virus a short distance, which can quickly settle on surrounding surfaces and other people.

Others may then get infected by the virus if they touch those surfaces or objects and then touch their mouth, nose or eyes. This then becomes an onward chain of transmission with the virus spreading to others and infecting more and more people. An outbreak can begin with a single case of COVID-19 before then quickly passing through a community. All measures within the protocol are therefore designed to break the chain of transmission, as and when an outbreak is observed.

Whilst any form of outbreak poses a threat to public health, a managed outbreak (Level 1 **AMBER** or Level 2 **RED**) will provide the best possible chance for the island's medical facilities to continue providing essential care to those who are most severely affected by COVID-19 related illness, and for island critical services to continue operating.

An uncontrolled outbreak without appropriate measures in place to manage it could see COVID-19 spread throughout the island population quickly, and as a result place the island medical facilities and critical island services under significant strain. Escalating the AIG response to Level 2 **RED** or Level 3 **BLACK** will provide the conditions to reassert control over an outbreak, and in turn reduce the burden on medical facilities.

However, Level 3 **BLACK** measures will also place unprecedented restrictions on what would be considered normal life and regular activities. In order to be successful it will require

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-Exiting-Social-Distancing-24-03-2020.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-Global-Impact-26-03-2020v2.pdf>

that these measures are observed and respected by the public. Whilst it is expected that individuals will recognise the extraordinary circumstances and associated risks of a COVID-19 outbreak on Ascension and react accordingly, the AIG are also taking the step of introducing the Public Health (Coronavirus) (Temporary Provisions) Regulations, 2020. Within these regulations are the powers to enforce these public health measures, along with penalties of up to £5,000 and six months in prison for those who do not adhere to them.

It is important to remember that all of the measures in place are precautionary but proportional. They are there to minimise the risk of the COVID-19 virus being introduced to Ascension and then establishing itself within community, leading to uncontrolled onward transmission of the virus. Each of the levels within the protocol is proportionate to the risk of the situation at the time, are designed to minimise the number of people contracting the virus, and in turn the number of people requiring medical care.

The main aim of the measures are to reduce the possibility of the virus passing from one person to another, and as such are designed to further reduce non-essential interactions with individuals as the situation becomes more serious. It is accepted that it is not possible to reduce contact with the people you live with, your household. As such, these measures are designed to further reduce non-essential contact with those outside of your household the more serious the situation is determined to be, based on the circumstances at the time.

Reducing contacts with those outside of your household will help to break the chain of transmission and onward spread of the virus, in turn stopping the spread of the virus through the community.

As the measures within each level are proportionate to the situation at the time, it may be that the AIG escalate through each of the levels (e.g. **AMBER** to **RED** to **BLACK**) before then deescalating (e.g. **BLACK** to **RED** to **AMBER**) as needed. Given the small community on Ascension and the importance of staying on top of any outbreak, it may be possible that this happens on several occasions as necessary, and will be dependent on the public health requirements at the time.

## **Level 1 AMBER**

As the COVID-19 pandemic remains ongoing Ascension will remain at Level 1 **AMBER**. This is to ensure that any potential cases are identified as early as possible, in turn minimising the risk of onward transmission and the spread of COVID-19 on the island.

As many will be aware having seen these procedures in action, this entails screening of all arrivals and self-monitoring for anyone on island. Anyone displaying symptoms consistent with COVID-19 is asked to go home, self-isolate as a precaution and telephone the hospital on 66252 or for USAF staff and contractors, to telephone the US Base clinic on 62224. The Senior Medical Officer will then advise them on what to do next, which may include precautionary self-isolation or compulsory isolation for up to 14 days, or until testing for COVID-19 can take place.

It is also likely that anyone who has had sustained and prolonged contact with the initial suspect case will also be asked or directed to isolate as a precaution for up to 14 days whilst their symptoms are monitored, or until testing for COVID-19 can take place.

Whilst sustained person-to-person transmission of COVID-19 remains ongoing in points of departure, all air arrivals from affected areas will be required to isolate for 14 days following their arrival. However, in recognition of Ascension's unique circumstances as a working

island, arrivals who are determined to be critical workers and who perform an essential function on island may be permitted to work within 14 days of their arrival. This will only be permitted where suitable adaptations have been put in place by their employer to avoid entirely, or where not possible to reduce to the lowest level possible, direct contact with other individuals who are not also isolating during this 14 day period. Outside of work these individuals will be required to isolate at all times until the period of 14 days has passed since their arrival.

These are precautionary measures which balance the reality that everyone on island is here to do an important job, against the risk of the fact that new air arrivals may have travelled from an affected area and may therefore pose a risk of spreading COVID-19, even if they are not displaying any symptoms.

Whilst this may be inconvenient to arrivals, it is important to recognise these measures for the few who do arrive by air from affected areas are in place so that more stringent social distancing measures do not need to be put in place for the wider public.

At present it is possible to conduct limited testing for COVID-19 off island. As such, testing will be conducted on suspect cases as soon as is practical following the development of symptoms that could be considered consistent with COVID-19. If testing becomes available on island in the future it may be possible to confirm the presence of COVID-19 in individuals more quickly, and the measures in place for new air arrivals may be reviewed.

A separate process is in place for individuals arriving by sea to ensure that they are not permitted to land unless they are able to satisfy authorities that they do not pose a risk of introducing COVID-19 to Ascension.

## **Level 2 RED**

If a case of COVID-19 is confirmed on Ascension, or in the absence of testing a case is presumed to be COVID-19 based on clinical observations, the response level will increase to the more serious Level 2 **RED**. As part of the procedures in Level 1 **AMBER**, all of the confirmed contacts of the individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 should already be in isolation. Following confirmation of a positive test all of these contacts will also then be tested.

As there will now have been a confirmed case of COVID-19 on Ascension, the island will be placed on high alert for the next 14 days.

During this period public spaces, including the school and wider workplaces, will remain open but practical social distancing is strongly advised and all unnecessary face-to-face interaction outside of the workplace should be kept to a minimum where possible. If interaction with others from outside of your household is unavoidable, extra precaution when doing so is to be demonstrated.

By demonstrating extra precaution both inside and outside of the workplace, the chance of any possible (as yet unidentified) onward spread of the virus will be reduced.

Whilst good hand and cough hygiene is advised at all times during the COVID-19 pandemic, during Level 2 **RED** it will be important that individuals practice vigilant hand hygiene, regularly washing their hands with soapy water before thoroughly drying them, and also practice ensure good cough hygiene is observed.

'At risk' vulnerable individuals, who will be made aware of their status by the hospital, are advised to self-isolate, avoiding all unnecessary interaction with others, until advised to do otherwise by the Senior Medical Officer.

All individuals are advised to be attentive to their own health and monitor for the development of possible COVID-19 symptoms. During this period of high alert it is extremely important that anyone who displays symptoms consistent with possible COVID-19 infection goes home, self-isolates as a precaution and telephones the hospital on 66252 for advice immediately.

If individuals who cannot be directly traced back to the original confirmed COVID-19 case begin displaying symptoms consistent with COVID-19, or can be confirmed as having caught COVID-19, it will be necessary to move to Level 3 **BLACK**.

This will mean that the identification and isolation of COVID-19 cases is likely to have been unsuccessful, and the chain of transmission has not been effectively broken. In the interest of public health it will therefore be necessary to move to Level 3 **BLACK**.

### **Level 3 BLACK**

The reason for moving to Level 3 **BLACK** will be the suspicion that COVID-19 is being spread unchecked throughout the community. This is the most serious situation the island can find itself in. If the virus is spreading unchecked all measures to reduce the opportunity for it to spread between individuals and households must be taken.

Level 3 **BLACK** will only be reached if it is not possible to trace the source of transmission or infection of a new case back to a case that has already been identified. Without being able to do this means that the virus is spreading throughout the community from unknown sources. As such it becomes very difficult to break the chain of transmission, and to do so requires significant measures to be put in place.

As the source is unknown many people within the community could have unwittingly contracted the virus and as a consequence now become potential sources of transmission themselves. Preventing all unnecessary contact between households now becomes crucial.

In the event that it becomes necessary to move to Level 3 **BLACK** all public venues and non-critical island functions, such as the school, will be temporarily closed. Access to critical public spaces will need to be restricted and managed appropriately. For mess halls this will likely mean managed collection times for meals with take-out only, to be eaten whilst separated from others. For access to food shops, this will likely mean having specific days for which you are able to place orders which are then collected by representatives from your employer and delivered to your homes. Similarly, items which arrive on ships during Level 3 **BLACK** measures being in place will be collected and delivered to your accommodation.

Non-essential elements of larger island organisations will temporarily close and non-critical staff will be directed to remain at home. Only staff involved in the delivery of critical island services will be permitted to go to work. Your employer will be able to provide more information about what work may look like under such circumstances, as well as which activities and staff might be deemed critical or essential, so please discuss this with them directly.

Contact with individuals outside of your direct household is to be avoided at all costs. If you are required to work due to being involved in the delivery of critical island services, your

employer will put in place extra measures to minimise, as far as is possible and practical, any unnecessary interaction with others.

Whilst not restricted entirely, travel outside of your home or accommodation should be minimised so as to reduce potential contact with those outside of your own household to the lowest level possible. It is important to remember that the purpose of the restrictive measures seen under a Level 3 **BLACK** situation is to avoid contact between households so as to prevent onward transmission, and the uncontrolled spread, of the virus. Therefore if you want to leave your home you should only do so for activities that you know will not involve you interacting with people who you do not already live with.

Ascension is fortunate to have lots of outside space which is possible to enjoy whilst avoiding others. During Level 3 **BLACK** measures it may be possible for a household to go for a walk, a drive or to the beach, but they should not do this with anyone from outside of their own household. If individuals do encounter others who are not from their own household whilst out, direct contact should be avoided. Direct contact can be avoided by maintaining at least two metres distance between persons at all times and by not passing or sharing objects, such as food, toys, fishing rods, etc.

To reiterate, individuals that have not been directed to isolate by the hospital are still able to go outside during Level 3 **BLACK** measures. However, there should be strictly no contact with anyone outside of their own household, unless they are other Level 3 **BLACK** critical island service employees who are also at work with you. Even then, interaction should take place with social distancing principles in mind and thorough hand and cough hygiene should be practiced at all times. These measures reflect the dramatic change in the pattern of ordinary life that will be experienced under a Level 3 **BLACK** scenario, and seek to balance the health and wellbeing of the public during this time with the need to manage and contain an outbreak of COVID-19.

If you have been directed to isolate by the hospital due to suspected or confirmed COVID-19, suspected or confirmed contact with a COVID-19 case, or due to being in an at risk vulnerable group, then you should not be leaving your accommodation at all. For those in isolation the conditions remain the same no matter which level of response the wider island is in, even during Level 3 **BLACK** measures, and as such you will still be under strict home isolation.

For vulnerable individuals who fall into the 'at risk' category, who will be made aware of their status by the hospital, during Level 3 **BLACK** strict self-isolation is to be observed at all times. This requires staying at home and avoiding all unnecessary interaction with those outside of their household, until advised otherwise by Senior Medical Officer.

The AIG recognise that in the event it becomes necessary to move to Level 3 **BLACK** this will be very disruptive to the normal pattern of people's lives. However, ensuring compliance with the measures of Level 3 **BLACK** will be critical to ensuring the spread of COVID-19 is brought under control. Noting this, these measures will be kept under constant review.

The key point to bear in mind for individuals during Level 3 **BLACK** is that there should be no interaction between one household and another household; this in practice means individuals should not meet with anyone who they are not sharing a home with during Level 3 **BLACK** measures being in place unless absolutely necessary (such as being at work with other critical service Level 3 **BLACK** employees).

If Level 3 **BLACK** measures are able to successfully break the chain of onward transmission of the virus, it will be possible to relax the measures in place and return to Level 2 **RED** or Level 1 **AMBER**.

## What now?

The AIG encourage all members of the public to familiarise themselves with the Ascension COVID-19 Response Protocol so that they are not only conscious of what is required of them now under Level 1 **AMBER**, but so that they are also prepared as and when the time comes to move to Level 2 **RED** or Level 3 **BLACK**.

It is vital that all members of the public respect the measures in place during the various levels of the protocol. Remember, these levels exist to safeguard our community and to save lives.

## Definitions

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**Household** Anyone who lives together and shares self-contained accommodation is considered a 'household'. This only applies to individuals who share self-contained accommodation, such as a bungalow or a house. Anyone who does not live in this self-contained accommodation with you is considered to be someone from outside of your household.

If you live in self-contained accommodation which is part of a larger group of self-contained accommodations, such as barracks, please speak to your employer about how this will be considered in terms of 'households'.

If you live on a military base please speak to your employer directly as to the base specific 'household' provisions.

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**Social distancing** Broadly, social distancing can be understood as individuals changing their behaviour to reduce unnecessary direct physical contact with other individuals from outside of their household. This can include avoiding public places where a large number of individuals have gathered or avoiding unnecessary social gatherings. Individuals will likely still need to attend work but at work should try to reduce or avoid all non-essential direct contact with others. If outside of work individuals should consider their interactions with others from outside of their household and potentially make adaptations to help reduce these. When interacting with those from outside of their household, individuals should try to observe at least two metres distance between themselves and the other persons.

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**Direct contact** Direct contact is physical contact between persons (although close contact within two metres of persons should also be considered direct contact).

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**Self-isolation** Anyone who develops symptoms which may be consistent with COVID should go home and telephone the hospital on 66252 for advice or, for US base staff, telephone the USAF clinic on 62224. They may then be directed by the Senior Medical Officer to self-isolate for a period of time whilst their symptoms are monitored. If their symptoms worsen, are consistent with COVID, or they subsequently test positive for COVID, they may be placed under compulsory isolation. Self-isolation involves remaining within your accommodation, not going to work, not travelling to public spaces or shops, and not receiving visitors at your home. Symptomatic persons are not permitted to leave their accommodation for exercise, or any other purpose except in an emergency.

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**Compulsory isolation** Anyone who the Senior Medical Officer has reasonable grounds to suspect may be infected with COVID-19, even if they are not displaying any symptoms, will be compelled to isolate as per the Public Health (Coronavirus) (Temporary Provisions) Regulations, 2020, for up to 14 days or longer if determined by the Senior Medical Officer. Under compulsory isolation individuals are not permitted to have direct contact with anyone outside of their household. They are only permitted to leave their accommodation under the direction of the Senior Medical Officer or another Public Health Officer, or if there is an emergency (e.g. a fire in the building).

Anyone in compulsory isolation will be supported where necessary and will be in daily, or more frequent, contact with their employer and/or the hospital for the duration of their isolation period.

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**Restrictions short of compulsory isolation** Based on an assessment of risk given case specific circumstances, it may be that restrictions short of compulsory isolation are more appropriate than compulsory isolation for certain individuals. The restrictions placed on someone under this category can be as restrictive as necessary, short of full compulsory isolation in their place of accommodation. This is designed to manage the risk the individual poses to the community in a situation where they may not be obviously symptomatic, but due to other factors cannot be determined as not having COVID-19.

The Senior Medical Officer may direct individuals who have developed symptoms that may be consistent with COVID-19, but are not presently at the threshold of being presumptive or confirmed COVID-19, to follow certain restrictions. Failure to comply with these will be an offence under the Public Health (Coronavirus) (Temporary Provisions) Regulations, 2020. Individuals will receive clear instructions as to what these restrictions are by the SMO if they are provided such a direction.

Certain restrictions may also be used for operationally critical purposes. For instance, it may be that an air arrival from an affected area is coming to deliver a service essential to the good functioning of the island. As such they may be made subject to restrictions similar to compulsory isolation but with adaptations made so that they are able to deliver this critical function in a way where the risk of possible contamination of others within the community is reduced to the lowest level possible.

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**High alert** During Level 2 RED the island will be on high alert for 14 days following each positive test. Public spaces, including the school and wider workplaces, will remain open but social distancing is advised and all unnecessary interaction outside of workplace should be avoided where possible. If interaction with others is unavoidable, extra precaution is to be demonstrated. All individuals should be attentive to their own health and monitor for the development of possible symptoms. If symptoms develop individuals should self-isolate immediately and telephone the hospital on 66252 or, for US base staff, telephone the USAF clinic on 62224. At risk individuals are advised to self-isolate, avoiding all unnecessary interaction with others, until advised to do otherwise by the Senior Medical Officer.

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**Person under investigation (PUI)** A person who is symptomatic

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**Person Under Monitoring (PUM)** A person who is not displaying any symptoms but who has had exposure to COVID-19 (e.g. close and prolonged contact with a person who is symptomatic) and/or has travelled from an affected area.

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**Isolation** Compulsory isolation for individuals who are symptomatic.

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**Quarantine** Precautionary isolation or restrictions short of compulsory isolation for individuals who are not displaying symptoms but who are potentially infected or contaminated with COVID-19.

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