

26 Shields

Stories from the margins of a pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, we've heard stories of heroics and tragedies, but some of the most important stories remain untold. There are now over four million people in the UK who're shielding, living with the most severe restrictions. Yet we rarely hear their stories. It's time to change that.

26 Shields is a different kind of project. We want to give people who have shielded a place to share their stories and a community to hear them. This is a place for hard truths, quiet courage, small joys and positive, powerful reflection on what it means to live.

We hope 26 Shields will help us all appreciate the lengths some people go through to survive, and the strength of character they have. We want to focus on people's courage, resourcefulness and humanity throughout the pandemic. Most of all, we want to show shielders that we're here and listening in awe.

We hope you will help us share their vital, untold stories.

The 26 writers

We're looking for 26 writers from two related yet distinct groups:

Shielders: If you've either had to shield, or chosen to shield, we'd love to hear your story. What has it been like? What have you missed, and what have you found an appreciation for? What have you learned about the world and yourself? What are your hopes for the future?

Those who've observed family and/or friends shielding: What has their experience been like? What have they missed, and what have they found they can live without? And what can they teach others about living well as a result?

If you're writing about someone else who has shielded, we'll ask you to pair with that person for the project to make sure their voice comes through.

The brief

You'll be writing about the experience of shielding across a series of key moments throughout the pandemic. We're calling these moments 'five short acts'. How you choose to write about those moments is entirely up to you – it could be prose or poetry.

The five short acts:

1. 1st lockdown (23 March – 1 August 2020)
2. 2nd lockdown (November – December 2020)
3. 3rd lockdown (January – March 2021, so far!)
4. Vaccination
5. Your hopes and dreams for the future.

We're setting a maximum of 500 words across your total piece – 100 words per act. You'll start each act will start with a seven-syllable title, not included in the word count.

We'll publish the work online to the 26 website, share across 26 social media and ask writers to audio record their work. When we say we want to hear shielders' voices, we literally mean it.

Project timetable

26 February	Project launched with a call for submissions
26 Feb - 14 March	Members submit their proposals
15-19 March	Select the range of stories /shielders
23 March	Announce the writers (a year to the day of the 1 st lockdown)
23 April	Deadline for the finished pieces – online publishing begins
June	Audio recordings of the work start appearing

The groups

For anyone shielding or knows of someone shielding, the following list of clinically extremely vulnerable groups will be all too familiar. Those of a certain age who are by themselves at home, or in a home, have rightly been classed as very vulnerable and were the first to be vaccinated. We would love to hear their experience. However, the list of conditions is extensive and may prompt some thoughts of people in your circle whose story should be told.

Shielding list:

Solid organ transplants
Bone marrow and stem cell transplants
Those on dialysis or with chronic kidney disease
Those undergoing chemotherapy, radiotherapy and other targeted cancer treatments
Leukaemia, lymphoma and myeloma patients
Severe lung conditions such as cystic fibrosis or severe asthma
Sickle cell or SCID conditions
Serious heart conditions whilst pregnant
Adults with Down's Syndrome
Spleen illness
Those on high doses of steroids or immunosuppressants
Anyone classed as clinically extremely vulnerable by their doctor

In both instances, the main writer must be a member of 26. However, if you're writing on behalf of someone who isn't a 26 member, that's fine so long as you are.

Call for submissions

Our aim is to include people from across clinically extremely vulnerable groups. In this first instance, please send us a brief paragraph (no more than 100 words) of your shielding story, or somebody else's shielding story. Help us understand the circumstances. Let us know if you're connected to any charities that support your particular condition. At this stage, we're

*trying to find 26 writers whose subjects embrace a true cross-section of those shielding.
Deadline for submissions is 14 March 2021.*

If we attract many more than 26 writers, we will find a way of hearing and featuring all your stories on the 26 website.