

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1017
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/04936/20
Janet Finch-Saunders MS
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25 August 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter dated 19 August regarding Petition P-05-1017 to allow pupils to wear masks in all areas of the school premises.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share some views on this matter with the Petitions Committee in advance of the Committee's formal consideration of the petition.

The use of face coverings and personal protective equipment (PPE) more generally has been a frequent source of discussion during the pandemic. I appreciate many people have strong personal views on whether and in what circumstances face coverings should be worn. Global understanding of the virus has continually improved and this means we must be live to the scientific and medical advice in setting our policy; and equally must be open to reviewing the position as our understanding continues to develop.

The current medical and scientific advice to Welsh Government from our Technical Advisory Cell supports the view of the Chief Medical Officer for Wales that physical distancing, hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene remain strongly evidenced to be the most effective ways to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Our guidance to schools and settings is that there is therefore no need to use PPE when undertaking routine educational activities in classroom and school settings.

Our [operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#), which we updated on 11 August, includes advice on instances where PPE may be required, for example in the event of a suspected case of COVID-19 or in instances where staff provide intimate care.

The use of PPE by staff within education settings should be based on a clear assessment of risk, taking into account each individual setting and the needs of the individual learner. We

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

expect schools and settings to ensure, where possible, that they organise their environment and operate to ensure that social distancing can be maintained throughout a routine day.

The Welsh Government does not explicitly prohibit use of face coverings in classrooms. In cases where a learner or family feel strongly that they or their child should be able to wear a face covering in class, we would urge them to discuss this with the school, noting anything which might require special consideration as part of the school's risk assessment. In coming to a local decision, we would want schools to take a pragmatic and inclusive approach.

Considering the wellbeing of learners is critical to any considerations around whether staff or older learners wear face coverings. Our guidance is also clear that no one who may not be able to manage face coverings as directed, for example young learners or some learners with special educational needs or disabilities, should be required to wear them. The impact of wearing a face covering for learners with any level of hearing loss must also be carefully considered and our guidance links to advice provided by the National Deaf Children's Society to help schools and settings manage this appropriately.

Our operational guidance details that schools should have a process for removing face coverings safely when learners and staff who choose to use them arrive at school, including not touching the front of their face covering during use or when removing them, washing hands immediately on arrival (in the case of all learners), and disposing of or storing them safely.

There is a great deal that our schools and settings can do to reduce the risk of transmission and create as safe a space as possible for all learners to thrive. In the classroom, maintaining a safe distance between people and reducing the amount of time they are in face-to-face contact, lowers the risk of transmission. Ideally, adults should maintain a 2 metre distance from each other and from learners. It is strongly advised that staff in secondary schools maintain distance from their learners, staying away from colleagues where possible and staying at the front of the classroom. We know these measures will not always be practical, in particular with younger learners, but following the guidelines when circumstances allow will help reduce the risk of transmission.

It is important for our schools and settings to support learners to maintain a safe distance and not to touch staff and their peers where possible. Where this cannot be achieved, the transmission risk can still be reduced significantly by keeping learners in smaller, class-sized groups as outlined in our guidance.

In line with health advice, children under 11 no longer have to maintain a 2 metre distance from each other or from adults while at schools and settings. The advice remains that the risk to and from children under 11 is very low. However, they will remain subject to other restrictions in place and must continue to observe the social restrictions on meeting other family groups or wider gatherings for example.

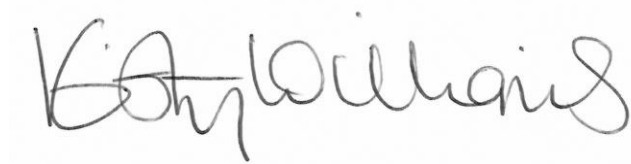
Schools can make changes to the routine of the day, such as not holding large gatherings such as physical assemblies in one place, staggering break times, changing seating arrangements, increasing ventilation to indoor areas and holding activities in outdoor learning environments, where possible.

The author of the petition refers to public transport arrangements and face coverings. The Welsh Government are working closely with local authorities in Wales who are responsible for school transport. Our operational guidance outlines that local authorities should assess the travel needs of learners aged under 19 and should put in place proportionate safeguards to minimise the risk of transmission on dedicated home to school transport. There is no requirement to wear a face covering on dedicated home to school transport.

However, a child over the age of 11 who is travelling on ordinary public transport will need to wear a face covering in line with the Coronavirus regulations.

I understand this guidance will be welcomed by some and may cause concern for others. We must balance the overall risk to learners from COVID-19, which is very low, as well as the absence of evidence of any substantial benefit from the use of face coverings, compared with the potential risks of incorrect use and disposal, against the concerns of parents and children and desire to wear face coverings. I would like to reassure the author of the petition that our advice on face coverings will be kept under constant review against the latest health and scientific evidence, including in context of new information released by the World Health Organisation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams', written in a cursive style.

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