

Kirsty Williams AS/MS  
Y Gweinidog Addysg  
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1021  
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/05122/20

Janet Finch-Saunders MS  
Chair, Petitions Committee

5 October 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter dated 1 September regarding Petition P-05-1021, to not make face coverings mandatory in any (including secondary) schools.

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 latest scientific and medical advice in setting our policy; and equally must be open to reviewing the position as our understanding continues to develop.

You will be aware that on the 28 August I issued a [joint statement](#) alongside my colleague Vaughan Gething MS, Minister for Health and Social Services, on the use of face coverings in schools. This was done following advice from our Technical Advisory Cell who provided additional [advice](#) following an update from the World Health Organisation and our position was confirmed.

The wearing of face coverings in schools is not mandatory, the advice from our Chief Medical Officer is that face coverings are recommended for all members of the public over 11 years in indoor settings in which social distancing cannot be maintained, which may include schools and school transport.

As they have reopened to full capacity for the autumn, as well as considering the published [operational guidance for schools and settings](#), schools have considered how to keep learners and staff safe in areas where the ability to social distance will not be possible or will

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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.

be a challenge, such as school corridors. As a result, many secondary schools have chosen to adopt a policy of wearing face-coverings as a mitigating measure. I applaud and support the adoption of local arrangements such as this.

I believe school leaders are best placed to make decisions relating to their schools, as they know their learners, their staff and their school environment. In arriving at decisions regarding the mitigating measures being introduced in their school, I know that head teachers will have undertaken a thorough and detailed risk assessment as outlined in the operational guidance, which will have included engaging with their local authority, staff and wider school community. By undertaking this process, schools will be able to demonstrate that the decisions made for their school are appropriate and proportionate.

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.

The author of the petition refers to face coverings encouraging face touching, which can spread the virus. Our operational guidance details that schools should have a process for removing face coverings safely, 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. Further information on the wearing of face coverings can be found at the links that I have attached below.

Welsh - [https://youtu.be/\\_rDqnRYbiCM](https://youtu.be/_rDqnRYbiCM)

English - <https://youtu.be/b5-QBMGKeKc>

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.

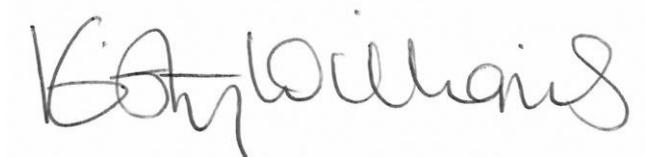
It is important for our schools and settings to support learners to maintain a safe distance and not to touch staff and their peers where possible. Where this cannot be achieved, the transmission risk can still be reduced significantly by keeping learners in smaller, class-sized groups as outlined in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

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 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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