



Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
House of Commons
London
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7 June 2021

Dear Robert,

During my appearance before the committee on 29 April, I committed to providing additional information regarding the medical and scientific evidence that underpinned the Department's decision to recommend face coverings in secondary and further education (FE) classrooms and the assessment the Department has made on the impact of wearing face coverings on teaching and on children's wellbeing and mental health. I have summarised below some of the publicly available scientific evidence and the considerations that underpinned the assessments undertaken throughout the review.

Context

On 22 February 2021, ahead of the full reopening of schools and FE colleges on 8 March, the Department published updated guidance on face coverings.

In line with the latest PHE advice, the guidance recommended that face coverings should be worn by staff, pupils and students in schools and colleges where year 7 and above are educated in both communal areas and classrooms unless social distancing could be maintained. The guidance made clear that this was a temporary measure that would be reviewed at Easter in partnership with health experts.

Face coverings policy

When the policy was introduced, it was an appropriate additional safety measure while rates of infection were high in the community, the school and college testing regime was in its early stages, and the vaccine programme was just starting to roll out.

We recognise, however, that this needs to be weighed against the disadvantages which include the negative impact on communication between teachers and pupils in the classroom, the effect on mental health, and the discomfort of wearing face coverings for prolonged periods in warmer

weather. We therefore sought to remove our recommendation on the use of face coverings in classrooms at the first safe opportunity.

The decision to continue the policy at Easter was a cautious approach that aimed to maximise the effort to reduce transmission in schools and colleges and therefore support the aim of keeping pupils and staff in education as safely as possible.

At this point, it was decided that any changes to the policy would be considered alongside the roadmap process at step 3, where the Government would consider wider relaxation of restrictions against the four tests. This would also allow time for the vaccination programme to reach everyone in the top priority groups with their first dose. At this point, it was expected that wearing face coverings would no longer be recommended in classrooms, or by pupils and students in communal areas, at step 3 of the roadmap (from 17 May). This decision was supported by PHE.

We have been clear that the recommendation to wear face coverings in classrooms was a precautionary temporary measure. As the four tests were met, the balance shifted, and it was appropriate to remove the recommendation. We continue to recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and visitors in situations outside of classrooms where social distancing is not possible.

FE colleges have the discretion to use face coverings in specific circumstances, in line with individual risk assessments. This recognises the significant differences between colleges and schools, particularly the diversity of academic and vocational provision.

However, the reintroduction of face coverings for pupils, students or staff, may be advised for a temporary period in response to particular localised outbreaks, including variants of concern. In all cases, any educational drawbacks should be balanced with the benefits of managing transmission.

Evidence considered

As part of the ongoing review of the policy, the Department worked closely with PHE and the Cabinet Office to consider a range of evidence, balancing both the health and educational considerations. This included the latest public health advice and the most recent scientific evidence, as well as stakeholder intelligence from schools and colleges on their experiences of wearing face coverings in classrooms and any perceived impacts on teaching and communication.

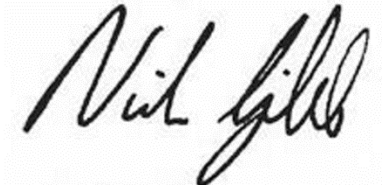
The Department has continued to update its assessment of the policy, informed by PHE advice and stakeholder intelligence. Some of the publicly available evidence considered as part of the review is available at Annex A.

Our policy on the system of controls is kept under review and informed by the latest scientific and medical advice including in the context of prevalence, new

variants, and progress of the vaccination programme. We will continue to develop comprehensive guidance and to understand the impact and effectiveness of these measures on staff, pupils and parents.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Nick Gibb', written in a cursive style.

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Annex A – Data and analysis on case rates in secondary school age children

[Daily summary | Coronavirus in the UK \(data.gov.uk\)](https://data.gov.uk/collections/daily-summary-coronavirus-in-the-uk)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Infection Survey, UK - Office for National Statistics](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-infection-survey)

[SARS-CoV-2 infections in children following the full re-opening of schools and the impact of national lockdown: Prospective, national observational cohort surveillance, July-December 2020, England - ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1473210121000010)

[Evidence summary: COVID-19 - children, young people and education settings \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/publications/evidence-summary-covid-19-children-young-people-and-education-settings)

[Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak, Week 19 2021 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/covid-19/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak-week-19-2021)

Epidemiological position

[National flu and COVID-19 surveillance reports - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/national-flu-and-covid-19-surveillance-reports)

[Variants: distribution of cases data - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/covid-19/variants-distribution-cases-data)

[Scientific evidence supporting the government response to coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/scientific-evidence-supporting-the-government-response-to-coronavirus-covid-19)

Impact of wearing face coverings and stakeholder intelligence

<https://phe.koha-ptfs.co.uk/cgi-bin/koha/opac-retrieve-file.pl?id=9adedb17d5622f9cd7e42febcaadb19ad>

<https://teachertapp.co.uk/genies-classrooms-the-continued-disruption-of-life/>

[Microsoft Word - Joint letter - face coverings.docx \(gmb.org.uk\)](https://www.gmb.org.uk/microsoft-word-joint-letter-face-coverings.docx)