Face Coverings in Schools

Buckinghamshire Council Guidance

1st September 2020

1.

This advice on the issue of face coverings in schools is in light of the [advice of the World Health Organisation](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-IPC_Masks-Children-2020.1), which was published on 21st August 2020.

The advice notes that the volume of evidence supporting the initial scientific position on a key benefit of face coverings (protection of others from infection by the wearer) has grown.

There is also emerging evidence to suggest that the wearer of a face covering can be protected.

2.

Face coverings should not be confused with PPE. Use of face coverings as set out here should be seen as just one mitigation within a package of measures within a school. Other mitigation measures may include physical distancing for adults, environmental cleaning, personal hand and respiratory hygiene, grouping of young people and maintaining distancing between young people in secondary schools where possible; these remain vitally important in reducing the spread of COVID -19.

3.

Anyone (whether child, young person or adult) wishing to wear a face covering in school should be permitted to do so.

Some individuals are exempt from wearing face coverings. UK government guidance includes the following exemptions:

* children under the age of 11
* people who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability
* where putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause you severe distress
* if you are speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expressions to communicate
* to avoid harm or injury, or the risk of harm or injury, to yourself or others - including if it would negatively impact on your ability to exercise or participate in a strenuous activity

There are also scenarios when a student could be permitted to remove a face covering:

* if they are aged 11 to 18 attending a faith school and having lessons in a place of worship as part of a core curriculum
* in indoor premises such as a dining hall to eat and drink, then they could remove their face covering in this area only. They should put a face covering back on once they leave the seating area.

4.

Face coverings should not generally be required in classrooms or other learning and teaching environments. However, face coverings should be worn by adults where they cannot keep 2m distance and are interacting face-to-face for a sustained period (about 15 minutes or more) with other adults and/or children and young people.

Face coverings may also be worn in the following circumstances (except where an adult or child/young person is exempt from wearing a covering):

* where adults and young people in secondary schools (including special schools and independent schools) are moving about the school in corridors and confined communal areas (including toilets) where physical distancing is particularly difficult to maintain; and
* in line with the current arrangements for public transport, where adults and children and young people aged 5 and over are travelling on dedicated school transport.

This approach reflects precautionary judgements based on the latest scientific advice and the experience of school reopening in other areas to date. It is limited to the specific environments identified above for the following reasons:

* These are areas where mixing between different (age) groups is more likely, increasing the potential for transmission of the virus;
* Experience and feedback has demonstrated that crowding and close contact in these areas is more likely, and that voices may be raised resulting in greater potential for creation of aerosols;
* The scope for effective ventilation is often less;
* There are less compelling counter-balancing arguments regarding the potential impact of face coverings on educational outcomes in these areas of the school estate; and
* For school transport, the adoption of an approach to face coverings applying to children and young people aged 5 and over will be consistent with the current approach on public transport.

 5.

Face coverings may also play a particularly important role when prevalence rises, and their use may be increased in specific local contexts on the basis of risk assessments and local factors, including as follows:

* Local Incident Management Teams may recommend a further strengthening of the use of face coverings in other areas of the school (e.g. classrooms) when dealing with local outbreaks (see Outbreak Management).
* The local authority and secondary schools (including special schools and independent schools) may wish, following the relevant local authority processes and appropriate risk assessment and consultation with school communities, to consider strengthening the use of face coverings in other areas of the school (e.g. classrooms) to address specific local circumstances (e.g. particular concerns or anxieties around distancing or confidence building in the context of local or wider outbreaks).

An example of this local “stepping up” of measures may be the use of face coverings in secondary school classrooms where any form of distancing is impossible, in circumstances where increased community transmission is being seen.

6.

In making any such local decisions on the stepping up of use of face coverings, it will remain vitally important to consider the potential impact on children and young people, including via the appropriate use of Equality Impact Assessments. The impact of wearing a face covering for learners with additional support needs, including any level of hearing loss, should be carefully considered, as communication for many of these learners (including hearing impaired young people) relies in part on being able to see someone’s face clearly.

This is also important for children and young people who are acquiring English and who rely on visual cues to enable them to be included in learning. Individuals who may not be able to handle and wear face coverings as directed (e.g. young learners, or those with additional support needs or disabilities) should not wear them as it may inadvertently increase the risk of transmission. In classes where any such impacts are anticipated and no alternative mitigations are reasonable, schools may wish to consider the use of see-through face coverings which are increasingly available.

Some children and young people may need additional support/reassurance about the reasons for adults wearing face coverings.

7.

It is vital that clear instructions are provided to staff and children and young people on how to put on, remove, store and dispose of face coverings in all of the circumstances above, to avoid inadvertently increasing the risks of transmission. The key points are as follows:

* Face coverings should not be shared with others.
* Before putting on or removing the face covering, hands should be cleaned by washing with soap and water or hand sanitiser.
* Make sure the face covering is the right size to cover the nose, mouth and chin. Children should be taught how to wear the face covering properly, including not touching the front and not pulling it under the chin or into their mouth.
* When temporarily storing a face covering (e.g. during classes), it should be placed in a washable, sealed bag or container. Avoid placing it on surfaces, due to the possibility of contamination.
* Re-usable face coverings should be washed after each day of use in school at 60 degrees centigrade or in boiling water.
* Disposable face coverings must be disposed of safely and hygienically. Children and young people should be encouraged not to litter and to place their face coverings in the general waste bin. They are not considered to be clinical waste in the same way that used PPE may be.

There should be regular messaging from schools to adults and children and young people about these instructions. These risks must be considered when deciding locally whether to step up measures.

8.

Schools should consider carefully how to address any equity concerns arising from the use of face coverings, including in respect of the impacts on certain groups of pupils and the costs of providing face coverings for staff and children and young people. It is reasonable to assume that most staff and young people will now have access to re-usable face coverings due to their increasing use in wider society, and the government has made available information on how to make a simple face covering.

However, where anybody is struggling to access a face covering, or where they are unable to use their face covering due to having forgotten it or it having become soiled/unsafe, schools may wish to take steps to have a contingency supply available to meet such needs.

9.

No-one should be excluded from education on the grounds that they are not wearing a face covering.