

May 4, 2021

To:
The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
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We are extremely concerned at reports that the government plans to stop requiring children to wear face coverings in secondary school classrooms from 17th May in England. We are not aware of any plans to lift face covering requirements in relation to shops or transport, where people generally spend less time in close contact with large groups.

We support the general principle of using data not dates to decide on the lifting of restrictions. However, while there is significant community transmission (Independent SAGE's suggested threshold is 10 cases/100,000 population/week with strong test, trace isolate and support systems, while Victoria, Australia was successful by targeting <1 case/100,000 population/week), we view face coverings (along with other measures such as improved ventilation, air purification, using outdoor spaces, and mass testing) as an essential part of the wider system of control in schools. Masks reduce the risk of children contracting and transmitting SARS-CoV-2, as wearing a face covering in class reduces the emission of virus-carrying particles as well as reducing wearers' exposure due to filtration.¹ Both the CDC and WHO recommend that children wear masks in schools, including in classrooms.^{2,3} Not only do masks help keep school students and staff safe, they are also a critical part of the overall effort to reduce community transmission and allow the safe lifting of restrictions in general to be achieved as soon as possible. They also minimise educational disruption, allowing children to remain in school, while also protecting household members, including clinically vulnerable contacts, from onward risk of infection.

This is important both for protecting the health of our children and the staff who look after them, as well as our wider communities. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) infection survey has shown that the number of positive COVID cases among school age children closely tracks school openings, closures and attendance.⁴ After schools opened in England (8th March), the number of children testing positive for COVID-19 increased and by the start of the Easter break, prevalence of infection was higher in school age children than in any other age group.⁵ As more children have been infected, we have seen increased positivity among young adults, and plateauing of declines in infection while schools were open.⁵ Notably, we see reversal of this pattern over Easter break, with declines in prevalence of infection resuming across the UK

following school holiday closure,⁵ further supporting the role of schools in community transmission of SARS-CoV-2.

It is extremely worrying that we saw such marked case rises over March among children, given that schools were only open for a few weeks, and with mitigations such as mask wearing in place for secondary school children (although only recommended when distancing could not be maintained). We note that although there were increases in both primary and secondary school age groups, rises were sharper among primary school age groups, potentially due to mitigations, including masks, in secondary schools reducing the rate of spread. This would suggest that more robust mitigations are needed, rather than removal of one of the few mitigations currently in place. Indeed, evidence from a study of around half a million parents in the US shows that parents of children in school are at higher risk of infection, but that this risk can be mitigated with multi-layered measures, including mask use within classrooms.⁶ Concerningly, we have seen outbreaks of B.1.351, B.1.617 and B.1.1.7 +E484K sub-lineage linked to schools,^{7,8,9} suggesting that school outbreaks are contributing to community spread of these concerning variants.

We also know from ONS data that 10% of primary school age children and 13% of secondary school age children have persistent symptoms even 5 weeks after the initial infection.¹⁰ Between 7-8% have symptoms that persist for at least 12 weeks. We have an estimated 43,000 children, and 114,000 teaching and educational staff living with long COVID, a syndrome whose impact on children and adults long-term is poorly understood.¹⁰ The ONS data indicates that two-thirds of people with long COVID have some degree of limitation in activity,¹⁰ suggesting that the condition has important impacts on people's day to day lives.

Mask wearing is practised widely in both primary and secondary school classrooms in most countries in Europe, US and South East Asia, and recommended as an important mitigatory measure to protect children, staff, families and the broader community. In this context, it is surprising that the UK government which has claimed to be 'following the science' and 'following data not dates', would consider setting an arbitrary date for removing the widely recommended measure of face coverings from its already inadequate set of mitigations in schools, without any reference to 'the data'.

On the 6th of April 2021, the DfE published a statement following their review of evidence, in which they said 'Alongside rapid testing, the available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering reduces the emission of virus-carrying particles when worn by an infected user, helping to protect others.' A little over a week since schools have reopened after the Easter break, it does not seem possible that new evidence of such weight could have emerged to cause the DfE to reverse its conclusions from the 6th of April. Indeed, surveys conducted by Unison on 7,636 staff prior to this review showed support for mask use among teaching and support staff, and high adherence among children.¹¹ Many schools are expecting their clinically extremely vulnerable staff to return to the workplace despite the continuing message to work from home if possible, and recognition that vaccination is not 100 per cent effective. Against

this background any relaxation of mask use would cause great anxiety among the staff and students at greater risk.

While a significant proportion of the UK population has at least received a single dose of vaccine, this is not sufficient to fully mitigate the impact of transmission among children on infection rates in the community. Countries like Israel fully emerged from lockdown after **fully** vaccinating >80% of adults, and only re-opened schools fully in the last few weeks, with mitigations still in place, including mask mandates in classrooms.

Millions of children across the globe wear masks in classrooms every day. There are substantial benefits to wearing masks in schools while significant community transmission continues. Given legitimate concerns about impact on children and families from school closures, we highlight that wearing masks can reduce transmission in schools, which will help ensure that children remain in classrooms and continue in-person education without disruption. Evidence both in the UK and worldwide does not suggest harm of general use to either adults or children, and whilst we acknowledge that it may be more challenging to communicate while wearing masks, and accept that some children and adults may not be able to wear them, it is very clear that the benefits far outweigh any potential risks at the current time. We support mask wearing in schools at this time, with exemptions for children who cannot wear them. Clear face coverings may aid communication. We call on the government to provide clear masks for staff and school children, where needed, in order to aid communication and we support exemptions for children who cannot wear masks.

We urge the government to consider the global and national evidence on current infection rates in schools when making decisions about face coverings in school. These should be continued in schools after the 17th May, with review prior to the next stage of the roadmap on the 21st June. To strip these necessary covid protections, when there are already too few mitigation measures in schools, and when rates of Covid-19 are still significant would have consequences for the health of our children and their parents as well as their communities.

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Caroline Stone, Parent
Bob Corrick, Grandparent
Carolyn Jones, Parent
Max Simpson
Sarah Beauchamp, Parent
Sam McKean BSC (Hons), Parent
Katherine Lethbridge, Parent

Puja Singh, Parent
Jade Richardson, Teacher
Elise Muncaster, Parent
Sarah Philpotts, Parent
Suzanne Horwood, Parent
Lisa Diaz, Parent
Anthony Sleight, Grandparent
Vicki Martin
Ann Beddow, Grandparent
Laura Harvey
Chris Vine, Parent
Dr Luna Centifanti, Parent
J.N. Paquet, Parent
Jasmine Shah, Parent
John Muir, Parent
Lynn Western, Grandparent
Elizabeth, Teacher
Johanne, Parent
Anna Gresty, Parent
Ondine Sherwood
Ibtihal Elshikh, Parent
Emma Craig, Parent
Nicola Hughes, Parent
Caroline Datta, Parent
Tracey Anderton, Parent
Geraldine Patten, Parent
Kay Hammond, Parent
Siaw Yein Ng, Parent
Theoden, Student
Turaya, Student
Lucy Bishop, Parent
Melissa Jordan, Parent
Helen McCartney, Parent
Lucien Chaleyssin, Parent
Melanie Proud, Parent
Sophie Ayling, Parent
Lara Wong, Teacher, and Founder of Clinically Vulnerable (CV/CEV) Families UK
Barbara O'Shea, Parent
Abigail Morris, Parent
Jamie-Lee Moloney, Parent
Emma Pattison, Parent
Christa Hook, Grandparent
Thomas Payne, Teacher
Mahmoud Alkhudary, Parent
Kevin McGrath, Parent
Prof Lyla Mehta, Parent
Alex Clare

Janine Chapman, Parent
Amanda McIntyre, Parent
George Gargan
Emma blanks, Parent
Louise Richards, Parent
Pamela Annund, Parent
K West, Teacher
Nicola Heywood, Teacher
Marti Bowley, Parent
Kirstie Davies, Parent
Steele Stewart
Patricia Wightman, Grandparent
Jessica Kill, Parent
Andy Say, Parent
Elizabeth Bates, Parent
Ian Bentley
Andrew Walls, Teacher
M. M., Grandparent
Paula Williams, Parent
Kate Nethertonm Parent
Vicky Bain, Teacher
Dominic Hems, Parent
J Afton, Teacher
Louise Auty, Parent
Steve Upton
Caroline Scaife, Parent
Laura Rogers, Parent
Roshan Reynolds, Parent
Julie McDonald, Teacher
Andrea Upton, Parent
Alexandra Kathleen DeCozen, Teacher
Nesen surmeli, Parent
Helen Crofoot, Parent
Sue Peters, Parent
Andrea Hill, Grandparent
Irene Tosetti, MD, MBA, Parent
Alison Hicks, Parent
Euan McKean, Parent
Sharon Packer
Kay Lovell, Grandparent
Goran Newsum
Mary Forsythe, Parent
Ekaterina Nosenko, Parent
Elizabeth Keetley, Grandparent
Adriana, Parent
Jonathan Westwood
Annemarie Guest

Tim Wilson, Parent
Caroline Hoile
Sarah Charmley, Parent
Lynn Hancock
Gemma Rogers, Parent
Mary Anness, Grandparent
Neil Laister, Grandparent
Clare Harrison, Parent
Fiona Richardson, Teacher
Royce Barton, Grandparent
Benjamin Dover, Parent
Jeremy Hamway-Bidgood, Parent
Michael Orgel MD
Tim Cox-Brown, Parent
Louise Pearson, Parent
Ciara MacLavery, Parent
A Hobbs, Parent
Cheryl Nielddecrespo, Teacher
Rachel King, Parent
Tiff Housley, Parent
Leonie Barua, Grandparent
R Smart, Parent
Fiona McNeill
Victoria Lewis, Parent
Dr Grace Hurford, Parent
Allison Rowlands, Teacher
Becky Willis
Daniela Nardini, Parent
N Johnson, Parent
Cindy Benton, Parent
Catherine Walton, Parent
Karen Taylor Burge, Teacher
Rachel Weinstein, Parent
Amber Butler, Teacher
Jon Lovell, Parent
P. Ewing
Riccardo Durante
Chris Fellows, CChem,Parent
Rose Stevens, Parent
Sharon Kirkland, Teacher
Ellen Boyle, Parent
Suzanne Parker, Parent
Shelley Spacey, Parent
Cathryn Roberts
Hannah Watson, Teacher
Alison Wake, Parent
Claire Perry, Parent

Zoradi Tucker
Aidan Cross
Mandy Ferrie, Parent
Gordon Pearson, Parent
Carol Lewis, Grandparent
Denise Baker, Teacher
T Boyd, Parent
Mrs Kylie Jensen-Smith, Parent
Pete Matthews
Sophie Gage, Parent
Panya Banjoko, Grandparent
James Heard
Hannah Davies, Parent
Lynne rees
Pauline Woolley
Helen Prior, Parent
Jacquie Steel
Dominic, Parent
Alan Morgan
Mrs F Boniface, Grandparent
Francis Kinsler, Grandparent
Kathryn Goulding, Parent
Alan Wallwin, Grandparent
Matthew Glide, Parent
Melissa Knight, Parent
Andy Weaver
Samantha Stewart, Parent
Sarah Lawes, Teacher
Leo Stewary, Teacher
Tim wright, Teacher
Sue Chubb, Grandparent
Stephanie Wheeler, Parent
Effie Galletly, Grandparent
Bethan Desai, Parent
Jade Ashby-Rozier
Lise Jones, Teacher
Claire Dibble, Teacher
Charlie Morris, Parent
Victoria Stacey-Masters, Teacher
Lucy Chennells, Parent
Joanne, Parent
T M Bridgeman
Claudia Blindauer
Chris Richardson, Grandparent
Sarah, Parent
Martin Corless
Laura Rutherford

Caroline Lea, Parent
Patricia Bentley, Grandparent
Peter Bentley, Grandparent
Pablo Diaz, Parent.
Morgane Cozler, Student
Becca Snow, Student
Daniel Worthington, Parent
Alex Helsby, Deputy Education Convenor Bolton, Unison
L.Benton, Parent
S Pearson parent,
I Allen Grandparent
Carl Chambers , Teacher
O'Connor, Parent
Janis Ward
Amanda Whatley, Teacher
Mrs Abigail Brown, Parent
David Cheesman
Stewart Ford, Parent
James Scrivener, Parent
Nicola Stafford, Parent
Antero Manocchi, Teacher
Catherine, Parent
John Eyre, Teacher
Alan Parkinson, Teacher
Asli Umur
Tom Humphreys, Teacher
Kelly Boazman, Parent
Helen Sherwood, Teacher
Sarah Milner, Parent
Lisa McJury, Parent
Ian Stacey
Karen Tutton, Teacher
Leah Brady, Parent
Lyn Prendergast
Andrew Lister, Teacher
Charlotte Dodson, Parent
Ritt Ster
Helena, Parent
Rob Payne, Parent
Colin Murray, Parent
Ade Adeyemo, Parent
Peter Bentley
Phillippa Williams, Parent
Sue Hillbeck, Teacher
Matthew David Ward, Parent
dorothy walker, Grandparent
Nicola lyden, Parent
Cathy Gallagher

Rebecca McCarter, Parent
Nicola Peltell, Parent
Tom Bosak, BSc (Hons), Student
Ellie Clarke, Parent
Carol Maddalena, Teacher
Sarah Hanagan, Parent
Jane Bonsor, Teacher
Mrs Claire Sealy, Teacher
J RATCLIFFE, Parent
Ian Aldridge, Parent
Rebecca Fitchett, Parent
Helen McKinley-Smith, Parent
Susan McJury, Grandparent
Paul Reeve
Rev Joe Haward, Parent
Luisete Batista, Grandparent
Sarah Smith, Parent
Tuba Bauhofer, Teacher
Andrea Gilbert, Parent
Cecille Edgar, Parent
James Hanner, Teacher
Helena Edwards, Teacher
Jane Preece
Stacey Warwood, Parent
Lucy Glanfield, Teacher
Jacky Seeds, Grandparent
George Ashcroft
Kay Watt, Parent
Stephen Futchler, Parent
Christopher Smith, Grandparent
Cllr Avril Coelho
Jo Boardley, Parent
Alan Smith, Teacher
Carole McKenna, Teacher
Lisa Mountford, Parent
Alice Spencer, Parent
Helen Essex, Parent
Elizabeth York, Grandparent
Himani Simons, Parent
Debbie Doyle
Andrea Whybrow, Teacher
Lisa Dalton, Parent
Bridget Duffy, Parent
Sue Osullivan
Vesna Bozic Taylor, Parent
Sally Millet
Lucy Watson, Parent

Gavin Keir, Teacher
Nadira Petterson, Parent
Sarah George, Parent
Lilit Movsisyan
Theresa chambers, Parent
Alex Loftus, Parent
Anthea Lehmann
Anthony Cassidy, Grandparent
Fiona Bovingdon, Parent
Paul Miller, Parent
Kate Blair, Other
Sally McGill, Teacher
Sophie Malia, Parent
John Stevenson
Linda Toase, Parent
Theresa Irvine
Claire Palmer-Jones, Parent
Mike Cashman, Grandparent
Caroline O'Halloran, Parent
Clare Silcock, Parent
Kathryn Gemmell, Parent
Nicola Heslehurst, Parent
Garry Francis, Teacher
Kathryn Johns, Grandparent
Hilary Stuart
Rachel Clark, Parent
Michael Hopkins, Grandparent
Ruth Waterson, Parent
Paul Brooks, Parent
sally east
Gerry van Talligan, Grandparent
Ann Stapleton
Lorcan Whitehead, Parent
Jennifer Warren, Teacher
Cressida Sparrow, Teacher
Su Lambert
Vicky James, Parent
Dr Trevor Fear, Parent
Claire Hastie, Parent
Ron Osborne
Fiona Kennedy, Grandparent
Maureen Stopford, Grandparent
Olaf Simms, Grandparent
Richard Donkin
helen
Michael Lindsay, Teacher
Ian Smith

kristian culliney, Parent
Akhilesh, Student
Veronika Szentpetery-Kessler, Parent
Isabelle Lee, Parent
Françoise Brewerton, Teacher
Ann Levein
Lindsey McIntosh, Parent
Helen Morrison, Teacher
Lisa Hayer, Parent
Morten Sjaastad, Parent
Robert Brewerton, Parent
Lars Otto Naess, Parent
G F Wilson, Parent
Bex Toogood, Parent
Catherine, Parent
Janet Reilly, Teacher
Helen Ramsey, Parent
vicky welsh, Teacher
Michael Robinson, Parent
Gail Leng, Teacher
Catherine Wilson
Natasha Rickard, Parent
Ian wilson, Teacher
John Chambers, Grandparent
David White, Student
Anna Radcliffe, Parent
Ajith Nair, Parent
Eleanor Davies, Teacher
Naheed Akhtar, Parent
Catherine Maria Vassallo, Parent
Richard Oliver, Grandparent
Bryony Esther