

PE2071/L: Take action to protect people from airborne infections in health and social care settings

Scottish Government written submission, 8 April 2025

Thank you for your email of 10 March 2025 on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in relation to PE2071, regarding a call for the Scottish Government to take action to protect people from airborne infections in health and social care settings.

The Committee has requested that the Scottish Government provides information on:

“how people from high-risk groups are involved in decision making regarding policies to amend or remove protections from airborne infections in health and social care settings.”

In order to fully respond to this request, the Scottish Government has provided detail on both the business-as-usual approach to transmission based precautions guidance, as well as the extended use of facemask guidance issued and withdrawn by the Scottish Government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Transmission based precautions guidance for health and social care settings

As our national clinical infection prevention and control (IPC) experts, Antimicrobial Resistance and Healthcare Associated Infection (ARHAI) Scotland is responsible for providing expert intelligence, support, advice, evidence-based guidance, clinical assurance and clinical leadership in relation to IPC and healthcare associated infections (HCAI).

As noted in our previous letters, the Scottish Government has no role in the development of the National Infection Prevention and Control Manual (NIPCM) or the Care Home Infection Prevention and Control Manual (CH IPCM). ARHAI liaises with other UK countries and international counterparts in the delivery and development of their national priority programmes including the review and updating of the Manual based on new and emerging evidence.

The Scottish Government has engaged with ARHAI Scotland in relation to the recent request from the Committee. ARHAI Scotland have provided the following response:

“ARHAI Scotland are currently recruiting new laypersons into the NIPCM (National Infection Prevention and Control Manual) guidance groups to ensure broad active representation. The NIPCM is publicly available and provides a direct "Contact Us" link and we have received feedback and provided responses to a number of individuals and organisations both advocating for extended mask use as well as those opposing it.

The methods used in the development of the NIPCM have recently been updated, and published, to ensure an open and transparent approach allowing anyone with an

interest to view the evidence base and considered judgements that have been used to inform NIPCM content.

The guidance within the NIPCM is founded on evidence-based practice, balancing risk assessment with ongoing monitoring of national epidemiology. During the winter months, surveillance of respiratory infections informed the Scottish Government's decision to advise local NHS Boards to assess their respective areas and implement appropriate local control measures, such as universal masking where necessary.

We recognise the value of including public perspectives, our primary focus remains on ensuring that guidance is driven by robust evidence, supported by continuous data monitoring. Our approach aims to provide safe and effective infection prevention measures while acknowledging the range of perspectives.”

Please contact ARHAI Scotland if you would like further information on the processes involved in the development and maintenance of the NIPCM. ARHAI Scotland can be contacted at NSS.HPSInfectionControl@nhs.scot

Extended Use of Face Masks and Face Coverings across Health and Social Care Settings

The Scottish Government acknowledges and understands the impact that the publication and subsequent withdrawal of the extended use of facemask guidance has had on a range of people. As we set out in our previous response (sent to the committee on 15 January 2024), decisions in relation to the extended guidance were informed by the epidemiological evidence and an assessment of the risk and harm caused by Covid-19 at the time.

With regards to how high-risk groups were involved in the decision making process in relation to this guidance, this is an area in which the Scottish Government acknowledges that we can, and will, do better. The Committee will understand that in response to the pandemic, policies and guidance were developed rapidly in order to try and protect as many people as possible in society. The process for developing those policies and guidance was streamlined in order to support fast deployment and bolster our pandemic response. It was therefore not possible to engage with all affected groups as part of that process.

However, the Scottish Government has taken account of all the learning from the pandemic in relation to IPC in health and social care settings. We want to ensure that the diverse experiences of the people of Scotland are fully considered. As such, we have started the initial planning for ensuring participation and engagement with the public and undertaking an equality impact assessment in the development of the future 'Infection Prevention and Control Strategy' for Scotland. We will ensure that the voice of those with lived experience is heard as part of how we develop the strategy and any associated policies arising from the Strategy.

I would like to thank you again for requesting this information from the Scottish Government and I hope that you find this response helpful.

Chief Nursing Officer Directorate