

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

2nd Meeting, 2021 (Session 6)

Wednesday, 1 September 2021

PE1858: Provide free face masks for
everyone in Scotland

Note by the Clerk

Petitioners Alex Wallace

**Petition
summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government
to provide free face masks for everyone in Scotland during the
COVID-19 pandemic.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1858>

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 24 March 2021.
2. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. While not a formal requirement, petitioners have the option to collect signatures and comments on their petition. On this occasion, the petitioner elected to collect this information. 26 signatures and 2 comments were collected.
4. The Session 5 Public Petitions Committee agreed to seek advanced views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe B** of this paper.

Scottish Government submission

5. The Scottish Government submission highlights it advocates the use of re-usable face coverings and has provided guidance on how to make these, using widely available household products.
6. In respect of affordability, the submission notes the Scottish Government has committed over £1 billion of additional investment to help local communities and build resilience in public services. Some of this has been used by local partners including the third sector to provide face coverings free of charge to people on low incomes and for particularly vulnerable groups, such as homeless people.
7. The Scottish Government allocated £40 million directly to local authorities, which it advises was for them to tackle financial insecurity and meet need in their local area
8. It also provided an additional £30 million specifically to support people impacted by COVID restrictions and guidance.
9. The submission advises that given the significant impact on the pandemic on household incomes, particularly for those with children, the Scottish Government delivered additional hardship payments for children in receipt of Free School Meals alongside launching the Scottish Child Payment for eligible children under the age of 6. In the coming year, it notes a further £130 [pandemic payment](#) will be made to low income households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, and two £100 [Family Pandemic Payments](#) will be made for each eligible child in receipt of Free School Meals.
10. The Scottish Government state that the accessibility of face coverings has always been a key consideration and its [face coverings guidance](#) recommends the use of re-usable face coverings. It has provided a [video](#) on how to make your own face covering from household products and guidance on how to clean a face covering if you do not have access to a washing machine.
11. Whilst the Scottish Government is not centrally providing face coverings to the general public, local authorities and schools consider how to address any equity concerns arising from the use of face coverings. It also advises that many homelessness outreach teams also provide disposable face coverings and a number of supermarkets and other retailers provide free disposable face coverings.

Action

12. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE01858](#)

Main Petitioner: Alex Wallace

Subject: Calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free face masks for everyone in Scotland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Scotland since early 2020. As part of measures taken to reduce the spread of the virus, face masks or face coverings have been mandated in a number of settings. The petitioner's main concern is that some people are unable to afford to buy masks or face coverings, and will therefore be unable to use some services, go inside shops or use public transport without receiving a fine.

Face masks or coverings are recommended by the [World Health Organisation](#) as a key part of the strategy to prevent virus transmission, especially in enclosed indoor spaces or where two metre physical distancing is not possible. [Research shows](#) that face coverings or masks are effective at reducing virus transmission, and reduce the likelihood of the wearer contracting COVID-19.

Guidance for where and when face coverings or masks must be worn by law in Scotland is [available on the Scottish Government website](#). This includes settings such as shops, takeaways, public transport and workplaces. The [Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Restrictions and Requirements\) \(Local Levels\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2020](#) set out these rules.

A timeline of the pandemic in Scotland including the evolution of the response is available in this SPICe blog: [Timeline of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) in Scotland](#). It has been mandatory to wear face coverings on public transport since 22 June 2020, and in shops since 10 July 2020.

Several types of mask or face covering are permitted. They must cover the nose and mouth. They can include disposable surgical face masks and fabric face coverings which are reusable when washed. Scarves and neck gaiters are also permitted. Failure to wear a mask or face covering can be enforced with a penalty notice of £60 (reduced to £30 if paid within 28 days).

There are exemptions for children under the age of five years, and those who are unable to wear masks or face coverings for medical reasons. These reasons include having a disability (including hidden disabilities such as autism, dementia or learning disabilities) which would make wearing a mask unsafe or cause severe anxiety or stress.

Reasons for exemption **do not** include experiencing mild discomfort or glasses steaming up. The full list of exemptions is [available on the Scottish Government website](#).

Those who are exempt can [request a free exemption card](#) to prove they do not need to wear a face covering or mask.

Members of the public are generally expected to provide their own mask or face covering when required, although some shops or other settings have provided customers with one.

There have been a number of examples where masks have been provided free of charge. In June 2020, [Scotrail provided passengers with free masks](#) for a limited period at major stations after the rules making them mandatory were introduced. Some schools [provide pupils with free masks](#) if they do not have one or forget to bring one. Some charities working with rough sleepers, such as [Streetwork UK](#) in Edinburgh, said they provide masks free of charge to service users who need them.

Some countries have provided masks for free. [In April 2020, the Belgian government](#) pledged to issue everyone in Belgium with a free fabric face covering as part of their lockdown easing plan. In France, people who are at greater risk from COVID-19, and those in receipt of some state benefits, [are entitled to free masks](#).

In Germany, more expensive medical-grade FFP2 masks are mandated in many settings such as shops and public transport. The German Government has provided people over the age of 60 years, and those with underlying health conditions, [with free FFP2 masks during winter 2020-21](#). This is reported to be costing the German government around 2.5 billion euros.

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government has not taken any substantive action to provide free masks for everyone in Scotland.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Scottish Parliament has not undertaken any significant consideration of the matters raised in this petition.

Key organisations:

- [Poverty Alliance](#)
- [Joseph Rowntree Trust](#)
- [Public Health Scotland](#)

Alex Priestley
Researcher
[31/03/2021]

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PE1858/A

Scottish Government submission of 4 May 2021

Summary

The Scottish Government advocates the use of re-usable face coverings and has provided guidance on how to make these, using widely available household products.

In respect of affordability, we have committed over £1 billion of additional investment to help local communities and build resilience in public services. Some of this has been used by local partners including third sector to provide face coverings free of charge to people on low incomes and for particularly vulnerable groups such as homeless people.

This additional funding includes over £140 million specifically focussed on tackling food insecurity, with around £56 million being invested to continue the provision of free school meal replacements during school closures, holidays and periods of online learning. Many food charities supported, in recognition of the requirement to wear face coverings, have provided these free of charge alongside other support provided.

We allocated £40 million directly to local authorities for them to tackle financial insecurity and meet need in their local area, and provided an additional £30 million specifically to support people impacted by COVID restrictions and guidance.

Given the significant impact on the pandemic on household incomes, particularly for those with children, we have delivered additional hardship payments for children in receipt of Free School Meals alongside launching the Scottish Child Payment for eligible children under the age of 6. In the coming year a further £130 [pandemic payment](#) will be made to low income households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction, and two £100 [Family Pandemic Payments](#) will be made for each eligible child in receipt of Free School Meals.

FACTS

The Scottish Governments [FACTS](#) campaign helps us remember the key measures we need to comply with:

- Face coverings in enclosed spaces;
- Avoid crowded places;
- Clean hands and surfaces regularly;
- Two metre distancing; and
- Self-isolate and book a test – if you have symptoms.

Face Coverings

On Friday 23 February 2021, The First Minister announced the updated [Coronavirus \(Covid-19\): Scotland's Strategic Framework](#). This framework sets out how we will work to suppress the virus and presents reflection of the decisions we will need to make.

Scottish Government face covering decisions have been informed by advice from the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) and [Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies \(SAGE\)](#). We continue to apply the advice from WHO, SAGE and other appropriate sources of evidence to inform decisions in Scotland.

Face coverings can provide some protection to the wearer from droplet and aerosol transmission and they can also provide protection to those around the wearer. That's why we have made the use of face coverings mandatory in a large range of indoor public places, including where we know the risks are highest. We have also advised the use of face coverings outdoors where two metre distancing is difficult to maintain. There are a range of exemptions [set out in legislation](#) which describe circumstances in which wearing a face covering can be excused, including health reasons.

All policy is made with the goal of keeping people in Scotland safe and bringing a swift end to the pandemic with as little harm to wider society as possible.

Accessibility and Affordability of Face Coverings

The accessibility of face coverings has always been a key consideration for the Scottish Government. Our [face coverings guidance](#) recommends the use of re-usable face coverings that are two, preferably three, layers thick and we have provided a [video](#) on how to make your own face covering from household products. We have also provided guidance on how to clean a face covering if you do not have access to a washing machine. And we have produced a [video on face covering best practice](#).

While we are not centrally providing face coverings to the general public, local authorities and schools consider how to address any equity concerns arising from the use of face coverings and we are aware that some schools have procured transparent face coverings through Scottish Excel to support deaf children and facilitate lip reading. Our guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in schools states that 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 should take steps to have a contingency supply available to meet such needs.

Many homelessness outreach teams also provide disposable face coverings and a number of supermarkets and other retailers provide free disposable face coverings.

Conclusion

The Scottish Government continues to take an evidence based approach to do all we can to stop the spread of the virus and support those impacted by Covid-19.

In relation to face coverings, we continue to keep our policy and guidance under active review and if appropriate will bring forward further changes in line with emerging evidence.