

Parliamentary Briefing: What plans the government have to review their advice on the wearing of masks in public to address COVID-19

House of Lords short debate, 11 June 2020

NHS Providers is the membership organisation for the NHS hospital, mental health, community and ambulance services that treat patients and service users in the NHS. We help those NHS trusts and foundation trusts to deliver high-quality, patient-focused care by enabling them to learn from each other, acting as their public voice and helping shape the system in which they operate.

NHS Providers has all trusts in voluntary membership, collectively accounting for £84bn of annual expenditure and employing more than one million staff.

Overview

The government has made a series of announcements in recent weeks regarding the wearing of masks in public as it seeks to safely ease lockdown. This includes guidance on 11th May that homemade cloth face coverings could help reduce the risk of transmission¹ and an announcement on 4th June that passengers would be compelled to wear face coverings when using public transport². At the Downing Street press conference on Friday 5th June³, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced that all staff in hospitals in England will be provided with surgical masks, which they will be expected to wear from 15 June. All visitors and outpatients will be required to wear face coverings.

While this shift to compulsory mask wearing for all NHS staff working in any part of a hospital is clearly designed to help ensure staff and patients are protected and feel safe, it is deeply concerning that national NHS leaders neither consulted NHS trusts nor gave them notice ahead of this major shift in policy which they will need to operationalise swiftly. This is the latest in a long line of announcements that have had a major impact on the way the NHS operates during the COVID-19,

¹ HM Government (May 2020) Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 strategy

² Department for Transport (June 2020): Transport Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 4 June 2020

³DHSC (June 2020) Face masks and coverings to be worn by all NHS hospital staff and visitors

with frontline organisations being asked to make significant and complex operational changes either immediately or with very little notice. With just under a week to go until this policy comes into force, trusts are yet to receive guidance on how this measure will be implemented or cast iron guarantees that they will have access to the full supply of type 1 and 2 masks that they need for the foreseeable future.

Compulsory mask wearing for all NHS staff from 15 June

Trusts leaders are committed to doing all they can to protect patients and the staff caring for them. Given that those who are working in health and care settings are more likely to catch coronavirus, whether they work in a clinical setting or not, it is only right that stringent safety measures are put in place to protect NHS staff. Unfortunately, the government's announcement on 5th June which requires all hospital staff to wear Type 1 or 2 surgical mask at all times, in all areas except those areas designated as COVID-secure workplaces, has raised a significant number of questions, which must be answered urgently.

First, despite assurances from the government that it has adequate stocks of face masks to meet demand and that it continues to pursue contracts for additional stock, trusts are questioning whether they will have sufficient supplies of type 1 and 2 masks to cater for hospital staff, patients and visitors ahead of the policy being implemented on 15th June. Given the daily rate at which trusts go through face masks, a sustainable source of PPE must be secured.

This is all the more important because of the major challenges the NHS has faced throughout the pandemic in securing a steady supply of masks and other items of PPE. While most trusts report that they are now regularly receiving the right PPE when they need it, several issues remain, and supply is still not as consistent and reliable as it needs to be. For example, in recent months, trusts have come precariously close to running out of medical face masks.

The government has sought to reassure the NHS that as part of the new guidance for easing lockdown, measures have been put in place to expand PPE supply from overseas, to improve domestic manufacturing capability and to expand and improve the logistics network for delivering to the frontline. This includes a deal to manufacture 70 million FFP2 and FFP3 masks in the UK over the next 18 months⁴.

⁴ Department of Health and Social Care (May 2020) 70 million face masks for NHS and care workers through new industry deal

While this is a welcome long-term initiative, it is essential that the government has sufficient stock levels, both in the short and long-term, to meet trust needs ahead of this new policy being introduced on 15 June.

Secondly, the government has indicated that guidance for hospitals will be published by 15 June to allow hospitals to get stocks and plans in place, and that the guidance will be kept under review. With less than a week to go until this policy comes into force, trusts are rightly asking when this guidance is going to be published. Given the major operational impact this policy will have across the provider sector, the delay in publication of this critical guidance is simply not good enough.

Thirdly, a multitude of questions remain over whether this policy applies to every trust site (for example, does it apply to sites where no patient facing activity takes place) and the frequency with which trusts are expected to supply masks to each member of staff (should this happen on a daily, weekly or fortnightly basis).

These, and many other operational questions, could have been answered had national NHS leaders consulted trust leaders ahead of the announcement being made on 5th June.

Face masks and face coverings

The government makes an important distinction between face masks and face coverings in its announcements on safety measures as lockdown is eased, calling upon the public to opt for face coverings instead of face masks. A face covering is not the same as a surgical mask or respirator, which is used by health and care staff. It is vital that the requirement for face coverings on public transport or in public more generally, does not impact on the availability of medical fluid repellent masks for health; steps must be taken to ensure that NHS mask supply is not jeopardised. Specifically, we are calling for top end fluid repellent to be prioritised for the NHS frontline, which are key to safety and avoiding the spread of coronavirus.

NHS Providers view

Trust leaders play a vital role in shaping and informing how the NHS responds to the COVID-19 pandemic. Important decisions on major operational changes to the way the NHS works should not come as a surprise to those who are expected to deliver them, as happened on compulsory face mask wearing for all NHS staff. It is vital that national NHS leaders consult trust chief executives ahead of major announcements that impact on the NHS in the future.