

Statement on face coverings

With the gradual easing of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, social distancing measures will remain in place for some time. Due to ongoing COVID-19 risks, many people will be wearing face coverings when out in public and when accessing services including schools, shops and hospitals. The use of face coverings is mandatory while travelling on public transport in England.

The use of opaque face coverings (including masks, shields and other items such as scarves secured around the face) will increase communication difficulty for many people, especially deaf and hard of hearing children and adults. We are deeply concerned about the effect of wearing face coverings on communication for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Please be aware that not everyone will understand you while wearing a face covering. Deaf people will not hear or see you speaking. There are reports of deaf people being abused e.g. for not moving aside quickly, because they could not hear or see someone talking to them. It is important to consult and check individual communication needs with the people you are talking to and be mindful of different strategies for communicating in general. Please consider alternative ways of communicating, such as typing in your mobile phone so another person can read your message, or writing with pen and paper. Remember that some deaf people use British Sign Language (BSL) and regularly work with professional BSL/English interpreters. Please remain aware of these different ways of communicating, and incorporate them as part of your growing awareness of social distancing measures.

With regards to face masks or shields, it is important that people use transparent materials (that do not form condensation) wherever possible, so that those who rely on lipreading can continue to access lip patterns and see facial expressions, which convey important messages. Transparent face shields are better than transparent face masks, as they enable the whole of the face to be seen. Transparent face shields are also beneficial for the wider population, because lipreading facilitates understanding of speech in noisy environments and helps communication where one or both of the speakers may not be using their first language. Being able to see each others' facial expression is important for communication and social interactions in general.

Educators, practitioners and medical staff will need to wear transparent face coverings while communicating with deaf and hard of hearing students and colleagues as well as supporting deaf children and adults, and with other individuals who have specific communication needs. Several companies and individuals are making prototypes for transparent face coverings. We strongly encourage engagement and dialogue with our deaf communities about the development of possible solutions. Deaf and hard of hearing people are best placed to advise on design needs and ensure any products are fit for purpose. For example, shields that can easily fit with behind-the-ear hearing aids or cochlear implants, that do not

steam up when talking and keep enough of the face visible, with non-distracting material surrounding the transparent part.

Please note that such adaptations to face coverings are not a solution for everyone. They are not a solution for deaf people who communicate using BSL and use BSL/English interpreters in their daily and work life. It is important that BSL signers continue to be able to access highly qualified and experienced BSL/English interpreters whilst maintaining strict social distancing rules or via video conferencing platforms. It is important that the focus on face coverings does not take away from access for deaf BSL signers. There is a risk that access for deaf BSL signers will be adversely affected by the sustained focus on transparent face coverings.

This statement was jointly authored by deaf and hearing DCAL staff. For further information please contact Dr. Fiona Kyle (f.kyle@ucl.ac.uk).

Footnote: In this statement ‘face coverings’ is used to collectively refer to masks, shields and other items such as scarves secured around the face.