

May 2020

An open letter to all professionals and interested parties in the wider community:



Scan here for BSL (translation)

We are a group of deaf professionals concerned about the impact that wearing face masks, and specifically the lack of transparent face masks, will have on the 12 million deaf and hard of hearing population of the UK.

We would like to be clear from the outset that we recognise the importance of the latest recommendation for the public to wear masks in order to control the spread of the current Covid-19 pandemic. We are not advocating that all current masks are replaced. We also acknowledge that the Government has not insisted upon the compulsory use of masks beyond medical and care settings. However, many people are already choosing to wear face-masks as part of their everyday life, which will have a profound effect on our society.

Our aim is to raise awareness of the social and emotional impact of wearing opaque masks, and to propose that an effective alternative be made available, as and when needed, to facilitate communication with deaf and hard of hearing people.

To achieve this, the following will be needed:

- 1) *Campaign for policy change at government level*
- 2) *Uk based production of transparent masks*
- 3) *Public awareness campaign*

Face masks that are currently being used in medical and community settings obscure half of the wearer's face. This makes communication more difficult, and in many cases, impossible, for deaf/hard of hearing people and others, by preventing lip-reading, muffling speech and masking facial expressions- all of which are key components of communication. It also impacts on the 87,000 deaf adults and children who use British Sign Language (BSL) as their primary mode of communication. Contrary to popular belief, BSL is not simply a language of the hands but also relies on facial expression and body language to convey meaning. Investing in additional listening devices such as loop systems, etc will not in any way be sufficient for a great many deaf/hard of hearing people to overcome the barrier of opaque masks.

We are therefore advocating for 2 types of transparent/'window within a mask' masks to be made available:

Transparent masks that meet the standards of PPE

Transparent masks for general use and in educational and public sectors

If we fail to achieve this, we risk a decline in the physical and mental wellbeing of deaf people of all ages as the current masks will hinder communication in all areas of life, causing confusion, stress, distress and increased isolation.

In the world of work, the wearing of masks will impact a deaf/hard of hearing person's ability to access information required to carry out their roles effectively and safely. Consequently they may be at an increased risk of losing their jobs, or not being employed in the first place. Employers may not understand the need for transparent masks, what types of masks are suitable or how to procure and provide them. The Government, therefore, needs to ensure that all employers receive statutory guidance around masks and communication to ensure they meet their obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

In health and social care settings, compliance to medical or health regimes is heavily dependent on an effective two-way communication between professionals and their clients with regards to diagnosis, treatment, interventions and care. Preventing clinicians from being able to effectively communicate with their deaf/hard of hearing patients places their clients' physical and mental health needs at risk and also raises the question of the validity of informed consent in the presence of poor communication

It is also likely that, with concerns that children are potential vectors for the virus to transmit to adults, people who work with them may also want to wear face masks. This would have an adverse effect on the ability of deaf/hard of hearing children to understand the world around them. This additional physical barrier to communication would undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on their education, social, emotional and mental wellbeing, with long-reaching consequences.

Research has shown that deaf/hard of hearing people are almost twice as likely to have mental and physical health issues compared to the general population. The reasons for this are complex and multifactorial, and beyond the scope of this letter. However it can be said that communication difficulties is a major contributory risk factor leading to the development of mental health issues, be it struggles with daily interactions or obstacles obtaining accessible information and support. Opaque masks will further exacerbate this by making access to the world virtually impossible leading to increased feelings of isolation - the consequences of this will be dire.

There is a risk that some people will be tempted, or be asked, to remove their masks when talking to deaf/hard of hearing people. Current Public Health England guidelines do not recommend touching the front of the mask or removing it in any setting. There is a potential for this to be perceived as an act of discrimination but it is clear that health and safety is paramount.

What are we calling for?

1. For the Government to commit to putting the needs of deaf/hard of hearing people at the heart of any future policies around mask wearing in consultation with deaf people and those working with this population.
2. For textiles and masks manufacturers in the UK to come together with deaf people to design and produce masks that would enable lipreading.
3. A public awareness campaign to explain the need for transparent masks, which takes into account effective communication strategies and government policies.

We therefore urge you to support our campaign to encourage the Government to listen to our concerns and take appropriate action. You can do this by adding your name to this letter, returning a copy to us at deafvoices@icloud.com by Wednesday, 27th May 2020, as well as sharing it far and wide.

We also welcome your individual stories, as real-life experiences are powerful in helping others understand the barriers we face on a daily basis, and how they can help to alleviate this. We attach one such example from a young deaf child who has written to the Prime Minister to express his upset and worries about masks.

Please help us to ensure that the needs of deaf and hard of hearing people of all ages are heard. Help us to show how one small change as a society can make a huge difference.

Kind regards

Shanée Buxton (retired Headteacher, Teacher of the Deaf)
Dr Fatin Izagaren (Paediatrician)
Dr Constanza Moreno (Clinical Psychologist, National Deaf CAMHS)
Lenka Novak (Deaf mental health advisor, National Deaf Services)
Emily Crowe (Support Worker)

Boris Johnson,

I am writing to you to please help me to encourage everyone to try their best to use see through masks or visors. You see Sir, that I am deaf. I have to lip read, to understand what anyone is saying and so do lots of my friends. And lot of other people, they are really helpful.

The masks that cover up the mouths are awful I don't like them, they make me feel sad and lonely because, I can't talk to hear or understand what any body is saying.

From
Austin [redacted]

[redacted]

50 Anning Lane

Please tell this on TV
Please if has to be read later