

Weekly Poll - COVID-19: Face Covering Exemptions

Each week Disability Equality Scotland send out a poll question to our members on a topical issue. For the week beginning 6 July 2020, we asked a question about face covering exemptions.

Results

Question 1. Are you able to wear a face covering?

- YES – 62% (147 respondents)
- NO – 38% (92 respondents)

Question 2. Are you concerned about being judged for not wearing a face covering?

- YES – 89% (178 respondents)
- NO – 11% (21 respondents)

Question 3. Do you fear being the victim of a hate crime if you are seen not wearing a face covering in public?

- YES – 87% (197 respondents)
- NO – 13% (30 respondents)

Comments

The following is a summary of the main themes and key concerns of our members regarding face covering exemptions. We provide verbatim comments where appropriate to illustrate strength of feeling or personal experience.

Discrimination, Abuse and Hate Crime

The majority of respondents were concerned about being judged (89%) or feared being the victim of hate crime (87%) for not wearing a face covering. Disabled people are being challenged for not wearing a face covering and, in some cases, refused entry to retail premises. These actions are demeaning to disabled people and can lead to public humiliation and incidences of disability hate crime.

“I got harassed today at Tesco in Springburn by the security guard. She asked me why I wasn’t wearing a face mask and I said I can’t wear one because of my lung condition and that I don’t need to because of exemptions. She said I was not allowed in without one.”

“I was refused entry to B&Q in Bishopbriggs because I wasn’t wearing a mask. I explained I was exempt and was told by the female employee on the door that I wouldn’t be allowed to enter the store without one.”

“I was very nearly refused to be served in my local fish and chip shop. I walk with crutches and wear a full length caliper on my right leg. I had to explain why I wasn't wearing a mask in the middle of the shop, after being told I wouldn't get served for not wearing one, and was made to wait outside for my fish and chips.!”

Public Transport

There have been specific examples of disabled people being subject to abuse on public transport.

“I have already been verbally abused and told to get a mask on by a passenger on the bus. I can’t wear a mask because of a medical condition and don’t see why I should need to explain myself.”

“One person said I couldn’t get on the bus because I wasn’t wearing a face mask. Thankfully, the bus driver sorted it and told them I was exempt. It is quite intimidating.”

“Having already witnessed hate crime on Edinburgh transport I fear this can only increase.”

Public Awareness

Some respondents believed that a public awareness campaign will help alter the attitudes and behaviours of the general public. We recently launched a campaign to raise awareness of the exemptions that are in place for people who cannot wear face coverings, which can be viewed on our website: www.disabilityequality.scot/face-covering

“There has not been enough public messaging on this. Plenty on social media but nothing on TV.”

“Public attitudes towards disabled people has shifted during Covid-19. I think we are seen as carriers of the virus and putting people at risk. There needs to be a public awareness campaign to correct this perception.”

Stress and Anxiety

The prospect of being challenged and the fear of being the victim of hate crime for not wearing a face covering is the source of stress and anxiety for disabled people. In some cases, this has resulted in disabled people feeling like they are unable to leave their homes, resulting in reduced independence and reliance on others.

“I was all geared up to head out yesterday but couldn't. Panic, anxiety, the fear of being judged. I ended up stuck in the toilet for over an hour. I gave up and couldn't do it. Awful that we are made to feel this way.”

“I don't have a visible disability, but not wearing a face covering marks me out as different and I worry about being challenged constantly, so I won't be shopping much.”

“I am really quite anxious about it all. Since COVID I have found more people to be abusive and stopped going to the shops because people kept questioning me for being out. I am feeling so anxious and lonely and don't think things will ever get back to a good place.”

“I have severe anxiety that will cause really bad distress, and I am really scared that I'll receive abuse or hate crime for not wearing a face covering, and I am not sure what to do about it.”

Communication

A number of respondents highlighted the communication barriers that are created by wearing face coverings. At Disability Equality Scotland we host the Inclusive Communication Hub (www.inclusivecommunication.scot), a website dedicated to guidance and resources to ensure communications are embedded with inclusive principles.

“I rely on facial expression and lip-reading. I do not object to wearing a mask but need others to make an "adjustment" for me. The guidance is poor!”

“Face coverings muffle your voice and I find that when walking my guide dog, you have to speak louder as the dog does not pick-up on commands when using your normal voice level.”

“We need high quality, comfortable transparent face masks to be widely available and used as soon as possible. Until this is done, huge numbers will continue to suffer severe communication disadvantage, which will impact on social inclusion, workplace productivity and mental wellbeing.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the majority of disabled people were concerned about being judged or feared being the victim of hate crime for not wearing a face covering. Respondents shared their experiences of being challenged or refused entry into shops and on public transport. This has resulted in increased stress and anxiety for disabled people. Disability Equality Scotland recently launched an awareness campaign which aims to raise awareness of the exemptions that are in place and help to alter the attitudes and behaviours of the general public towards disabled people in Scotland. You can download our awareness poster and exemption card from our website: www.disabilityequality.scot/face-covering

Disability Equality Scotland, July 2020

About Disability Equality Scotland

Disability Equality Scotland is a national charity working to achieve full access and inclusion for disabled people in Scotland.

We promote access in its widest sense. This includes access to the built and natural environment and access to the same opportunities as are enjoyed by others in our communities thus promoting a life of dignity, respect and independence. This extends beyond physical access to include access to information, access to inclusive communication and inclusion in decision-making, whether with planners over inclusive design or transport providers about accessible travel.

Our aim is for every disabled person to have the opportunity to participate in a fulfilling life and for their voice(s) to be heard. We represent the views of individuals with any type of impairment, as well as disability organisations and groups who share our values.

We are a membership organisation and as such listen to the views of disabled people and champion on their behalf. We work to influence the policies of the Scottish Government, which affect how disabled people live, and work to encourage others to be inclusive and informed in their attitudes towards disabled people.

We are also the umbrella organisation for all disability Access Panels in Scotland and the principal provider of support and guidance to the Access Panels presently representing disabled persons at a local level throughout Scotland. Access Panels are committed to improving access and equality in its widest form, which means access to the physical environment, Education, Housing, Health, Transport, Leisure & Recreation and Social Justice amongst other areas.

Verbatim comments

I feel that it makes me feel safer wearing my face mask and I feel protected from other people. It also makes me feel like of an following the rules and that of am treated the same as other people and not treated differently because of my disability.

I feel like a leper. I was all geared up to head out yesterday but couldn't. Panic, anxiety, the fear of being judged. I ended up stuck in the toilet for over an hour. I gave up and couldn't do it. Awful that we are made to feel this way.

That the doctor/ hospital teams start working with the government to help with official help like cards etc so we don't need a mask.

Live in a tiny village in the Highlands and cannot shop there anymore as both small shops are not even allowing exemptions. Luckily, I can drive and now need to make a 30 mile round trip for a pint of milk.

I have severe asthma and will wear a mask when just going into a shop for papers etc, however, have tried wearing a mask when doing weekly shop and really struggled, my breathing was really wheezy and needed my inhaler. Will order bandana to see if that's better.

I suffer from anxiety I've tried wearing mask but I can't breathe and begin to panic however I'm only young and fear that elderly generation will judge or make remarks if I don't have one I have tried but I end up in a mess cause I get so worked up from it.

I feel stressed only thinking about wearing a mask. I disagree with forcing on healthy people to wear a mask. Simple thing what if someone would face a crime from someone who is wearing a mask. There is no chance to catch this person because the person is covering the face. When you see face you can say something about the person, see something particular

about this person. It's like with fingerprints. This is only one reason but there is a lot more. It is just not normal for people to cover faces.

I have Social Anxiety Disorder and wearing a face mask causes me to feel claustrophobic and have difficulty breathing. I have experienced high levels of anxiety and panic whenever I have tried to wear a mask whilst shopping.

I was refused entry to B&Q in Bishopbriggs because I wasn't wearing a mask. I explained I was exempt and was told by the female employee on the door that I wouldn't be allowed to enter the store without one.

I feel I can't get out and about because of fear of intimidation of not wearing a mask

I get anxiety attack. People judge me for not wearing mask. If am honest am the cleanest person ever. Because I can't wear mask people make me feel like am a bad person or I don't care. Am not going to explain myself to every person. Am sick of it. It's not fair at all. We all should be able to go shops and don't feel stressful but at the moment I get anxiety attack all the time because of face mask.

Hi I suffer from anxiety and panic attack and I really can't wear face mask. I get abused on bus when am not wearing fake mask. This makes me feel even more stressed. I need to go n get food shopping tomorrow and am panicking now they won't let in. Every morning I get very bad anxiety to go out and get bus to work in case people will be horrible to me.

I already have overheard nasty comments about the fact I didn't have a face covering on.

Wearing anything over my face make me feel suffocated and panicked!

I don't have visible disability, but not wearing a face covering mark's me out as different and I worry about being challenged constantly, so I won't be shopping much.

Day 1 of mandatory yesterday and I got verbally abused in Asda (not staff) for not having a face masks on.

I am worried that I will get hassle even though I will be wearing a lanyard saying that I am medically exempt. I am worried that people will force me to wear a mask or make me stay at home when I have no one to help me as I live independently.

Doctor surgeries should be able to supply patients with exemption cards.

I was very nearly refused to be served in my local fish and chip shop. I walk with crutches and wear a full length caliper on my right leg. I have discovered that I can't see where I'm putting my feet, with a face mask on. It makes the risk of tripping and falling huge. I had to explain why I wasn't wearing a mask in the middle of the shop, after being told I wouldn't get served for not wearing one, and was made to wait outside for my fish and chips. Humiliating!

I got harassed today at Tesco in Springburn by security guard. She asked me why I wasn't wearing a face mask and I said I can't wear one because of my lung condition and that I don't need to because of exemptions. She said I was not allowed in without one. The Scottish government has completely failed disabled people and left us facing to discrimination and harassment from store workers This is unacceptable.

I have not been to shops but I am extremely apprehensive about having to be challenged or questioned before entering every shop or on buses. I have ordered an exemption badge and will probably not try until it arrives. There are lots of angry messages on twitter from people re people unable (saying they should just stay home) not helped by previous quote by Mike Russell MSP saying "people should stare down people without face covering" I am frightened I will be challenged by random people adding to anxiety.

I have severe anxiety that will cause really bad distress, and I am really scared that I'll receive abuse or hate crime for not wearing a face covering, and I am not sure what to do about it.

Already myself and 2 girls have been pointed at talked about shouted at for not being able to wear masks and at end of day it's not really anybody business you should not have to explain in less you feel comfortable to do so.

I get grief for being out anyway so not wearing a mask is only going to make it worse.

I am not wearing a "Euan's Guide" badge to point out my disability. What a terrible idea. This takes us right back to the medical modal of Disability. Terrible idea to "badge the disabled people" - please pass this on!

I think there is a perception that disabled people carry a greater risk of spreading the virus.

I'm autistic and wearing a mask is intolerable and can cause me to have a meltdown but because my autism, in the main, is invisible people don't understand and can be rude and aggressive.

People are just so rude and uneducated about disability and this has been heightened by the pandemic.

At a time of national crisis some people seem to have reverted to selfishness and unthought fullness rather than be kind.

These so called face coverings do nothing more than provide a false sense of security and confidence in potentially dangerous social situations. Simple materials as they are made of will stop nothing! A purpose made respirator, effectively sealing the wearer from the outside environment and

contaminants is the only way plus a face shield or goggles to prevent contamination via eyes or skin.

Public attitudes towards disabled people has shifted during Covid-19. I think we are seen as carriers of the virus and putting people at risk. There needs to be a public awareness campaign to correct this perception.

I'm just so scared to go out now and people's attitudes are so cruel towards disabled people.

Glad to see the piece about lip-reading etc as I have a deaf granddaughter. She will not hear people wearing a face mask or be able to lip-read. Her mum is preparing for comments etc.

Neck breather but still think everyone should wear face coverings to protect themselves from others.

It is inevitable that my husband would receive hate crime against him (and I) should he need to remove a face mask at any time to take medication or to relieve distress.

I just know I am going to get grief for not having a mask on.

I am really anxious about using public transport and have a hospital appointment and no other way of getting there as the ambulance service said they can't take me as they are full that day. I can't wear a mask due to breathing difficulties and I am really anxious that people will be rude to me as I have already experienced this at the shops.

Concerned that some may not wear a mask when they should, claiming a non-existent disability. This increases the risk of spreading the infection and may make life difficult for those who genuinely are exempt.

People seem to think that disabled people carry the virus.

Why are disabled people always the target?

I have ADHD, asthma and am a little hard of hearing. Mostly I am fine wearing a mask but there are occasions when I am very uncomfortable doing so. I would like to be able to remove it without fear of being judged.

I can wear one, but I find them horrible. Maybe some pin badges could be sold by the charity to explain "can't wear a face covering" and to raise some funds! There are bound to be some incidents of abuse, which saddens me greatly.

I know that I would get abuse if I don't wear a face covering because people have already been abusive to me at bus stops before the face covering rule came in so this would just give them another opportunity to have a go.

People's attitudes towards disabled people during this crisis have been terrible. It feels like their mindset is on survival of the fittest and disabled people are dispensable.

I have already been verbally abused and told to get a mask on by a passenger on the bus. I can't wear a mask because of a medical condition and don't see why I should need to explain myself.

People don't understand that because you're disabled that doesn't mean you need to shield. They don't understand that disabled people still need to use public transport to go to work.

People's attitudes towards disabled people during COVID has been shocking. I have been verbally abused on several occasions for using the bus to go for essential food.

I am really quite anxious about it all. Since COVID I have found more people to be abusive and stopped going to the shops because people kept

questioning me for being out. I am feeling so anxious and lonely and don't think things will ever get back to a good place. People and the government are more worried about getting a pint and a hair cut than they are about helping disabled people.

Already been victim of hate crime, prejudice, discrimination, ignorance and bigotry through lock down, thankfully I cannot use local public transport so will be spared anything related.

People have been really abusive during lockdown and do t think disabled people should be out the house. I have been challenged several times.

I have COPD and need to be able to breathe without restriction and do not want to be approached because of this.

Many people are not wearing face coverings in public or in shops. in the rural village in Stirlingshire where I live, you would hardly know there is a pandemic,; people are not adhering to the 2 metre rule at all, groups of youngsters walking around abreast of each other and not giving way to anyone walking in the opposite direction, mothers allowing their children to walk ,run, or cycle beside other pedestrians and not keep apart from them at all. Cyclists and joggers/runners passing close by, even though there is plenty of room to keep 2 metres apart on pavements or roads, etc. many ignorant or selfish people.

I agree with you 100 % as to some people, and not just them with disabilities, being unable to wear face masks. Sometimes Joe Public just thinks about number one and jumps in without thinking. They don't even think about the fact that not all disabilities are visible.

I personally have not had issue about wearing face coverings. I am more concerned about those who ignore the guidance. As someone who is shielding I am concerned about people who are refusing to follow the advice with no regard to the health concerns of those around them. The

exceptions made for those in special exemption categories are not the problem.

Most people who will be exempt will be in the current shielding category and therefore should not be out in a position where they would encounter others in close proximity. So the common sense thing to do would not to put yourself or others at risk by going out into unsafe areas.

It is obvious that many people are not wearing face coverings in public places, in shops and on transport. Yet, the risk of being challenged is still there. It will be near impossible to police the attitude by the public, of face coverings.

Investment is required into researching and developing transparent face coverings. We need high quality, comfortable transparent face masks to be widely available and used as soon as possible. Until this is done, huge numbers will continue to suffer severe communication disadvantage, which will impact on social inclusion, workplace productivity and mental well being.

People who are exempt or say they are, should have to show some form of evidence or proof. Too many just don't want to wear face covering and say they are exempt. People with real reason would be willing to prove it.

Regarding fear of hate crime with respect to wearing a face covering or mask, there is irony in that! I have worn a mask from the outset when out in public when no one else did locally, been ridiculed, stared at, received comments about being infectious, outright asked why I was wearing it, told to go home and isolate, told I am putting others at risk, etc. NOW it is clearly fashionable for people to wear pointless pieces of material draped from ear to ear, offering them or anyone else NO protection whatsoever but that is okay now and I no longer get stared at or receive comments!

If I can't wear covering because of breathing/ bleeding issue I tend not to focus on others but it could be an issue if people got abusive.

I think it is important that we wear face coverings in fact I have worn a face covering every time I have left the house this includes going to the park. Or just to the end of the street to get fresh air.

Some people (general public) have already been abusive to me as they assume I should be shielding. A few people have questioned why I am not wearing a mask, not in an abusive way, but I feel it's only a matter of time.

I am a quadriplegic and don't want my carer to have to put a mask on me and it also affects my breathing tube. I have already been verbally abused about being out and there is also one or two people who think it's clever to be abusive towards you.

I am really pretty apprehensive about using public transport now but since my furlough is lifted I don't have any other options to get to work.

As I am a full time carer it important as I know, I am keeping my daughter safe from germs.

There has not been enough public messaging on this. Plenty on social media but nothing on TV.

I wear it when out, in shops and on public transport.

Having already witnessed hate crime on Edinburgh transport I fear this can only increase where, disabled people are exempt from statutory rules, without express permission (a card, letter, or other informed consent) to indicate our exemption. Euan's Guide have gone some way, on producing exemption badges. Will these be universally recognised though?

The last time out one person was saying I couldn't get on the bus because I want wearing a face mask. Thankfully the bus driver sorted it and told them I was exempt. It is quite intimidating.

Particularly from young people who tend to disregard the seriousness of COVID on the elderly and disabled. There also needs to be more clarity on what constitutes a face covering!

Face coverings muffle your voice and I find that when working my Guide dog you have to speak louder as the dog does not pick-up on commands when using your normal voice level.

Can wear face coverings most of the time but not when I need to suddenly take medication for hay fever.

I rely on facial expression and lip-reading. I do not object to wearing a mask but need others to make and "adjustment" for me. The guidance is poor!

Have already been challenged just for being out!