Medical unions urge public to keep wearing masks

Health unions have joined organisations, charities and medical professionals in encouraging the public to keep wearing facemasks now that they are no longer compulsory in most settings in England.

Led by the NHS Confederation, the alliance of bodies is promoting the message that it’s #NotTooMuchToMask and that people should keep protecting themselves and each other from catching or passing on the coronavirus at a time when cases are soaring and hospitalisations are rising.

The campaign asks the public to pledge to continue:

- wearing a face mask or covering, including where not wearing one could make someone feel unsafe;
- doing what they can to keep indoor spaces well-ventilated and opting for meeting outdoors, where possible;
- cleaning their hands regularly, including before and after social contact with those outside their household;
- getting tested, supporting contact-tracing measures and self-isolating, when required; and
- making sure they get both doses of the coronavirus vaccine and that they encourage people they know to do the same.

UNISON general secretary Christina McAnea said: “Rising infections mean more people are falling ill and will need NHS care. Hospital admissions are already back to where they were last autumn. “Wearing masks doesn’t stop anyone from living their lives. But it can help prevent infection spread and limit pressure on the NHS. So, think of NHS staff, and mask up in enclosed or crowded spaces.”

The campaign is led by the NHS Confederation with the support of: NHS Providers, Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, British Medical Association, UNISON, Patients Association, NHS Race and Health Observatory, SAPHNA, Queen’s Nursing Institute, Skills for Health, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, CRUK, Kidney Care UK, Royal College of GPs, Royal College of Midwives, Royal College of...
Paediatrics and Child Health, MacMillan Cancer Support, British Geriatrics Society, Alzheimer’s Society, Richmond Group of Charities, and British Heart Foundation.

Meanwhile the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and British Medical Association have joined the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, British Dental Association and College of Optometrists in making a plea for protective measures to continue in health and care settings.

In a joint letter to the prime minister they say that the public should continue wearing face masks, social distancing and washing hands regularly, while staff must be given the appropriate level of PPE and ventilation in their workplaces.

And the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) and The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which between them represent the majority of NHS staff working in maternity, warned that services face major challenges as restrictions ease in England.

They are worried whether NHS trusts will be able to keep maternity services running at full capacity if infection rates continue to climb. During previous waves, some services had to be limited or completely suspended for brief periods, they say.

Both organisations are asking maternity services users, their families, and friends to continue to exercise caution around mask wearing, social distancing and hygiene when in hospitals and maternity units.

Gill Walton, chief executive of the RCM, said: “Unfortunately there is a small but significant minority who refuse to wear masks or don’t follow social distancing guidance – and abuse staff who ask them to.”

She also advised: “If you can, get vaccinated. It’s safe for you and it’s safe for your baby – and even one dose will give you both some protection, even if you can’t fit both in before you give birth. Getting vaccinated, wearing a mask in crowded places and keeping to social distancing as much as you can are the best ways of keeping yourself and your baby safe.”

These latest moves to ensure that masks continue to be worn, including in healthcare settings, follow weeks of vigorous warnings from unions about the consequence of relaxing anti-Covid restrictions in England (see Fact Service issues 27 and 28).

● General union the GMB has said that its members working for the NHS were appalled by a government announcement that “double vaccinated frontline NHS and social care staff in England who have been told to self-isolate will be permitted to attend work in exceptional circumstances and replaced by testing mitigations”.

Rachel Harrison, GMB national officer, said: “Ministers have no regard for the welfare of staff at all. That’s apparent, as the guidelines only exempt staff from self-isolation to attend work, and not outside of work.”


Employment ‘continues to recover’

The UK’s labour market is continuing to recover, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), with a drop in the quarterly unemployment figures and rises in the number of payrolled employees and in the employment rate. Total hours worked also increased, but remain below pre-pandemic levels.

According to the ONS, the UK employment rate was 74.8%, 1.8 percentage points lower than before the pandemic, but 0.1 percentage points higher than the previous quarter. The unemployment rate was 4.8%, 0.9 percentage points higher than before the pandemic, but 0.2 percentage points lower than the previous quarter.

The number of payrolled employees showed another monthly increase, up 356,000 in June to 28.9 million. However, it remains 206,000 below pre-pandemic levels. For the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, some regions are now above pre-pandemic levels. These include the North East, North West, East Midlands and Northern Ireland.

There were 862,000 job vacancies in April to June 2021 - 77,500 above the pre-pandemic level in January to March 2020, the ONS found. All but one industry saw quarterly increases in their number of vacancies.

Growth in average total pay (including bonuses)
Unions leaders slate government on LGBT+ rights

Leaders from across the UK trade union movement have signed an open letter to equalities minister Liz Truss criticising the government for scrapping its LGBT Action Plan and disbanding its LGBT Advisory Panel.

The letter states: “We urge you to consult with unions on a strategy to make sure workplaces are safe for all LGBT+ people. As a minimum, the government should introduce a new duty on employers to protect workers from harassment by customers and clients.

It should also create a specific duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment. And it should reinstate employment tribunals’ powers to make wider recommendations to employers, to root out systemic failings and cultures of bullying and harassment.

We call for the recruitment of a new LGBT Advisory Panel, with a clear mandate and trade union representation.

We add our voices to those calling for an immediate ban on all forms of conversion therapy, and for a simplified, free, statutory gender-recognition process, based on self-declaration.

We look to the government not only to promote equality and eliminate discrimination against LGBT+ people but also to take a principled lead in building an inclusive culture in words and deeds that supports LGBT+ people’s safety, dignity and equality so that LGBT+ people can thrive and live authentically.”

Union wins post office closure freeze

The Communication Workers’ Union (CWU) has announced the winning of “a vital breathing space” in its struggle to save crown post offices, in the form of an agreed moratorium on closures for the rest of 2021. The agreement with the Post Office also commits both sides to top-level talks aimed at establishing a long-term strategy for the network.
“This is a crucial opportunity to fundamentally shift the direction of the Post Office,” CWU assistant secretary Andy Furey commented. “Through a combination of public pressure, political lobbying and campaigning plus persuasion, we’ve managed to secure this moratorium until the end of 2021.”

Since 2012, the number of crown post offices has fallen from 373 to 114. Some have been closed completely, according to the union, but the majority have been effectively privatised through franchise to retailers.

“We’ve opposed, argued against and fought against this privatisation all the way, including bouts of strike action,” Furey continued, “but although we’ve won some notable victories, it’s been an incredibly difficult uphill struggle for us industrially.

“What’s made a difference here, I believe, has been the relatively high public profile of the UK’s post office network and service, and the consequent public disquiet at what’s happened.”

Unions watching out for Covid compliance

Transport and retail unions have welcomed the retention of some anti-Covid restrictions – even though they may not be legally enforceable.

Train drivers’ union ASLEF backed the announcement by the mayor of London that face masks will remain compulsory on London Transport, but pointed out that, without legal enforcement, there will still be the potential for challenges and disruption.

The TSSA warned of “deadly freedoms”. It said that in the rail industry no control measures for employees will be removed until a joint risk assessment is completed, with no changes expected this week. Rail staff will continue to wear face coverings, maintain social distancing, and protections such as screens and heighted cleaning regimes remain in place, the union stated.

The RMT said that what was needed was high level talks with the government, the unions and the industry focussed on mandatory mask wearing, clear and enforceable systems of protection and agreements on test and trace, pinged alerts and the use of testing for key workers and services.

Meanwhile, shopworkers’ union Usdaw welcomed what it believed are early indications that retailers are keeping important safety measures to help reduce the spread of Covid. It called on the whole retail industry to follow these leads and avoid customer confusion, and for the shopping public to abide by the rules and respect shopworkers.

Specialists’ union Prospect has issued guidance to reps in response to the easing or planned easing of restrictions in the nations of the UK. It recommends several key actions, which include:

- a precautionary approach should be taken;
- risk assessments should be reviewed;
- the return of staff should be planned and controlled;
- flexible and hybrid working should continue where staff want it;
- it is recommended that social distancing measures are retained in workplaces and considered as part of any joint risk assessment;
- masks and face coverings should continue to be used in public areas of buildings and areas which have poor ventilation or air circulation;
- ventilation standards should be reviewed;
- screens should be retained, in particular where staff are face-to-face;
- hand sanitisation and effective cleaning should continue;
- consideration must be given to supporting and protecting those who are clinically vulnerable and extremely clinically vulnerable;
- support should be available from employers for those suffering with long Covid;
- individual risk assessment discussions should take place with those whose health is most at risk due to Covid;
- arbitrary attendance targets should be opposed;
- any guidance issued alongside the risk assessment should consider how staff travel to work; and
- staff should have the confidence and support of their employer to remove themselves from potentially hazardous situations.