



# Westcountry Schools Trust

## Rationale for Face Covering Recommendation

### Introduction

All schools and colleges will open fully from Monday 08 March 2021. Returning to school and college is vital for pupils and students' education and wellbeing.

We know that the predominant new variant of coronavirus (COVID-19) is more transmissible; however, Public Health England (PHE) advice remains that the way to control this virus is with the system of controls, even with the current new variants. We are further strengthening these measures to provide more reassurance and to help decrease the disruption the virus causes to education.

Implementing the system of controls creates a safer environment for staff, pupils and students where the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) infection is substantially reduced.

The use of face coverings in recommended circumstances is one element of the system of controls and must be implemented in line with other guidance.

This is a temporary measure in England and will be reviewed at Easter, in partnership with health experts, to decide whether evidence suggests that these measures can be eased ahead of the summer term.

This is guidance, not mandatory activity, and any legal exemptions that apply to the wearing of face coverings in shops and on public transport also apply to this advice.

To view the full guidance produced by the Department for Education, in conjunction with Public Health England and endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer, please follow this link: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/965446/Face\\_coverings\\_in\\_education\\_-\\_March\\_2021.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/965446/Face_coverings_in_education_-_March_2021.pdf)

### What a face covering is

In the context of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, a face covering is something which safely covers the nose and mouth. You can buy reusable or single-use face coverings. You may also use a scarf, bandana, religious garment or hand-made cloth covering but these must securely fit round the side of the face.

Face coverings are not classified as PPE (personal protective equipment), which is used in a limited number of settings to protect wearers against hazards and risks, such as surgical masks or respirators used in medical and industrial settings.

Face coverings are instead largely intended to protect others, not the wearer, against the spread of infection because they cover the nose and mouth, which are the main confirmed sources of transmission of virus that causes coronavirus infection (COVID-19).

### **When to wear a face covering in education**

The World Health Organisation published a statement on 21 August 2020 about children and face coverings. They advise that “children aged 12 and over should wear a face covering under the same conditions as adults, in particular when they cannot guarantee at least a 1-metre distance from others and there is widespread transmission in the area.”

For further information please follow this link: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-children-and-masks-related-to-covid-19>

Where pupils and students in Year 7 and above are educated, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff, pupils and students when moving around the premises, outside of classrooms, such as in corridors and communal areas where social distancing cannot easily be maintained.

Face coverings do not need to be worn by pupils and students when outdoors on the premises. However, each WeST secondary school has different infrastructure constraints, and as a consequence there may be some local variation on this according to risk.

In addition, we now also recommend that in those settings where pupils and students in Year 7 and above are educated, face coverings should be worn in classrooms and during activities unless social distancing can be maintained.

This does not apply in situations where wearing a face covering would impact on the ability to take part in exercise or strenuous activity, for example in PE lessons.

In primary schools, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and adult visitors in situations where social distancing between adults is not possible (for example, when moving around in corridors and communal areas).

Children in primary school do not need to wear a face covering.

### **Exemptions**

Some individuals are exempt from wearing face coverings. This applies to individuals who:

- cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical impairment or disability, illness or mental health difficulties.
- speak to or provide help to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expression to communicate (However, staff safety should be considered here).

The same exemptions should be applied in education settings, and we would expect teachers and other staff to be sensitive to those needs, noting that some people are less able to wear face coverings and that the reasons for this may not be visible to others.

## Factors supporting the recommendation of the use of face coverings for all adults and secondary pupils in communal areas and classrooms:

1. WHO and UNICEF advise that children aged 12 and over should wear a face covering under the same conditions as adults, in particular when they cannot guarantee at least a 1-metre distance from others and there is widespread transmission.
2. The wearing of face coverings in classrooms and communal areas is also recommended by the Department for Education, in conjunction with Public Health England and is fully endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer for England and the UK government's Chief Scientific Advisor.
3. There are at least three new Coronavirus variants in the UK since December 2020 (known as the Kent, South African and Brazilian strains). These new strains are up to 70% more transmissible, and there is some evidence that they may result in a slightly increased mortality. Due to the increased infectiousness, the 'system of controls' that existed within English schools in December requires further strengthening. The two key aspects of this strengthening are rapid flow testing and wider use of face coverings.
4. There is now stronger evidence that older teenagers are able to spread the virus at a rate similar to that seen in adults.
5. We now know that 'aerosol transmission' through breathing, talking and shouting plays a significant part in the spread of the virus. There is also increasing evidence that the wider use of face coverings does reduce the level of risk associated with aerosol transmission.
6. SAGE estimate that the re-opening of schools will increase community transmission and increase the R-rate. Face coverings are one strategy that will contribute to reducing the impact of school re-opening.
7. As full attendance is required by the DfE, it is impossible in secondary classrooms to maintain at least 1m+ between pupils. The average classroom will have approx. 30 people together, all from different households, in a comparatively small space – this will usually be for around 60 minutes at a time.
8. Ventilation and air circulation are a challenge in most schools, especially during very cold weather.
9. Each positive case in a school, results in 'bubble collapses' and isolations of both pupils and teachers, further disrupting face-to-face education for children. Reducing the number of potential isolations is vital to ensuring children remain in school.
10. There will be high levels of anxiety for many pupils and staff about a full return. A robust 'system of controls', which includes the recommended use of face coverings and rapid testing, increases public confidence.

## Potential concerns

- Some pupils and staff will find wearing a face covering distressing.
  - **Mitigation:** The wearing of face coverings is not mandatory. No pupil or member of staff will be forced or pressurised to wear a face covering.
- Pupils or staff that are hearing impaired, or rely on visual cues, will be negatively impacted by the use of face coverings in classrooms.
  - **Mitigation:** Those who rely on visual signals for communication, or communicate with or provide support to such individuals, are currently exempt from any requirement to wear face coverings in education settings or in public places.

- **Mitigation:** Alternatives or workarounds should be explored to ensure that SEND needs are met, whilst balancing the safety of others. This could include:
  - Providing, where appropriate, a member of staff with a clear face covering
  - Producing handouts/copies of presentations to convey key information
  - Recording a video where it is possible to lip read etc...
- Potential for face coverings to impact on the mental health of some pupils and staff.
  - **Mitigation:** The wearing of face coverings is not mandatory. No pupil or member of staff will be forced or pressurised to wear a face covering.
  - We know that the long-term closure of schools does impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Re-opening schools is seen a national priority. However, nationally there is still widespread community transmission at this time. The DfE and PHE are recommending face coverings and rapid testing to enable schools to re-open and stay open. This will significantly benefit the mental health and wellbeing of pupils.
- There are a number of 'myths' that exist around the use of face coverings that are propagated widely through social media. These include severely restricting oxygen in the lungs, harm to the immune system and high carbon dioxide toxicity.
  - **Mitigation:** These claims have been extensively 'debunked'. Face coverings are not classed as 'tight-fit' PPE and under normal conditions can be worn by most people. However there are some circumstances where people are advised not to wear them and this includes: people with respiratory conditions who may struggle to breathe or when people are exercising.

## Conclusion

We recognise that use of face coverings is a divisive issue. On one hand some members of our school communities will feel that the use of face coverings in school is unnecessary, cruel or infringing on human rights. On the other hand, some will feel that because they are not 'mandatory', we are failing to ensure adequate safety measures. We also recognise that are contrasting views on this from medical professionals, scientists and politicians.

**Overall, based on the considerations in this document, we will recommend the use of face coverings in WeST secondary schools in both communal areas and classrooms when we re-open on Monday 08 March 2021.** This decision is backed by the Department for Education, Public Health England, The Chief Medical Officer for England, The UK government's Chief Scientific Advisor, The World Health Organisation and UNICEF. This is a recommendation and no pupil or adult will be forced or pressured into wearing a face covering.