

Edinburgh Local Association

Reasons for raising grievance about lack of FFP2 masks

Edinburgh EIS has, for some time, been asking that school staff be given the option to wear FFP2 face masks, as an alternative to the currently supplied face coverings and fluid resistant surgical masks.

Following on from several discussions and email exchanges where we were explaining why many school staff wanted to have these masks available, we more formally outlined some of the reasons why we feel this would be an appropriate mitigation in a paper submitted to CEC on 16th March. This is attached to this grievance for ease of reference. On 30th March, we received an email that refused this request – again, this is attached. This email did not actually address many of the matters we had raised, and we feel there are valid counterarguments to the those points it did contain. Further, since communicating CEC's refusal to EIS members, some people have raised other reasons why they feel their employer has a duty to make these masks available. The following is a brief summary of the key reasons why we feel aggrieved and call on CEC to reverse its decision.

- It would seem to be the case that the main reason given by CEC for not complying with this request is that national guidance does not mandate their use, and that CEC's duty of care is fully discharged if it complies with national guidance. The EIS refutes this.
 - The national guidance is a set of minimum required standards. There is nothing to stop any employer exceeding those standards and making an enhanced offer to its employees
 - Even were one to accept that the national guidance is correct (which we do not – see attached paper, and below) it makes no reference to psychological distress and anxiety. The blunt fact is that many staff are very worried about potential exposure to the virus – in some cases that worry is significantly impacting on their health, wellbeing, and ability to discharge their duties. Providing FFP2 masks, which offer enhanced personal protection from infection to the wearer, would go some way towards mitigating that worry, offer some comfort to staff and thus is a reasonable request to make of our employer.
- The national guidance quoted by CEC states that:

The Sub-group view was that such a requirement was not commensurate with the risk in school settings, and that cloth face coverings, when combined with the other, more important, mitigations of physical distancing and hand hygiene, were considered appropriate in schools.

Further, at its meeting on 1 March, the Advisory Sub-group considered whether the wearing of type IIR face coverings should be advised for secondary school staff. In light of the absence of evidence that school staff are more likely to

become infected or become seriously ill, and recognition that schools are relatively low risk environments as long as mitigations are applied and community transmission suppressed, the sub-group advises that standard face coverings, rather than type IIR, remain appropriate for secondary staff.

The reality is that, in many CEC schools, it is very difficult to observe the other mitigations, particularly physical distancing. In some cases this is due to the nature of working with children, and in others due to crowded buildings, small classrooms etc. There are ongoing issues with ensuring adequate ventilation (at the time of writing, we still have not had confirmation of when CO₂ monitors will be delivered to schools – this despite there having been a full return of all primary pupils for several weeks – which makes it hard for staff to check whether ventilation is adequate. Staffing pressures mean bubbles are difficult, if not impossible to maintain. And surely everyone can appreciate that not all children are good at maintaining hand hygiene, no matter how much they might be encouraged in this... Thus, it would seem only logical to strengthen those mitigations that are easy to enhance, such as higher-grade face masks, so as to provide an extra layer of protection.

- As is widely recognised, and is outlined in more detail in the paper we submitted, face coverings are designed to reduce virus *transmission* – they are a collective measure whose efficacy is predicated on full compliance, and which offer limited protection to the wearer. Not everyone in schools can, or does, wear face coverings. Several secondary schools have reported that many pupils will not wear coverings, and in some schools there will be staff who are exempt. This reduces their impact as a mitigation.
- FFP2 masks are designed to reduce *infection*. They offer much higher protection to the wearer. This is why so many staff feel they should be made available, so that they have protection in their workplace.
- Since the beginning of 2021, nearly 100 Edinburgh school staff have tested positive for COVID-19 (it is likely that, by the time this document is read, the total will have exceeded 100). It should be remembered that, for a large fraction of this time, most pupils were learning remotely, and even now secondary schools are not fully reopened for in-school learning. If FFP2 masks prevented even a small percentage of those infections, that would be a massive gain: it would reduce costs to the council (cover, sick pay); it would reduce disruption to learning and teaching; it would reduce knock-on impacts on others having to self-isolate; it would reduce anxieties amongst staff in schools where people do test positive (for obvious reasons, concerns spike when colleagues become infected); it would reduce long-term costs linked to potential cases of Long-COVID. And all this is aside from the moral imperative to take reasonable steps to prevent employees becoming ill.
- Some staff have reported that they find FFP2 masks more comfortable to wear. Whilst this is certainly not going to be true for all, giving staff a choice of different masks and coverings, so that they can select the one

that suits them best, will enhance compliance and make it easier for staff to be able to wear them for the extended periods required.

- Some local authorities have made the decision to make FFP2 masks available to their school staff. CEC's refusal to follow this example reinforces the views of some that, whilst CEC's *rhetoric* around valuing the contribution of education staff is strong, the reality is very different.
- It has been pointed out by several EIS members that the decision to refuse to offer this enhancement has been made by people who are themselves working from home. There is genuine anger over this, and a feeling that senior managers are completely unaware of the reality of day-to-day working in schools. Teachers are spending hours every day in small rooms with, often, more than 30 other people. They are often working with children who cannot, or will not, physically distance, and who may present with behaviours (spitting, biting, toileting issues etc) that further increase risk. Surely it is only natural that this leads many staff to feel afraid? Even if the Scottish Government's assertions about schools being low risk environments are true (and many health experts dispute their reading of the statistics), the psychological strain of working in environments that are so at odds with what applies in so much of the rest of society are huge. And yet, when we ask for a simple additional mitigation that would go some way to alleviating that strain for some employees, that is refused. Frankly, most staff – even those who do not themselves feel the need to wear FFP2 masks – find this baffling.