

## Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

**Petition Number:** [PE1858](#)

**Main Petitioner:** Alex Wallace

**Subject:** Provide free face masks for everyone in Scotland

Calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free face masks for everyone in Scotland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Scotland since early 2020. As part of measures taken to reduce the spread of the virus, face masks or face coverings have been mandated in a number of settings. The petitioner's main concern is that some people are unable to afford to buy masks or face coverings, and will therefore be unable to use some services, go inside shops or use public transport without receiving a fine.

Face masks or coverings are recommended by the [World Health Organisation](#) as a key part of the strategy to prevent virus transmission, especially in enclosed indoor spaces or where two metre physical distancing is not possible. [Research shows](#) that face coverings or masks are effective at reducing virus transmission, and reduce the likelihood of the wearer contracting COVID-19.

Guidance for where and when face coverings or masks must be worn by law in Scotland is [available on the Scottish Government website](#). This includes settings such as shops, takeaways, public transport and workplaces. The [Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Restrictions and Requirements\) \(Local Levels\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2020](#) set out these rules.

A timeline of the pandemic in Scotland including the evolution of the response is available in this SPICe blog: [Timeline of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) in Scotland](#). It has been mandatory to wear face coverings on public transport since 22 June 2020, and in shops since 10 July 2020.

Several types of mask or face covering are permitted. They must cover the nose and mouth. They can include disposable surgical face masks and fabric face coverings which are reusable when washed. Scarves and neck gaiters are also permitted. Failure to wear a mask or face covering can be enforced with a penalty notice of £60 (reduced to £30 if paid within 28 days).

There are exemptions for children under the age of five years, and those who are unable to wear masks or face coverings for medical reasons. These reasons include having a disability (including hidden disabilities such as autism, dementia or learning disabilities) which would make wearing a mask unsafe or cause severe anxiety or stress.

Reasons for exemption **do not** include experiencing mild discomfort or glasses steaming up. The full list of exemptions is [available on the Scottish Government website](#).

Those who are exempt can [request a free exemption card](#) to prove they do not need to wear a face covering or mask.

Members of the public are generally expected to provide their own mask or face covering when required, although some shops or other settings have provided customers with one.

There have been a number of examples where masks have been provided free of charge. In June 2020, [Scotrail provided passengers with free masks](#) for a limited period at major stations after the rules making them mandatory were introduced. Some schools [provide pupils with free masks](#) if they do not have one or forget to bring one. Some charities working with rough sleepers, such as [Streetwork UK](#) in Edinburgh, said they provide masks free of charge to service users who need them.

Some countries have provided masks for free. [In April 2020, the Belgian government](#) pledged to issue everyone in Belgium with a free fabric face covering as part of their lockdown easing plan. In France, people who are at greater risk from COVID-19, and those in receipt of some state benefits, [are entitled to free masks](#).

In Germany, more expensive medical-grade FFP2 masks are mandated in many settings such as shops and public transport. The German Government has provided people over the age of 60 years, and those with underlying health conditions, [with free FFP2 masks during winter 2020-21](#). This is reported to be costing the German government around 2.5 billion euros.

### **Scottish Government Action**

The Scottish Government has not taken any substantive action to provide free masks for everyone in Scotland.

### **Scottish Parliament Action**

The Scottish Parliament has not undertaken any significant consideration of the matters raised in this petition.

**Alex Priestley**  
**Researcher**

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