

Face Coverings Webinar

Summary report



Introduction

Face coverings became mandatory in Scotland on public transport on 22 June and in shops from 10 July. Not everyone can wear a face covering. This webinar was to discuss the issue of exemptions for those who cannot wear a face covering. Disability Equality Scotland worked in collaboration with transport providers and Police Scotland to present this discussion. The event took place digitally using the Zoom platform on 30 July 2020 in line with physical distancing guidelines for COVID-19.

There were 40 people in attendance. This report summarises the discussions at this event.

Background

In July 2020, Disability Equality Scotland ran a weekly poll on face covering exemptions. People are exempt if:

- They have a disability or health condition that means they cannot put a covering on.
- A covering will cause them severe distress
- They need to communicate with someone who relies on lip reading
- Or if there's a reasonable need for them to eat, drink or take medication while out.

We discovered that a significant number of disabled people were concerned about being judged for not wearing a face covering (89%) and specifically, 87% were fearful of being the victim of a hate crime if they were seen not wearing a face covering in public.

Our research revealed that disabled people were being confronted by members of the public for not wearing face coverings. As an organisation, Disability Equality Scotland believe this behaviour is completely unacceptable and must not be tolerated. This led us to launch a social media campaign, with the aim of reminding the general public that not everyone can wear a covering, and this included making our own

exemption cards which are available to those who feel more confident with something tangible to show, if challenged.

We wanted to explore some of the ways that transport providers are promoting the message of exemptions, how incidents of hate crime could manifest in these circumstances and how we should be mindful of inclusive communication. This paper summarises the discussion.

Panel discussion

Emma Scott, from Disability Equality Scotland set the context of the day and introduced the panel speakers:

- Robert Burns, Stakeholder Engagement Officer, FirstBus
- Seumas Campbell, Customer Service Director, NorthLink Ferries
- James Davidson, Communication and Research Coordinator, Disability Equality Scotland
- Police Constable Stephanie Rose, Safer Communities Team, Police Scotland

Key discussion points

Promoting the message of exemptions on public transport

FirstBus has recognised that not everyone can wear a covering and have been promoting this message widely on their social media. FirstBus has introduced a 'better help to travel' card which carries a specific message 'I am exempt' which passengers can discreetly show to the driver. FirstBus will also accept Thistle Assistance and Disability Equality Scotland's exemption cards, taking a 'common sense' approach recognising that if someone has an exemption card of any kind, they will recognise it.

NorthLink passengers are directed to wear a face covering, but if staff are told 'I am exempt' then they will not challenge further. NorthLink recognises the Thistle Assistance Card and the Sunflower lanyard scheme as indications of exemption.

Travelling without a face covering

As the wearing of a face covering is mandatory, FirstBus staff will challenge those not wearing a covering, but the primary objective is to get everyone to their destination safely. FirstBus staff do not have the power to prevent anyone without a face covering from travelling but a slip will be issued as a reminder that coverings are mandatory and there could be fines for non-compliance.

FirstBus has been able to gather feedback from drivers, passengers and stakeholders about some geographic 'pockets' where there is low uptake of face coverings. FirstBus can then target these areas to reinforce the education message via their Street Team who travel on services on a 'turn up and check' basis, offering advice and reiterating the message.

Transport providers clarified that there are health and safety reasons why they cannot offer free face coverings to passengers. The onus is on the passenger planning to travel on a service and come prepared.

Fear of being a victim of hate crime

Police Scotland explained that a hate crime is where you are targeted because a person shows hostility and prejudice towards you because of your disability. The impact of hate crime is huge, and Police Scotland acknowledged that many people are fearful and do not wish to leave the house.

Disability Equality Scotland has received numerous calls and messages from disabled people who have been subject to abuse during lockdown. In order to raise awareness, Disability Equality Scotland put out a call to action to members to report incidents of hate crime, which we can present as case studies on our Disability Safety Hub in a relatable manner.
(www.disabilitysafety.scot)

Awareness of incidents on services

Transport providers are aware that there are some incidents that occur on their services as a result of disabled people being challenged by other passengers for not wearing a covering. This is also prevalent on social media, where comments are left by passengers about those not wearing coverings on particular services.

On NorthLink, there are some staff members who are exempt from wearing a face covering and they have been subject to abuse from passengers.

NorthLink have a system of reporting passenger behaviour; those refusing to comply would receive a reminder of their obligation in writing and an indication that their right to travel could be refused if they do not comply.

Police Scotland reiterated that people should not directly challenge other members of the public for not wearing a face covering. If something is giving cause for concern, to make staff aware. If you are being targeted, you should get yourself to a safe place and alert staff. If you feel a crime has been committed, then contact Police Scotland.

Enforcement of face coverings

Police Scotland won't ask those not wearing a face covering to explain themselves or prove their exemption. The Chief Constable's approach is to encourage people to take responsibility where they can, and to wear a face covering.

Police Scotland will firstly engage with people, explain the guidance and legislation and why it is important, encouraging the voluntary wearing of a face covering. The final stage is enforcement. There is a gradual scale of fines depending on whether it is your first or second fine.

The Panel responded to a question about the misuse of exemption cards, for example someone falsely claiming to be exempt, to avoid wearing a covering. Neither Police Scotland nor transport providers have the mechanisms to identify fraudulent use of exemption cards, but in general providers report high levels of compliance in wearing a face covering, so it

appears the risk of abusing the exemption is negligible, especially when weighed against the benefits of trusting that people are exempt.

Inclusive communication

Face coverings present significant challenges to those with hearing impairments. Many rely on facial expressions and lipreading and those commanding guide dogs find their speech is more difficult to hear when wearing a face covering.

One in five people in Scotland have some level of hearing loss. There are a number of organisations producing transparent face coverings with clear panels so that the mouth remains visible. There are also shields and visors available.

There are exemptions in place though, so if you are travelling and providing assistance to someone who relies on lipreading you are not required to wear a face covering.

FirstBus staff continue to utilise the clear safety screens of the driver's cab. The drivers are used to communicating clearly with anyone who needs to lipread. For NorthLink, the vessels are prioritising the fitting of safety screens.

Police Scotland has issued guidance to all officers about considering accessibility, that not all disabilities are visible and not to make presumptions about why people are not wearing face coverings. Every police officer in Scotland received the guidance, including the approach that people are not to be asked to prove their exemption.

Police officers will ask the individual which communication method works best and will try to implement alternative methods of communication where possible.

Disability Equality Scotland July 2020