

Sir Simon Stevens  
Chief Executive  
NHS England  
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14 May 2020

**Re: Commissioning of clear face masks and visors/shields for use with deaf patients, and accessible health information for deaf patients.**

Dear Mr Stevens,

This letter concerns the increased use of face masks in response to the spread of Covid-19, and the impact this has on deaf people who rely on seeing a person's mouth in order to understand them and communicate with them. We are writing in our capacity as organisations that represent and support deaf children, young people and adults with varying levels and types of deafness and deafblindness. There are 11 million people in the UK who are deaf or hard of hearing and 390,000 people who are deafblind.

We understand that, particularly in health settings, masks provide essential protection for staff. However, we are seriously concerned that deaf people are experiencing a very significant barrier to communication, which can lead to potentially dangerous situations.

Communication for virtually all deaf people, including those who use sign language, relies in part on being able to see someone's face clearly – whether this is for lip-reading, understanding facial expressions or for understanding non-verbal communication more widely (e.g. seeing whether someone is smiling or looks upset). An obstruction to the mouth makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a deaf person to understand what is being said. Face masks also have the effect of obscuring and muffling speech, making it harder for deaf people to make use of any residual hearing that they have.



**We are the National Deaf Children's Society,  
the leading charity for deaf children.**

Chief Executive: Susan Daniels OBE | President: Sir Christopher Benson FRICS DL  
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This problem is also affecting deaf NHS staff, as discussed in a recent article<sup>1</sup> for the British Medical Journal, by deaf doctors Helen Grote and Fizz Izagaren.

In light of these concerns, we urge NHS England to review the commissioning and availability of protective face masks and visors/shields for use in health settings.

Clear face masks would certainly help, by allowing deaf people to lip-read and to access more visual cues. Clear face visors/shields, making it possible to see the whole face, would make it easier still. Research indicates that visors/shields also help to reduce anxiety among patients<sup>2</sup>.

This is of particular importance in settings where the primary audience is deaf people, e.g. Deaf Mental Health services or audiology services.

We very much hope that NHS England will give this serious consideration and would be happy to support work in this area.

More widely, we ask NHS England to remind health professionals of the need for accessible health information and communication, in line with the existing Accessible Health Information standard.

We know that deaf people already miss out on key health information, and we fear that the use of face masks is worsening this situation. It is critical that deaf people are able to understand health professionals and that reasonable adjustments must be made. For instance, for deaf people who use British Sign Language, relay services are now available to ensure immediate access to an interpreter. It should also be noted that if deaf people are not confident they will be understood, they may be less likely to report any health issues to their GP – leading to dire consequences as illnesses go undetected or are diagnosed too late for meaningful intervention or treatment.

Separately, we have also written to Duncan Selbie at Public Health England about ensuring the guidance for the general public includes a reference to the issues faced by deaf people, and some simple strategies that can be adopted to communicate with deaf people while wearing a mask.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/05/07/push-universal-mask-wearing-communication-needs-deaf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5015006/>

We would appreciate a response to this letter and the points raised as soon as practically possible. Please do respond to [Susan.Daniels@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:Susan.Daniels@ndcs.org.uk)

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience

Thanking you in anticipation

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan T. Daniel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a clear, legible font.

Susan Daniels OBE, Chief Executive, The National Deaf Children's Society

Mark Atkinson, Chief Executive, Action on Hearing Loss

Amanda Casson-Webb, Lesley Frearson and Sue Mountford, Joint Chief Executives, Royal Association for Deaf people

Craig Crowley MBE, Chief Executive Officer, Action Deafness and Chair, UK Council on Deafness

Steph Halder, President British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) and Paul Simpson, National Executive Officer, British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD)

Richard Kramer, Chief Executive Officer, Sense

Linda Richards, Chair, British Deaf Association and Damian Barry, Executive Director, British Deaf Association

James Watson-O'Neill, Chief Executive, Sign Health