



10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

www.gov.uk/number10

From the Private Secretary

7 May 2021

Dear Dame Kinnair

Thank you for your and your co-signatories' letter of 18 February, regarding protecting healthcare workers against COVID-19. Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding to you.

I am writing on behalf of the Prime Minister to reiterate the Government's commitment towards protecting and supporting our fantastic frontline NHS and social care workers.

The infection prevention and control (IPC) guidance for COVID-19 that you refer to is underpinned by the *National Infection Prevention and Control Manual* practice guide and associated literature reviews. This guidance is consistent with the World Health Organization's recommendations for protecting health and social care workers from COVID-19. The UK IPC Guidance was updated in January to reflect the most up-to-date scientific understanding of how to prevent and control COVID-19 infection. Amendments have been made to strengthen existing messaging and provide further clarity where needed, including updates to the care pathways to recognise testing and exposure.

The guidance is issued jointly by the Department of Health and Social Care, Public Health Wales, Public Health Agency Northern Ireland, Health Protection Scotland/ National Services Scotland, Public Health England, and NHS England (NHSE). This is official guidance and pertains to all patient-facing roles.

There is now a better understanding of the role of COVID-19 airborne transmission than at the start of the pandemic, along with the importance of ventilation to decrease transmission risk. The UK-wide IPC Cell, a team within NHSE that looks at the updating of the IPC guidance, recently reviewed evidence in relation to the transmission route of COVID-19 and the IPC precautions required, and agreed that no changes to the current PPE requirements were needed.

There is also consensus among the Chief Medical Officers in the four nations of the UK that existing guidance regarding the use of face masks and FFP3 masks by healthcare workers is correct. Emerging evidence and data on variant strains will be continually monitored and the recommendations on IPC and use of PPE, including FFP3s, will be amended accordingly if needed. PPE should continue to be worn as per current IPC guidance, with FFP3s being worn for aerosol-generating procedures.

The implementation of the IPC guidance should be underpinned by a risk assessment that takes into consideration the patient, environment, procedure and task being undertaken by any member of healthcare staff, with the risk assessments and use of PPE determined at an organisational level. This will include the use of FFP3 respirators and eye or face protection.

The Office for National Statistics has published data on COVID-19-related deaths by occupation since 9 March 2020. Those who work in health and social care have been shown to be at higher risk than other groups. As such, the Government has prioritised frontline health and social care workers, including those in care homes, during phase 1 of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. Furthermore, we continue to work tirelessly to deliver PPE to protect those on the frontline.

Since the formation of Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) in January 2020 and several other working groups, the Government has continued to engage with many experts from across the academic, public sector, industrial and commercial communities. The high quality research and insight that they provide has been drawn on to formulate Government policy.

From May 2020, we have endeavoured to release minutes and papers presented at SAGE meetings as soon as possible and aim to do this within two weeks of the meeting. There are rare exceptions where papers are held by Government as policy is in development, including if they discuss key topics, announcements or policy decisions not yet in the public domain, or if papers relate to national security concerns. All existing SAGE minutes are currently published in a fully accessible format, apart from meetings 1-19 which are published as PDFs. Going forwards, all minutes, as well as papers on key topics (where appropriate), will be uploaded as both the original PDF document and HTML. Specific papers can be requested in an accessible format.

Thank you, once again, for writing on this important issue.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ollie Ilott', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

OLLIE ILOTT

Dame Donna Kinnair DBE