

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2071](#): Take action to protect people from airborne infections in health and social care settings

The petition is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- improve air quality in health and social care settings through addressing ventilation, air filtration and sterilisation;
- reintroduce routine mask-wearing in those settings, particularly respiratory masks;
- reintroduce routine Covid testing;
- ensure staff manuals fully cover preventing airborne infection;
- support ill staff to stay home;
- provide public health information on the use of respiratory masks and the HEPA air filtration against airborne infections.

Background

General advice on infection and prevention control in health and care settings is set out in the [National Infection and Prevention Control Manual](#) (NIPCM) and the [Care Home Infection and Prevention Control Manual](#) (CH-IPCM). These.

These manuals are published by Antimicrobial Resistance and Healthcare Associated Infection (ARHAI) Scotland and cover all of the main pathogens with links to further guidance specific to a certain pathogen (e.g. [Collection of COVID-19 information and guidance for adult social care settings](#)).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people with certain conditions which placed them at higher risk from the virus were added to a 'shielding list'. This later became the 'highest risk list'.

The highest risk list ended on 31 May 2022 and the [Scottish Government press release](#) explained that this was because the risk of hospitalisation or death from the virus was no greater for those on the list than for the general public.

Facemasks

The extended use of face masks and face coverings guidance across health and social care settings was withdrawn on 16 May 2023.

The infection control manuals now take a person-centred approach based on clinical need and as such there is no mandate for widespread use of facemasks. There is different advice for face masks based on the clinical need of the patient and the infection risk posed by the procedure.

However, this does not prevent staff from wearing facemasks if they wish. In addition, according to DL(2022)10, health and social care staff are also able to request respiratory protective equipment (such as FFP3 masks) if they wish.

Testing

According to the [Scottish Government guidance](#), most people cannot get free covid tests. However, people with specific health conditions can access tests. These conditions include (but are not limited to):

- Down's syndrome, or another chromosomal disorder that affects your immune system
- certain types of cancer, or people who have received treatment for certain types of cancer
- sickle cell disease
- certain conditions affecting your blood
- chronic kidney disease (CKD) stage 4 or 5
- severe liver disease
- had an organ transplant
- certain autoimmune or inflammatory conditions (such as rheumatoid arthritis or inflammatory bowel disease)
- HIV or AIDS and have a weakened immune system
- a condition affecting your immune system
- a condition affecting the brain or nerves, such as multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, motor neurone disease, myasthenia gravis, Huntington's disease, Parkinson's disease or certain types of dementia
- certain lung conditions or treatments for lung conditions.

In August 2023, [the Scottish Government announced](#) that routine COVID-19 testing would be substantially reduced in hospitals and care homes. Testing is now based on 'person-centred clinical decisions'.

Routine testing for people moving from hospitals to a care home has continued.

Ventilation

Ventilation requirements in healthcare settings are set out in the [Scottish Health Technical Memorandum \(SHTM\) 03-01](#) published in February 2022. This sets out requirements for different settings with no 'one-size fits all' approach. Instead, recommendations are based on different risk profiles for patients, staff and procedures.

There are no specific technical requirements for ventilation in care homes but [regulations](#) specify that services must provide "adequate and suitable ventilation".

Care Inspectorate [guidance on care home design](#) advises:

“Ventilation or air conditioning systems should have a dedicated source of outdoor air. Recirculation units could be responsible for recirculating and spreading airborne viral particles into the path of socially distanced users. Where units that recirculate air in rooms are in situ they should be turned off because of the risk of spreading a virus. Care homes must not rely on mechanical ventilation only. There must be the ability for fresh air to be provided.”

During the pandemic, the Scottish Government established a short-life working group on ventilation in non-healthcare settings. The purpose of the group was to provide advice and make recommendations on actions to improve ventilation and support the creation of ‘infection resilient environments’. This led to the creation of the COVID-19 Adaptations Expert Advisory Group. The work of this group has now been embedded into wider pandemic preparedness work.

Support for staff

[Scottish Government guidance](#) advises people with symptoms of respiratory infections, including COVID, to stay at home and avoid contact with others.

Extra financial support which was put in place during the pandemic is no longer available to employees. What support staff receive will depend on their specific terms and conditions.

Scottish Government action

The Scottish Government, along with bodies such as Public Health Scotland, continuously monitors communicable diseases and is responsible for implementing control measures.

On 15 January 2024, the Chief Nursing Officer published [Extant guidance on infection prevention and control, surveillance and vaccinations for influenza and covid-19](#). This restated advice on risk assessments, reporting incidents and outbreaks, ventilation, water, bed spacing, vaccinations and antimicrobial prescribing.

Scottish Parliament action

The Scottish parliament has not undertaken any work on the specific issues raised in the petition since the end of the pandemic.