

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

MEMORANDUM E (20) 91 (C)

**FROM: ROBIN SWANN MLA
MINISTER FOR HEALTH**

DATE: 7 May 2020

TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES

FINAL EXECUTIVE PAPER - USE OF FACE COVERINGS IN NORTHERN IRELAND AS PART OF OUR RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS

Introduction

1. Colleagues will be aware that there has been much public debate about the use of facemasks by the general public during the COVID-19 epidemic.
2. Firstly, as a point of terminology, I would wish to differentiate between the use of “facemasks” (i.e. masks manufactured to a required standard, for use in a clinical setting); and “face coverings” (i.e. material used to cover the face, often homemade, used by individuals in day to day life). In respect of their use by the general public, we are focussed on face coverings – not least because:
 - This is not a clinical issue, and coverings to that standard are not required (and, more importantly, we don’t want the public to mistakenly think such a standard is required); and
 - We do not want to place a further strain on clinically required supplies of PPE.
3. This is clearly an issue on which we, as an Executive, now need to give guidance to the wider community. This issue is not completely straightforward, and is certainly not one where a simple “better safe than

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

sorry” approach should point us to recommending the deployment of face coverings – essentially there are two competing issues:

- a. On the one hand, while the scientific evidence may be weak, there is clearly some benefit from the use of face coverings;

however:

- b. There is a risk that the use of face coverings may provide a false sense of security to both wearers and others, and thus diminish adherence to social distancing and good standards of hand washing and respiratory hygiene.

4. In terms of paragraph 3, the position of the NI Strategic Intelligence Group, chaired by the Chief Scientific Advisor, Professor Ian Young, is that:
 - Evidence for benefit of face covering in the community is weak overall and benefits are likely to be small;
 - Evidence is stronger for reducing transmission of infection by infected individuals than for protecting healthy individuals from infection
 - On balance, there is sufficient evidence to recommend (but not mandate) face covering in enclosed environments where social distancing cannot be maintained, for short periods. In practice this means public transport and retail environments in the main;
 - Evidence is not sufficient to recommend face covering outdoors or in enclosed environments for long periods;
 - Cloth face coverings are recommended to avoid risk of shortages of respiratory masks which should be prioritised for the highest risk settings;
 - Face coverings may provide a degree of false reassurance which leads to reduced compliance with more important behaviours (such as social distancing);
 - A significant programme of education will be required around face covering technique, including wearing, taking on and off, disposal and

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

washing of reusable masks. This should also include emphasis on the need to maintain social distancing and good hand hygiene at all times; and

- Availability of face coverings will need to be addressed, including how to construct home-made face coverings. This should include measures to ensure that segments of the population are not disadvantaged by lack of access to face coverings.

5. In view of this - and while recognising the particular risk highlighted in paragraph 3(b) - my view is that we should move to **recommend** (as opposed to require) that the public consider the use of face coverings for short periods in enclosed spaces, where social distancing is not possible.
6. Such a position is based on the view of our own Strategic Intelligence Group, and is consistent with the position of SAGE, which has concluded that “on balance, there is enough evidence to support recommendation of community use of cloth face masks, for short periods in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not possible.”
7. Subject to the agreement to this position by Executive colleagues, my Department will consider what further guidance on this matter is required.

Recommendation / Decision sought

8. I recommend that the Executive:
 - i. Agrees we **recommend** (as opposed to require) the public consider the use of face coverings for short periods in enclosed spaces, where social distancing is not possible; and
 - ii. Notes that my Department will consider what further guidance on this issue is required.

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

LPP/LAP

**ROBIN SWANN MLA
MINISTER OF HEALTH**

OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE