



By email

request-744910-101ad0c9@whatdotheyknow.com

Our ref: 07/04/kl/054

06 May 2021

Dear Margaret Johnson,

Re: Data provided by PHE regarding face coverings in schools

Thank you for your request received on 7 April 2021 addressed to Public Health England (PHE). In accordance with Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the Act), I can confirm that PHE does hold the information you have specified.

Request

Yesterday guidance was issued by the DfE to schools in England to extend the 'guidance' for children to wear masks in schools and classrooms, de facto making it mandatory for children to do so. Ministers and representatives of the DfE have repeatedly stated that this was on the advice of PHE, whilst repeatedly failing to reveal the specifics of this advice. I would like to see the following information used when reaching the conclusion that this was necessary, proportionate and likely to be effective in addressing Covid 19:

- specific data provided by PHE when making their recommendation to DfE.***
- specific details and report provided by PHE to the DfE in making the recommendation to you.***
- the feedback gathered from stakeholders in reviewing the success and costs of this measure between March and Easter.***
- Data for the same.***
- Anecdotal feedback for the same.***
- Data and study evidence that face masks in classrooms are an effective measure in controlling Covid 19.***
- Any other factor considered in your 'review' of this measure between March and Easter.***
- The report providing details of the 'review' of face masks in schools between March and Easter, including full details of risks and benefits considered and the data behind these.***

Response

PHE can confirm that it does hold information on the data and evidence provided by PHE to support the Department of Education (DfE) review of their policy on the use of face coverings in secondary school classrooms. However, the information is exempt under section 21 of the Act because it is reasonably accessible by other means, and the terms of the exemption mean that we do not have to consider whether or not it would be in the public interest for you to have the information. For your convenience, we have collated the following information.

- The R value and growth rate
 - The latest reproduction number (R) and growth rate of Coronavirus (COVID-19) (data as of 26 March) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-r-value-and-growth-rate#:~:text=The%20R%20range%20for%20England,as%20of%2026%20March%202021.>
- Population prevalence data, by age group
 - Data from the Office of National Statistics Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Survey, UK: 26 March (data available for the week ending 20th of March) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveysurvey/26march2021>
- Data from Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 testing
 - PHE Weekly Influenza and COVID-19 Surveillance graphs (data from week 11, between 15 and 21 March 2021) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/973176/Weekly_COVID-19_and_Influenza_Surveillance_Graphs_W12.pdf (particularly Slides 19 - 31)
- Data on outbreaks in schools
 - PHE Weekly Influenza and COVID-19 Surveillance graphs (data from week 11, between 15 and 21 March 2021), see Slides 14-16 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/973176/Weekly_COVID-19_and_Influenza_Surveillance_Graphs_W12.pdf (particularly Slides 13 – 17)
- Published literature and other evidence
 - COVID-19 Schools Infection Survey Round 2, England: December 2020 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/covid19schools infectionsurveyround2england/december2020>
 - McMaster Living Rapid Evidence Review Update 14: What is the specific role of daycares and schools in COVID-19 transmission? <https://www.nccmt.ca/covid-19/covid-19-rapid-evidence-service/19>

PHE is an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and a distinct organisation with operational autonomy. PHE provide government, local government, the NHS, Parliament, industry and the public with evidence-based professional, scientific expertise and support. PHE does not set policy or legislation. Although PHE does provide scientific evidence support to the central government in the response to COVID-19, PHE is one of many departments, organisations and academic partners providing scientific advice to the central government.

Under section 16, a public authority has a duty to provide advice and assistance. Accordingly, you may wish to contact the DfE for further information on what scientific evidence was considered in the policy review on the use of face coverings in secondary school classrooms.

If you have any queries regarding the information that has been supplied to you, please refer your query to me in writing in the first instance. If you remain dissatisfied and would like to request an internal review, then please contact us at the address above or by emailing foi@phe.gov.uk.

Please note that you have the right to an independent review by the Information Commissioner's Office if a complaint cannot be resolved through the PHE complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner's Office can be contacted by calling the ICO's helpline on 0303 123 1113, visiting the ICO's website at www.ico.org.uk or writing to the ICO at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF.

Yours sincerely
FOI Team