

TOM PURSGLOVE MP
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

11th August 2021

Jean Contrevent,

RE: FACE COVERINGS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT.

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of the wearing of face coverings on an ongoing basis, particularly on public transport. I have read your comments with interest.

As you will know, we have now moved to stage four of the Government's 'road map' to ease the restrictions. The emphasis of the national response to Coronavirus has therefore now shifted from rules and regulations towards expecting people to protect themselves, and others, through informed choice. The legal obligation to wear a face covering has now ended. It is, however, expected and recommended that people wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces, such as on public transport - and personally, that is exactly what I am doing, not least because I am mindful of wanting to show consideration towards others. Separately, in private settings, such as in shops, it is up to private businesses to decide what rules, if any, they wish to have in place.

I am told that in September, the Government will undertake a review to assess the country's preparedness for autumn and winter, which will consider whether to continue or strengthen public and business guidance as we approach the winter, including on face coverings.

I appreciate that this may be a worrying time for some. The virus is still with us; it has not gone away and the risk of a dangerous new variant that evades the vaccines remains real. However, with our incredible vaccine roll-out and the treatments now available to those who are hospitalised with COVID-19, the link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths has been substantially weakened. That said, as we move forward, we must all remember the sensible precautions we can take to keep us all safe. That means staying at home when asked to self-isolate, considering the guidance that has been set out, and getting both doses of one of the vaccines when offered.

I have also enclosed a copy of an article that I have written for the *Northants Telegraph* that further sets out my views on the current situation, which I trust will be of interest to you.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again.

With best wishes,

TOM PURSGLOVE MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE



A tough call and a tricky balance - but we have to get back to normal with good judgement, common sense and consideration for others at the fore

Week on week we are seeing increasing numbers of people vaccinated against COVID-19 - a very significant achievement - and locally, the roll-out continues apace. It's remarkable that more than 87.5% of people aged 18 and over have now received at least one dose of one of the vaccines, and more than 70% of adults have now had both doses. It is crucial that we don't slow down now - and welcome, access to the vaccines is being bolstered and improved in our community all the time. Thanks to the incredible success of the vaccination programme, we have been able to re-open further in recent days and lift the restrictions in a substantial way and I'm hugely grateful to all of the amazing volunteers and staff that are continuing to make it happen here on the ground in Northamptonshire and across the country. I've now had both jabs, having been along to the drop-in vaccination clinic at Willow Place in Corby at the weekend to get my second, and I urge everyone here in North Northamptonshire to get vaccinated too at the first opportunity!

Ultimately, the further lifting of restrictions on the 19th July was a moment of great relief for many, but for others I know it was a source of genuine anxiety, worry and concern. Of course, there are mixed emotions on this, as there have been throughout the last 18 months, but in the end there was never going to be a perfect moment to do this.

For my part, I am clear that the risks of the disease, which the vaccines have reduced, but far from eliminated, had to be balanced with the risks of continuing with legally enforced restrictions that inevitably take a grave toll on people's lives, livelihoods and physical and mental health; something I have seen very starkly for myself in recent months as a constituency MP and which has been reflected in much of the correspondence I have received from my constituents and in the discussions I have had, and continue to have, locally. Some of what I have heard has been truly heartbreaking - both in terms of accounts shared with me by those who have experienced the disease itself and devastatingly lost loved ones, as well as the stories of those who have had COVID wreak havoc on their lives in so many other ways.

My postbag on the issue of easing the restrictions has been polarised, with deeply felt and sincere views expressed both ways. But the alternative to the plan to move to the approach we have adopted, which is undoubtedly helped by the summer and by the school holidays, would have been to open up in the winter when the virus would have an advantage, or not at all this year, which I do not believe would have been a sensible course of action, or indeed at all sustainable. Ultimately, the toll on many people's fragile mental health, on the economy and in relation to wider health considerations is now far too great and cannot be ignored.

Instead, the emphasis of the national response to Coronavirus has now shifted from rules and regulations towards expecting people to protect themselves, and others, through informed choice. Clearly, we must remain vigilant and go about enjoying these returned freedoms responsibly. I believe that the approach taken will achieve that balance. However, it also relies upon people showing ongoing common sense, good judgement and consideration for others, and I am confident that, as we have seen throughout this pandemic, the vast majority of people will continue to do just that. For example, if you're in a crowded place or on public transport, it makes sense to pop on a face mask if you can and personally, that is exactly what I intend to do.



We also have to show personal responsibility in that we all know our own risk scores better than anybody else and we should act in accordance with them. For example, the Government recognises how difficult the situation is for clinically extremely vulnerable people, both for their physical and mental health and so I welcome that guidance has been published for this group regarding ongoing support and assistance. Indeed, a person who is at a higher risk of becoming seriously ill if they were to catch Coronavirus may wish to take additional precautions going forward. These could include choosing to limit close contact with those they do not usually meet; meeting outside if possible; and if socialising indoors, ensuring the space is well ventilated; continuing to practice social distancing; and asking family and friends to take lateral flow tests before visiting. A recent study from Public Health England, which looked at more than one million people in at-risk groups, also found that people who are immunosuppressed are significantly better protected from symptomatic infection following the second dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

That said, cases will continue to rise as set out from the start of the 'road map', as will hospitalisations and deaths. However, hospitalisations are far lower than they were at this point during the previous wave and it is encouraging that people aged over 65, who are more likely to have had both doses of a vaccine, currently make up 31 percent of admissions, compared to 61 percent in January. It is clear therefore that our vaccines are working and building a wall of protection against hospitalisation and weakening the link between infection, hospitalisation and death. It is reassuring that the current data does not suggest that unsustainable pressure will be put on the NHS, but all data will be kept under constant review and I really do urge people to get vaccinated. I know many will also be reassured to know that the most vulnerable in our society will be offered booster jabs from September for the winter months.

I do just want to really emphasise that I know none of this is easy for anybody, and for some more than others - these are some of the toughest decisions politicians have ever had to take outside of war. At many times throughout this pandemic, these decisions have weighed extremely heavily on my mind. There are no easy answers - no textbook to refer to, no choices without risk and no single prevailing view about the best way forward. Nobody has a monopoly on wisdom, and it is easy to be wise after the event. Instead, this is an unprecedented, multi-faceted challenge which continues to evolve and develop. I know some will strongly agree with the approach taken, whilst others will stand strongly opposed. But for my part, I think Ministers reached the right, balanced decision in the circumstances at this stage.

Clearly, COVID-19 isn't over and people should continue to show common sense and exercise good judgement, but in the end, continuing as we have been simply wasn't tenable for much longer and we were always clear that the rules would only remain in place for as long as they were absolutely essential. The time had come to move forward and concentrate on our recovery - both socially and economically - because when all is said and done, we are going to have to learn to live with COVID-19 in our day-to-day lives, much as we all wish it weren't so.