



## **Joint Position Statement on The Use of Clear Face Masks**

The COVID 19 pandemic has seen a marked increase in the use of face masks, in line with public health guidance, to prevent the spread of infection. We understand that, across a variety of settings, masks provide essential protection for staff and members of the public generally.

However, as a consequence of the wearing of opaque face masks people with communication difficulties are experiencing significant barriers to communication, which can lead to a range of negative and potentially dangerous situations.

For everyone, communication relies on verbal and non-verbal cues. For people with communication difficulties, an obstruction to the mouth – such as the face mask – may impede both their ability to understand what is being said to them and to get their own message across. This includes people with aphasia, dysarthria, apraxia, autism, dementia, intellectual disability, and others. It also includes members of the d/Deaf community and those with hearing impairment who rely on lip-reading to communicate on an equal basis.

We urgently request the Department of Health to commence the procurement of clear protective face masks to support people with communication difficulties.

In terms of understanding, face masks reduce a person's ability to read facial expression, to lip read, and to understand what is being said because the communication partner's speech is muffled or at a lower volume. Expressively, masks create an added barrier for people with communication difficulties as a person's speech may already have been less clear, they may not be able to increase volume and they cannot augment their speech with facial expression to get their message across as they might do in usual times.

Clear face masks make it possible to see more of the person's face and so have the potential to support more effective communication for all. Access to clear face masks which meet health and safety standards and support effective communication in a safe manner are an urgent necessity. They are essential both for the professional communicating with a person with communication difficulties and the person with communication difficulties themselves.

All citizens are entitled to receive information in a way they understand – in an accessible and comprehensible way. At present, this is being severely compromised through the widespread use of opaque face masks.

We are calling on the Department of Health to initiate the procurement of clear face masks. This will support people with communication difficulties, support their communication rights, and support their communication needs. It is vital that people with communication difficulties do not continue to miss out on information that is important to them in their everyday lives.