



Communicating with a Face Covering Things to Consider

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Overview

Whilst COVID-19 has changed the way we work and live in the UK and is likely to have a significant impact for some time to come, the importance of clear and concise communication in protective security remains of paramount importance. This practical guidance offers some hints and tips on the impact of wearing a face covering, such as a face mask, for those who are unfamiliar in doing so, to ensure communications with others remains clear and understood and that the ability to identify suspicious activity is not hindered.

Wearing a face covering can make it harder to communicate

- Verbal communication can become muffled and/or the volume reduced;
- It can deprive the listener of some facial expressions leading to the intended meaning of the verbal communication being lost;
- It is generally easier for people to correctly identify basic emotions (e.g. happy, sad) and mental states (e.g. thoughtfulness, interest) when they see the whole face;
- Mask wearing may be more acceptable to some individuals than others and can impact on first impressions.

For security professionals it is important that they remain seen as well as vigilant. The ability to engage with people, in a polite and professional manner, will not only assist with the positive reputation of the organisation, but it also seeks to deter hostiles. A polite and probing conversation may resolve any suspicion that might be held, but the ability to do this whilst wearing a face covering could be challenging.

Hints and Tips:

Security managers should consider

- Encouraging staff to plan their message in advance when talking to the public to make sure it is clear and simple
- Ensuring that staff are wearing face masks competently and confidently
- Reminding staff that they can use their hands as a communication tool: friendly gestures such as waving can make it easier to start an interaction in a non-threatening way
- Planning and preparing staff for how to deal with comments or questions about wearing a mask: e.g. Why are you wearing that mask, do you have coronavirus?
- Making sure that staff wearing face coverings do not additionally cover the visible parts of their face; eyes can denote someone's emotions so avoid wearing sunglasses when communicating
- Reminding staff that words and tone of voice are important: with limited facial cues to read, how a person sounds, and what they say becomes more important.

Communicating in Advance



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You should consider using the organisation's social media platforms and website to notify staff and visitors that security and other staff will be wearing face coverings. For example, on the security page of your website, explain that its business as usual, but expect to see security and front of house staff wearing face coverings to help keep them and the public safe. Include a picture if you can so that people know what to expect. State that whilst keeping in line with current social distancing regulations and government guidance, people should expect to see the usual security procedures around the site at any time of day.

Communicating on Site

Inform visitors and staff through posters, announcements, visual display boards etc., that face coverings will be worn by security staff, and remind them that security procedures remain unchanged.

Resolving suspicions

Remember, people may be affected in different ways by face coverings and COVID-19, so what appears to be suspicious activity could include someone who is anxious for a number of reasons: e.g. they feel uncomfortable wearing a face covering, are feeling nervous following a period of isolation, are worried about becoming infected with COVID-19 or they ordinarily rely on lip reading and so are struggling with communication etc. (this is not an exhaustive list).

A polite and probing conversation where security staff ask an individual if they are ok or if they can help in any way, with a vigilant member of staff actively listening to the response, will be the best way of resolving suspicions. Whilst staff may not be able to see the whole face, the following cues can help inform decision making:

- What emotions can be detected from their eyes (if they are visible), e.g. are their brows furrowed suggesting they are irritated or are their eyes wide suggesting they are scared?
- What is the tone of their voice; e.g. are they shouting, do they sound embarrassed or nervous?
- What are they doing with their hands; are their gestures friendly?

These cues are not necessarily indicative of suspicious behaviour but can provide an insight into mindset. Where there are any concerns about an individual, a polite and probing conversation is the best way to resolve or confirm those concerns.

Don't forget that there are other things to consider with face-coverings

Cultural differences: Masks, and facial coverings more generally, have different connotations across cultures and it may be difficult to understand an individual wearing a mask and what it means to them, and how they may react to security professionals wearing one.



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People who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus: For those who rely on lip-reading to understand what someone is communicating, face coverings will present a significant challenge.

Cognitive ability differences: How much an individual can understand or interpret a message when wearing a face covering depends on their own abilities. For example, adults with autism or Asperger's find it much harder to interpret mental state or emotions from just the eyes alone.

Further Guidance

[Eyes Wide Open](#)

[Guard Force Response During COVID-19](#)

[Understanding Hostile Reconnaissance](#)

[Understanding Hostile Reconnaissance and countering the threat](#)

[Disrupting Hostile Reconnaissance](#)

[NaCTSO Crowded Places Guidance](#)

[Action Counters Terrorism](#)

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