



Caroline Russell AM

Chair of the Health Committee

The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Sent by email

15 July 2021

Dear Secretary of State

I am writing to you in my position as Chair of the London Assembly Health Committee. Firstly, congratulations on your appointment as the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. The role of the Assembly's Health Committee is to examine and report on matters relating to health in London and to lead on scrutiny of the Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy, and I would welcome a meeting with you to discuss how we can work together to improve the health of all Londoners.

On 22 June 2021, the Health Committee held an investigation into how to manage the ongoing threat of COVID-19 in London. We heard from a range of expert guests,¹ focusing on how London will need to adapt and respond, and on the importance of communication, as we move forward and adjust to a 'new normal'. The purpose of this letter is to highlight key findings and recommendations from our investigation. As COVID-19 restrictions are set to end in England, with step four of the roadmap lifting on 19 July, the Health Committee is seeking reassurance from you that current and future policies on the management of the Delta variant and future unknown variants will continue to provide adequate protection and safeguards for the health and wellbeing of Londoners. The list of our recommendations is included as an appendix to this letter.

¹ John Hetherington (Head of London Resilience), Vicky Hobart (Head of Health, Greater London Authority), Dr Sandra Husbands (Director of Public Health for Hackney and the City of London), Dr Zubaida Haque (Independent SAGE), Professor Anthony Costello (Independent SAGE).

London's vulnerability

London has been at the epicentre of the pandemic in the UK, and has experienced high rates of infection, hospitalisation and, tragically, deaths. London is large, densely populated and diverse with areas of high deprivation, and these factors have combined to produce challenges in achieving high vaccine uptake. In addition, London's disproportionately young population has contributed to the city being behind the rest of the UK as many Londoners have only recently become eligible for vaccination. As a result of these factors, the expert witnesses present at the Health Committee meeting on 22 June agreed that London was particularly vulnerable to current and new variants. Dr Sandra Husbands, Director of Public Health for Hackney and the City of London, described it as *"the perfect storm... of a young population that is very ethnically mixed; that is mobile, a lot of it is transient, so less settled; and also some significant areas of deprivation in the capital."* We must continue to reach out and provide support for the diverse and disadvantaged communities in London to get vaccinated, and it will be vital that we are prepared to deliver COVID-19 boosters and flu jabs ahead of the winter months.

We also heard concerns around the messaging of 'Freedom Day', and how important it is that Londoners continue to take actions to protect themselves and others. Although the vaccine roll-out is continuing to move at pace, it is clear that the Delta variant exhibits a degree of vaccine escape and that future successful variants may do the same. Ongoing public health messaging around the value of continued mitigation measures such as mask wearing and hand washing – particularly in high-risk settings such as crowded indoor spaces – will be important to safely support the opening up of the city after 19 July.

The Health Committee recommends:

- 1) The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care should reassure the Committee that sufficient planning, preparation and supply of flu vaccines and COVID-19 booster jabs will be readily available for Londoners when required, given the possible rise in other respiratory viruses such as flu, potential new variants, and reduction in vaccine protection due to waning immunity in autumn and winter.**
- 2) It is crucial that government messaging about opening up on 19 July supports the continued push to get Londoners double vaccinated as soon as possible and explains clearly how people can protect themselves and others by retaining mitigating habits such as wearing masks in crowded indoor situations and washing hands frequently.**

Schools

A key concern expressed at our Health Committee meeting was how to protect children, young people and adults working in schools, and thus prevent broader community transmission. The limited data released from Public Health England in early June clearly shows that outbreaks of the Delta variant in schools exceed those in any other defined setting, and that cases among secondary school children were the highest across all age groups and rising rapidly. The Committee heard that a significant challenge in terms of formulating localised policies for schools was partially due to the lack of publicly available data on the number of cases by age group of the Delta variant.

There was also discussion on the complicated advice protocols which determine the wearing of face coverings in schools and concern expressed that some Directors of Public Health were not able to be as responsive in their locality as they may like. Furthermore, the Health Committee investigation noted that mitigation measures such as improved ventilation and air filtration had not been introduced in most schools across London.

The Health Committee recommends:

- 3) To enable evidence-based policy making, the Department for Health and Social Care should request that Public Health England release the data on the infection and transmission rates**

of the Delta variant in schools, and on an ongoing basis should ensure that data on schools transmission of any new variants of concern is released.

- 4) As face coverings are no longer compulsory in schools, the Committee requests further details to understand under what conditions face coverings would be reintroduced.**
- 5) Greater discretionary powers should be considered for Directors of Public Health, so that they can be as responsive as possible in advising schools to re-introduce face coverings in their borough when necessary.**
- 6) The Department of Health and Social Care should utilise the summer holiday period to work with the Department for Education and consider the necessary mitigation measures that should be applied when schools return in September. These precautionary measures should include improved guidance and support to improve ventilation and air filtration in schools.**

Transport

The Committee heard that while there is still much to learn about how COVID-19 has spread, being close to an infected person indoors is clearly a risk. The risk of transmission becomes higher when contact is more frequent and longer lasting. Journeys on public transport therefore present a high risk of transmission, as they often require people to be in confined, enclosed spaces. This makes London particularly vulnerable, with London's underground, overground and bus network running millions of journeys daily.

Although face coverings may become the norm on public transport as a matter of personal responsibility, with the imminent lifting of restrictions, many of the experts giving evidence to the Committee expressed their concern for the safety of passengers and workers, and for the overall greater risk of transmission if face coverings were no longer compulsory on public transport in London.

The Committee notes and welcomes that the Mayor of London has asked TfL to keep face coverings as compulsory on its services as a condition of carriage, and further notes that the Transport Secretary, The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, has welcomed this decision as 'wanted and expected'. However, London has other travel operators apart from TfL and is also a major transport hub with people arriving from across the country. The Rail Delivery Group, which represents the industry, has said it is only asking passengers to: "follow the government guidance and, out of respect for others, wear face coverings if an indoor setting is busy."

The Committee is concerned that this will lead to confusion for passengers arriving into London, and people changing between services with different interpretations of the guidance and different rules. This lack of clarity will also make it hard for transport workers to enforce the rules.

The Health Committee recommends:

- 7) The Department for Health and Social Care should release the data that has driven the decision to make the use of face coverings on public transport a matter of personal responsibility rather than compulsory, and state at what threshold of cases face coverings would be mandated again.**
- 8) The Department for Health and Social Care should work with the Mayor of London to agree consistent shared messages about the use of face coverings on all public transport in London.**

Support for self-isolation

A recurrent theme raised as part of the Health Committee investigation was the need for effective, timely and personalised support, including financial support, to encourage people to self-isolate if they have tested positive for COVID-19 or are identified as a contact of someone who has tested positive. The Committee heard from several expert witnesses who suggested low levels of awareness of the support available was a key barrier, noting this was particularly the case for ethnic minority groups.

Furthermore, the Committee heard that the eligibility criteria for financial support was potentially too high and predicated only on social security benefits, thereby potentially excluding individuals and families in work on low incomes. The Committee welcomes the Government's pilot which is assessing how to further support people to self-isolate. It is imperative that best practice from this pilot are widely disseminated and then integrated back into the system as soon as possible. Effective, timely and personalised support to encourage people to self-isolate is clearly essential.

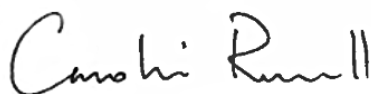
The Health Committee recommends:

- 9) Data and best practice from the Government's ongoing self-isolation pilots should be widely disseminated and then integrated into the self-isolation support scheme as soon as possible, particularly to help people living in overcrowded conditions and on low incomes.**
- 10) The threshold of eligibility for the current financial support packages for self-isolation should be reviewed.**

As part of our investigation, the Committee will also be writing to the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, to share the above concerns and to ask the Mayor to lead Londoners safely into this new chapter of COVID-19 recovery. While London continues to push ahead to make sure all adults and young people receive two vaccinations, it will be essential that Londoners receive coordinated and clear public health messaging from national, regional and local Government. It is only through consistent and coherent messaging that we will ensure the highest rates of vaccination uptake across all age cohorts to protect people's health.

While for many the lifting of restrictions will be welcomed, if we are to help control the spread of the Delta variant and new emerging variants, it is vital to reinforce the message of continuing to protect yourself and others by your behaviour. London, like the rest of the UK, is now at a critical juncture in the fight against COVID-19. I look forward to working with you to help London recover from the pandemic and keep Londoners safe, and I would welcome a response to our recommendations by 30 July 2021.

Yours sincerely,



Caroline Russell AM

Chair of the Health Committee

Appendix 1 – Health Committee recommendations

Following our 22 June meeting, the Health Committee recommends:

- 1) The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care should reassure the Committee that sufficient planning, preparation and supply of flu vaccines and COVID-19 booster jabs will be readily available for Londoners when required, given the possible rise in other respiratory viruses such as flu, potential new variants, and reduction in vaccine protection due to waning immunity in autumn and winter.**
- 2) It is crucial that government messaging about opening up on 19 July supports the continued push to get Londoners double vaccinated as soon as possible and explains clearly how people can protect themselves and others by retaining mitigating habits such as wearing masks in crowded indoor situations and washing hands frequently.**
- 3) To enable evidence-based policy making, the Department for Health and Social Care should request that Public Health England release the data on the infection and transmission rates of the Delta variant in schools, and on an ongoing basis should ensure that data on schools transmission of any new variants of concern is released.**
- 4) As face coverings are no longer compulsory in schools, the Committee requests further details to understand under what conditions face coverings would be reintroduced.**
- 5) Greater discretionary powers should be considered for Directors of Public Health, so that they can be as responsive as possible in advising schools to re-introduce face coverings in their borough when necessary.**
- 6) The Department of Health and Social Care should utilise the summer holiday period to work with the Department for Education and consider the necessary mitigation measures that should be applied when schools return in September. These precautionary measures should include improved guidance and support to improve ventilation and air filtration in schools.**
- 7) The Department for Health and Social Care should release the data that has driven the decision to make the use of face coverings on public transport a matter of personal responsibility rather than compulsory, and state at what threshold of cases face coverings would be mandated again.**
- 8) The Department for Health and Social Care should work with the Mayor of London to agree consistent shared messages about the use of face coverings on all public transport in London.**
- 9) Data and best practice from the Government's ongoing self-isolation pilots should be widely disseminated and then integrated into the self-isolation support scheme as soon as possible, particularly to help people living in overcrowded conditions and on low incomes.**
- 10) The threshold of eligibility for the current financial support packages for self-isolation should be reviewed.**