

14 July 2021

Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP
Speaker of the House of Commons

Mr Speaker

We are writing with regard to the Commission's decisions on Monday about arrangements for Parliament following the ending of COVID restrictions on 19 July.

At the Commission meeting on Monday, we called for caution in terms of returning to business as usual from 19 July, particularly when there is no apparent or compelling business reason for doing so. Double vaccination rates in London of people aged 40 and under were currently below 40%, and current infection rates were unfortunately high and rising. Therefore, there is a strong likelihood of increasing numbers on the estate leading to infected individuals interacting with staff and others who are not fully vaccinated.

It would be fair to say that the reaction of staff across Parliament has been one of incredulity, anger and concern. Had the current arrangements been left in place, they could have been reviewed in September in light of the public health situation at that time. This would also have allowed time to conduct a proper risk assessment and ensure appropriate mitigations are in place.

In particular, staff have expressed concern that at the decision to make mask wearing compulsory for staff but only "encouraged" for MPs.

This is a stark example of how rules in Parliament apply only to some and not to others. It also hints at a failure by the employer to exercise its duty of care to its own employees.

We are told that the absence of an "employment relationship" between Parliament and MPs means there is no ability to mandate MPs to wear a mask.

We would dispute this on a number of grounds. First the lack of an "employment relationship" does not prevent Parliament from having a dress code that allows the Speaker to prevent access to the Chamber to an MP dressed inappropriately. Such a power, in our view, can surely be extended, as a temporary public health measure, to MPs who seek to enter the Chamber without a mask.

Secondly, shops, museums and theatres do not have an "employment relationship" with customers and users of the services they provide. Yet that does not prevent them from setting requirements on those users in terms of conduct, behaviour and—most pertinently to this argument—measures designed to keep their employees and other users safe, such as mask wearing.

Further, you will recognise that the House has no more of an "employment relationship" with MPs' staff than it does with MPs themselves. We do not understand how a disparity of treatment of these groups is justified.

To be clear; the principal aim of mask wearing is to protect not yourself, but those around you. Your message to MPs on 12 July encouraged "Members to take personal responsibility for keeping themselves safe". But Members also have a responsibility to keep those around them—staff of the House, their own staff and, indeed, other MPs—safe. After more than a year of collective efforts, staff will not feel protected in their workplace if MPs are simply permitted to choose whether or not to take this one simple step to help protect staff from possible infection.

We would therefore ask you to urgently reconsider the guidance provided to Members so that all staff and members are content that the appropriate measures have been taken to protect their health.

Jenny Symmons, Chair, GMB Branch for MPs' and Lords' Staff
Ken Gall, House Trade Union Side President
Max Freedman, Chair and Priya Dev, Secretary, Unite Parliamentary Staff Branch