



POLICE SCOTLAND – MESSAGE TO COMMUNITIES

Message from Assistant Chief Constable Gary Ritchie – 27 July 2020

Police Scotland is committed to keeping people safe and protecting all our communities. We understand that daily life adhering to coronavirus (COVID-19) guidelines continues to be challenging for everyone.

Although Scottish Government guidance has provided flexibility for the individual needs of disabled people, we recognise this has not prevented some people becoming fearful of going out into their communities. We are aware some disabled people have reported being unfairly challenged and, on occasion, abused about issues linked to social distancing and face coverings.

Our partners have shared concerns that some disabled people can find physical distancing difficult - this could be linked to sight loss, autism, a physical disability or other issues. People have reported being shouted at, made to feel uncomfortable or fearful.

We have also received reports of people who are exempt from wearing face coverings being inappropriately challenged in shops or on public transport. This includes people who have invisible or hidden disabilities, like asthma or autism.

There are several exemptions in the guidance for people who cannot wear face coverings. A full list can be found on the Scottish Government website. Exemptions included are:

- you have a health condition or you are disabled and a face covering would be inappropriate because it would cause difficulty, pain or severe distress or anxiety, or because you cannot apply a covering and wear it safely and consistently in the proper manner. Individual discretion should be applied in considering the use of face coverings for children and young people, for example, children with breathing difficulties and disabled children who would struggle to wear a face covering
- you need to eat or drink
- you are taking medication
- you are communicating with someone who relies on lip reading.

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Police Scotland wants to reassure disabled communities that we take reports of people being targeted seriously. We would encourage the public to consider the implications of coronavirus (COVID-19) guidelines on disabled communities before challenging people. We want to prevent these incidents occurring and to ensure disabled people feel safe in their communities.

We will continue to work with the Scottish Government and other partners to ensure the public is aware of issues which directly affect disabled communities.

Police Scotland has circulated guidance to frontline police officers and staff to ensure they consider disabilities when engaging with people, particularly given the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) measures.

We understand some disabled people may choose to carry a card or wear a lanyard stating they have exemptions from wearing face coverings or to identify a disability. Individuals are under absolutely no obligation to carry information or to show it to anyone. Police Scotland officers will not ask you to provide any evidence of an exemption or disability. We will support your right to do this if it makes you feel more confident going about your daily life and will ensure we consider this if you choose to disclose this information.

Police Scotland's policing style response to coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to be based on a desire to work together and ensure everyone's safety with enforcement of legislation a last resort. Our approach will continue to be:

- **Engage** to establish the individual's circumstances and if they are aware of guidelines in place.
- **Explain** the risks to public health and to the NHS in line with government guidelines.
- **Encourage** voluntary compliance.
- **Enforce** only if officers are faced with non-compliance and as a last resort.

In the coming weeks and months, we urge everyone to continue to work together, ensuring no person or group in Scotland feels marginalised or isolated.

Police Scotland does not tolerate the targeting of individuals or communities, or any form of hate crime. Should anyone experience or witness such an incident please report it.

You can contact Police Scotland by:

- dialling 101, or 999 in an emergency
- via SMS 999 – you must register for this service before using it
- using Text Relay using the BT Relay UK app or textphone

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- you can also use our online hate crime reporting form on the Police Scotland website.
- Hate Crime can also be reported via one of our third party reporting centres. More information on third party reporting can be found on our Police Scotland website.

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