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**Blog article by Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission**

## **People with disabilities must not be left behind by response to COVID-19**

Disabled people “must not be invisible in the survival planning process”, said Baroness Campbell on 24 March as the House of Lords were debating the Coronavirus Act 2020.

Her words are echoed by local disability rights campaigner and [IMTAC](#) convenor Michael Lorimer: “In these unprecedented times it is more essential than ever that Government work directly with disabled people and their organisations when making decisions about issues that affect our lives.”

The comments are aimed at Government and the NI Executive to remind them that society must protect those most at risk, including thousands of people with disabilities, and not forgetting children with special educational needs, older people and those with underlying medical conditions, and those suffering from mental ill health. Fundamental to this is access to COVID-19 related information in formats people with disabilities can use, and their involvement in policy decisions and decisions about their care.

Disabled people are voicing fear and anxiety about becoming ill, and that decisions may be made about their support or care without their input.

Tony O'Reilly, member of the [North West Forum of People with Disabilities](#), says: “Take the fears of the general population about coronavirus and multiply by a factor of five for disabled people.”

David McDonald of the [Omnibus Partnership](#) has many concerns about how he and other disabled people might be treated in hospital during the crisis - from ensuring they can feed themselves or that someone feeds them, to how can they call for help if they are immobilised, and the need for staff to talk to disabled patients about lifting and handling.

Relatives of people with learning disabilities, especially those in supported living or institutional settings, are also worried that their family members, already segregated from society, will become even more isolated and unwell without family visits and without the daily routines on which they depend.

There are also concerns about potential disruptions to continuity of care and essential support services for people with all types of disabilities, due to potential

shortages of carers because of illness, redeployment or a lack of personal protective equipment. These include worries about basic access to food and medication and the crucial provision of personal care from carers coming into homes.

If you are disabled, your access to services, including health and social services, is already protected from discrimination under the law. In times such as these, resources are not always adequate and difficult decisions have to be made. However, equality characteristics, such as disability, should not be the only thing that determines the care or services you get, or don't get. Government should continue to provide health services required by disabled people specifically because of their disabilities.

The Council of Europe is advising governments to "take all necessary actions" to address such concerns "including if necessary by taking extraordinary measures such as relaxing recruitment procedures, prioritising core services, providing financial aid to persons with disabilities to make up for additional expenses caused by the situation and integrating providers of support, including informal support, to persons with disabilities in public emergency planning concerning the provision of personal protective equipment and training."

While the current crisis is unprecedented in modern times, Government must ensure that its commitments to principles of equality and international human rights standards are at the core of decision making and service delivery. Article 11 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) obliges our Government to take all possible measures to ensure the protection and safety of people with disabilities in the national response to situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies.

This means taking measures to ensure people with disabilities have the same access to the range, quality and standard of health care as other people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government must act to prevent discriminatory denial of health care or life-saving services, food or fluids on the basis of disability.

We know that people with disabilities are also worried about job security, about money and redundancy. In the two week period since the Coronavirus restrictions started, almost all of new disability discrimination complaints to the Commission's discrimination advice team have been about employment and half of these have been Covid-19 related.

We've heard from people with disabilities who have been dismissed or put on sick leave rather than being furloughed; people who are vulnerable because of disabilities being required to go to work; people having to go to work who care for and live with disabled family members; people with disabilities being furloughed where they could work from home and key workers who have children with disabilities who cannot go to school as the support they need is not available. The people who have contacted us have various disabilities including those with compromised immune systems and those with Crohn's disease, diabetes, asthma and COPD.

It is crucial that businesses follow their policies and make any decisions on redundancies according to clear criteria and that the decisions are objective and fair

to all concerned. We have just issued some [guidance on furloughing and equality law for employers](#).

**Everyone is in this together.**

There is a pressing need to ensure that levels of support for people with disabilities are not adversely impacted by the current crisis, that transparent and accessible information is available, and that people with disabilities are fully involved in decision making at both a personal and public policy level. We are liaising with officials and key disability organisations to ensure that government fulfils its disability related obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disabled people must be informed and involved. Nobody should be unfairly disadvantaged because of who they are and protected equality grounds or characteristics should not be a determinant of outcomes.

ENDS

The Commission is extremely grateful to Michael Lorimer, David McDonald and Tony O'Reilly for their valuable and timely input into this article.