



House of Commons  
Women and Equalities  
Committee

---

**Unequal impact?  
Coronavirus, disability  
and access to services:  
Government Response  
to the Committee's  
Fourth Report**

---

**Fourth Special Report of Session  
2019–21**

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 13 April 2021*

## Women and Equalities Committee

The Women and Equalities Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

### Current membership

[Caroline Nokes MP](#) (*Conservative, Romsey and Southampton North*) (Chair)

[Ben Bradley MP](#) (*Conservative, Mansfield*)

[Theo Clarke MP](#) (*Conservative, Stafford*)

[Elliot Colburn MP](#) (*Conservative, Carshalton and Wallington*)

[Angela Crawley MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Lanark and Hamilton East*)

[Alex Davies-Jones MP](#) (*Labour, Pontypridd*)

[Peter Gibson MP](#) (*Conservative, Darlington*)

[Kim Johnson MP](#) (*Labour, Liverpool, Riverside*)

[Kate Osborne MP](#) (*Labour, Jarrow*)

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP](#) (*Labour, Streatham*)

[Nicola Richards MP](#) (*Conservative, West Bromwich East*)

The following Member is a former member of the Committee:

[Sara Britcliffe MP](#) (*Conservative, Hyndburn*)

### Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2021. This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament Licence, which is published at [www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright-parliament](http://www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright-parliament).

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at [www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities](http://www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities) and in print by Order of the House.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Hannah Barlow (Committee Operations Manager), James Clarke (Committee Specialist), Holly Dustin (Committee Specialist), Chloe Freeman (Committee Specialist), Mariam Keating (Committee Specialist), Sean Kinsey (Clerk), Anwen Rees (Second Clerk), Saffron Stewart (Committee Support Apprentice) and Sue Wrightman (Committee Operations Officer).

### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6123; the Committee's email address is [womeqcom@parliament.uk](mailto:womeqcom@parliament.uk).

You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@Commonswomequ](https://twitter.com/Commonswomequ).

# Fourth Special Report

---

The Committee published its Fourth report of Session 2019–21, [Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services](#) (HC 1050), on 22 December 2020. The Government response was received on 30 March 2021 and is appended below.

## Appendix: Government Response

---

### Introduction

The Government welcomes the publication of the ‘*Unequal impact? COVID-19, disability and access to services*’ report by the Women and Equalities Select Committee on 22 December 2020.

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government has worked hard to put in place unprecedented measures to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, ensuring that disabled people have access to disability benefits, financial support, food, medicines, as well as accessible communications and guidance.

We know that the impacts of COVID-19 have resulted in this being an extremely difficult time for disabled people, and we are committed to supporting them, their families and their carers. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the impact on disabled people and those with long term health conditions continues to be monitored to ensure the needs of disabled people are considered in our response.

The pandemic has demonstrated the need to ensure that the breadth of Government policy making considers the specific challenges facing disabled people, as we rebuild from COVID-19 and the economic crisis.

As the Government rebuilds the UK’s economy and society in response to, and taking into account the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is committed to transforming the lives of disabled people. On 22 February 2020, the Government set out its four- step roadmap to ease lockdown restrictions across England, in a safe and measured way. Before proceeding to the next step, the Government will examine the data to assess the impact of the previous step before easing restrictions. We will move cautiously to keep infection rates under control and ensure we continue to protect those who are most vulnerable from the virus.

The Government will publish the National Strategy for Disabled People in Spring 2021, informed by insights from the lived experience of disabled people and focussing on the issues they say affect them the most in all aspects of life, to achieve practical changes, which tackle barriers and increase opportunity, to ensure that all disabled people can play a full role in society.

At the same time, the Strategy will also outline the Government’s plans to work across organisational boundaries to improve evidence, to better understand and respond to not only the everyday experience of disabled people, but also the complex issues that affect them.

We would like to thank the Committee for its report and look forward to continuing to work collectively to mitigate COVID-19 disparities.

## About The Equality Hub

The new Equality Hub, in the Cabinet Office, brings together the Disability Unit, Government Equalities Office, Race Disparity Unit and, from 1 April 2021, the sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission. The Government Equalities Office's remit relates to gender equality, LGBT rights and the overall framework of equality legislation for Great Britain, and the other units' areas of focus are on cross-government disability policy and ethnic disparities respectively. The units that make up the Equality Hub work closely together, under a single Director. The Equality Hub reports to Ministers who have other portfolios outside of the Cabinet Office, led by the Minister for Women and Equalities.

The Equality Hub has a key role in driving government priorities on equality and opportunity. The Hub has a particular focus on improving the quality of evidence and data about disparities and the types of barriers different people face, ensuring that fairness is at the heart of everything we do. This includes statutory protected characteristics but also other aspects of inequality, including in particular socio-economic and geographic inequality. The Equality Hub is key to driving progress on the government's commitment to levelling up opportunity and ensuring fairness for all.

The creation of the Equality Hub, at the heart of government, means that we can deliver a coordinated response to cross-cutting equality issues, including the challenges presented by COVID-19. On those issues, the Government Equalities Office, Race Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit work closely together and with the COVID-19 Taskforce.

## Impacts on Food Accessibility

### Recommendation 1

*The Government should also publicly state the vital importance of reasonable adjustments to allow disabled people equal access to food during the pandemic. We recommend the Government better promote the EHRC's new guidance to food retailers, including in its ongoing discussions with the food retail sector on maintaining disabled people's access to food during the remainder of the pandemic. (Paragraph 27)*

The Government is clear that all service providers—including shops and supermarkets selling food—must at all times comply with the law and make reasonable adjustments for disabled customers.

In this context the duty is anticipatory, meaning that retailers should not wait to be asked, but should be planning for the fact that some of their customers will have mobility or breathing problems and have help and support ready for when this is needed. The Government welcomes the opportunity to restate this publicly.

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has been regularly engaging with supermarkets which are a part of the priority delivery slot scheme for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) and Non-Shielded-Vulnerable (NSV) individuals.

Both schemes are in place to ensure that access to food for vulnerable individuals is maintained throughout the pandemic. In line with the national roadmap, Defra are looking at both the CEV and NSV offer and are engaging with supermarkets, local authorities and charities to come up with options for the futures of both services. This is being looked at in conjunction with the ending of Shielding, the need for the services going forward and taking into account a scenario where shielding may be re-introduced in local lockdowns.

Defra took an active stance in promoting the Equalities and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) guidance during the pandemic and has worked closely with the EHRC and British Retail Consortium (BRC) about concerns raised by the EHRC. These were around retailers failing to uphold their duties under the Equalities Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people under the exceptional circumstances caused by COVID-19, both in store and online. In light of the concerns raised, work was undertaken with the EHRC and BRC to look at what could be done in the context of social distancing and acute pressure on online delivery capacity.

Defra continues to be a part of ongoing discussions with the retail sector through forums such as the fortnightly Retailer Forum.

In September 2020, the EHRC published guidance for retailers.<sup>1</sup> Defra facilitated a discussion with retailers ahead of the guidance being published to assist them to meet their duties under the Equalities Act 2010 during the pandemic.

## Recommendation 2

*We further recommend the Government consider, with disabled people, as part of its consultation on the proposed National Strategy for Disabled People, the steps needed to more effectively adopt a social model of disability in relation to maintaining disabled people's access to food for the remainder of this pandemic and in future crises.*

*This consultation should consider the actions required to eliminate barriers to physical and online food shopping. The Government should consider with disabled people how, in crisis situations, to identify and reach a single category of people, including disabled people who may not have clinical needs and people with medical conditions who may not be disabled, who need food deliveries.*

*It should consider not only the steps required by retailers to meet obligations under the Equality Act but also steps required by the Government to meet its obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to respond to emergency situations in a way which includes consideration of the needs of disabled people. (Paragraph 28)*

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Defra has taken seriously the issues faced by disabled people accessing food. This includes providing support to the clinically extremely vulnerable cohort who were first advised to follow shielding guidance in March 2020. CEV individuals were advised to shield by a letter from the National Health Service, their GP or clinician. The letter encouraged them to register their support needs—including access to food—through the GOV.UK website registration system or telephone line. In March 2020, the Government rapidly stood up a National Shielding Service call centre

1 <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/retailers%E2%80%99-legal-responsibility-disabled-customers>

in England along with user support teams at local authorities, which used NHS data to identify and notify people who were recommended to shield and ensure they had access to the support they needed, including access to food and essential supplies.

In 2020, the government and wholesalers collaborated to deliver 4.7 million parcels to the CEV who were unable to access food. This scheme ended in August 2020 when the clinical advice to shield was lifted. This scheme was introduced as a temporary emergency response at the beginning of the pandemic in response to availability and access issues within the food supply chain. As food supply has returned to expected levels, it is not deemed necessary to re-implement the scheme.

However, Defra understood that schemes for CEV individuals only would not be sufficient in covering all disabled individual's needs. So, Defra—alongside other Government partners—put in place additional support structures for vulnerable individuals, which included:

- Priority delivery slot scheme—introduced in partnership with seven major supermarkets to ensure that individuals who had more specific needs could order their food and essential items, to be delivered directly to their homes, at a time when supermarkets were facing unprecedented demand.
- A further scheme was introduced whereby individuals could refer themselves as vulnerable to their Local Authorities and to four national charities.<sup>2</sup> This would allow those referred to receive priority delivery slots with 2 major supermarkets.
- Online guidance—the Government published online guidance on gov.uk around the different ways that individuals could access food and essential supplies which is updated regularly.
- Volunteer Responders—NHS Volunteer Responders help people avoid busy places by collecting their shopping, medicines and other important items, as well as providing regular friendly phone calls or lifts to medical appointments where needed. Individuals can be referred for support by a range of health, social care, charity or other professionals, or they can self refer into the service for support. The service has been available since April 2020 to provide support across the whole of England during the pandemic and was designed to complement local provision. It is currently commissioned until March 2021. Over 1.4m tasks have been undertaken in this time to support vulnerable people.
- Safe payment options—the Government worked with retailers to ensure that there were different payment options available to support individuals who were shopping for others.

Since the start of this pandemic, the Government has worked hard to ensure disabled people have access to food, as well as medicines, disability benefits, financial support, and accessible communications and guidance during the COVID-19 outbreak. This has been entirely consistent with the UK's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The National Strategy for Disabled People will also take into account the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled people and will focus on the issues that disabled people say affect them the most in all aspects of life.

The Government has engaged extensively with a diverse range of stakeholders to support the development of the National Strategy for Disabled People and future work. In order to hear the widest range of perspectives, this engagement has sought to listen to a broad range of voices from across urban and rural England; impairment type and other protected characteristics. It has been conducted through structured fora such as the:

- Disability Charities Consortium<sup>3</sup>—a consortium of the UK’s largest disability charities
- Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) Forum which was set up in July 2020 and is made up of DPOs and their representative organisations,
- Regional Stakeholder Network—a network of 225 disabled people, their organisations, parents and carers across 9 regions in England and chaired by a local chair who is well connected in their regions,
- Numerous workshops and roundtable meetings bringing together disabled people, their organisations businesses and business organisations, regulators, academia, professional bodies and the Devolved Administrations.

This engagement included online surveys and virtual round tables across the UK to enable disabled people to share views and insights on key challenges as the National Strategy is developed.

### Recommendation 3

*The Government must immediately publish its assessment of disabled people’s needs for support accessing food, including provision of free food box deliveries.*

*It must also publish a plan to review the adequacy of local arrangements and central government funding to support disabled people who need help getting food while coronavirus restrictions remain in place.*

*We expect such a plan to be published within two months of publication of this Report, and be both updated and re-published regularly during the remainder of the pandemic.*  
(Paragraph 36)

Defra has been assessing the support needed by disabled people for accessing food during the pandemic, through Equalities Impact Assessments (EIAs). These EIAs have been carried out for each scheme, including the Food Box scheme.

In line with the practice of successive administrations, the Government does not routinely publish EIAs.

---

3 Scope, Leonard Cheshire, Disability Rights UK, National Autistic Society, Mind, Mencap, Sense, Royal National Institute of Blind people (RNIB), Royal National Institute for Deaf people (RNID), and Business Disability Forum (BDF)

When setting up the NSV Referral scheme, potential barriers to communicating the scheme with disabled individuals were highlighted. It was noted that those with visual or learning difficulties may be unable to access promotional materials.

Consequently, Defra identified ways in which charities could actively engage and promote the programme to disabled people, by:

- partnering with local organisations that support people with sight loss or blindness and utilising staff across 75 eye hospitals to engage directly with patients experiencing sight loss to promote the scheme;
- using a variety of different communication channels to promote the scheme to disabled people. This includes engaging with disability support organisations and making promotional materials/leaflets available in Braille or audio format;
- making Text, Easy Read and BSL options available for promotional materials, to ensure that deaf individuals and those who are hard of hearing can access key information about the scheme; and by
- ensuring that their websites have a range of accessibility options, including Browsealoud for individuals that are deaf or hard of hearing.

In addition to the EIA for the NSV scheme, Defra conducted an EIA for the Food Box scheme. Through the EIA potential issues in accessing the food were identified, such as a person's mobility impacting their ability to pick up food boxes. Mitigations were provided for each potential issue.

For example, for those with mobility issues MHCLG were working with the food providers (Brakes and Bidfood) to ensure councils had access to data about who required help carrying their box into their house.

Defra will continue to monitor and evaluate the schemes which are still in place and should the need for such schemes arise again, lessons learned and findings from the evaluations of these schemes will be applied.

Defra recognises that it is important to keep under review the adequacy of local arrangements and central government funding with the continuation of challenges posed by the pandemic.

In line with the national roadmap, Defra are looking at both the CEV and NSV offer and are engaging with supermarkets, local authorities and charities to come up with options for the futures of both services. This is being looked at in conjunction with the ending of Shielding, the need for the services going forward and taking into account a scenario where shielding may be re-introduced in local lockdowns.

## **Statutory Code of Practice on the Public Sector Equality Duty**

### **Recommendation 4**

*The Government should consent to the Equality and Human Rights Commission issuing a statutory Code of Practice on the Public Sector Equality Duty. (Paragraph 55)*

As the Committee's report notes, the EHRC's existing technical guidance on the Public Sector Equality Duty is detailed and substantial, and public bodies are encouraged to consult it as a source for supporting their understanding of, and compliance with, the duty.

Making guidance statutory would not change the way that public bodies interact with it: it is already to their advantage to use the guidance to ensure they are meeting their responsibilities in a constructive, meaningful way, and to minimise any risk of legal challenge that they might face.

There is also now extensive case-law where courts have made rulings on compliance with the duty in specific circumstances, and this is of course available both to the courts themselves and to public authorities and their legal advisers.

Given this, the Government does not see any compelling need to depart from the normal preference of its predecessors against additional statutory codes of practice.

## Impacts on Health and Social Care

### Recommendation 5

*We recommend the Department of Health and Social Care work with the BMA, NHS and organisations representing people with learning disabilities, including user-led groups, to set stretching but achievable longer-term targets for the full reintroduction of annual health checks across the NHS and for the percentage of disabled people who attend them.* (Paragraph 64)

Although Covid-19 has impacted the ability of GPs to complete annual health checks and health action plans for people with a learning disability, they remain a priority for the NHS. NHS England and Improvement (NHSE/I) has taken several steps to support uptake and delivery of health checks throughout the pandemic.

NHSE/I ran an annual health checks campaign during the autumn and winter within their seven regions to promote uptake. An additional £325,000 has been specifically invested to help increase uptake and improve access for the most vulnerable and hard to reach groups including young people aged 14–19, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people, travellers and gypsy communities and people who have not had an annual health check before or for over two years. This is in addition to the GP Covid Capacity Expansion Fund of £150 million to support the expansion of general practice capacity up until the end of March 2021.

NHS leaders have also emphasised the importance of completing annual health checks and health action plans for people with a learning disability through regular bulletins and letters to primary care providers.

In the longer term, the NHS Long Term Plan sets out that by 2023/24, 75% of people with a learning disability on a GP learning disability register will have an annual health check.

## Recommendation 6

*We ask that the Department of Health and Social Care update us, in its response to this Report, on: progress in distributing clear face masks to NHS Trusts; the effectiveness of the pilot system to distribute the masks to social care providers through Local Resilience Forums; its assessment of the level of need for clear facemasks across health and social care services; and its plans for further procurement and distribution. (Paragraph 68)*

In the second half of 2020, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) procured 250,000 transparent face masks from ClearMask, which were piloted with the health and social care systems. The pilot demonstrated that transparent masks were valued and proved a need for them. Like all close-fitting masks, a number of masks will need to be made available to satisfy the needs of all potential wearers, which will all need to meet the standards set out in the Infection, Prevention and Control (IPC) guidance.

Building on this pilot, soft market engagement is being undertaken and there will be an assessment of a broader scope of products from a range of manufacturers to inform future procurement. This assessment will test different types of transparent masks that are currently at prototype stage, against a new technical specification being developed by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. This will include assessing the need and appropriateness of different masks for each end-user and setting, taking into account the feedback received from the ClearMask pilot. For example, a different mask may be needed in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) or for Speech and Language Therapists, or different masks may suit the needs of lip readers or patients with dementia.

DHSC will send a sample of masks to and seek feedback from a range of stakeholders, including representatives from adult social care, those who are deaf or have hearing loss, children and young people and people with a learning disability and autistic people.

Future procurement of any transparent masks will be informed by this work. DHSC are clear that transparent masks that are of the right standard and quality must be provided to the relevant clinical and care specialisms that need them.

## Recommendation 7

*We were disappointed with the 2020 Spending Review's financial settlement of £300 million in additional grant funding for local authorities' social care in 2021/22. We believe it falls considerably short of what is required. We agree with the Health and Social Care Committee that an increase in funding for social care, worth around £4 billion per year by 2023/24, will be a necessary first step towards fixing systemic problems in the sector. (Paragraph 84)*

DHSC are providing councils with access to over £1 billion of additional funding for social care in 2021/22. This includes £300 million of new grant funding for social care, on top of the £1 billion Social Care grant announced in 2019 which is being maintained in line with the manifesto commitment. The government is also enabling local authorities to access up to £790m of new funding for adult social care through a 3 percent adult social care precept. In addition, it is expected that councils will be provided with an estimated funding of around £3 billion in 2021/22 to help manage the impact of COVID-19 across their services, including in adult social care, and to compensate for income losses.

The 2020 Spending Review settlement allows Local Authorities to increase their core spending power by 4.5% in cash terms. This funding will support local authorities to maintain care services while keeping up with rising demand and recovering from the impact of COVID-19. In the longer term, the government is committed to sustainable improvement of the adult social care system and will bring forward proposals this year.

## Recommendation 8

*The Government must bring forward a social care reform package, which includes the whole sector, in this financial year. There has been a tendency by successive governments to focus on the problem of rising costs of caring for elderly people, particularly in care homes, and the unfairness of being forced to sell family homes to pay for care in later life. While these are key problems for which solutions must be found, the Government's reform package must be more wide-ranging, and include actions to improve the quality and personalisation of care and support for working age disabled people across all social care settings. It must address workforce issues across the sector, including low pay, poor career progression and high turnover. Its reforms must include a plan to more effectively integrate services and achieve parity of esteem across health and social care as a single system. The vital importance of the whole social care sector and its workforce has never been so apparent; it must now be valued accordingly. (Paragraph 85)*

As set out in the Spending Review, the government is committed to the improvement of the adult social care system and will bring forward proposals this year.

Our objectives for reform are to enable an affordable, high quality and sustainable adult social care system that meets people's needs, whilst supporting health and care to join up services around people. DHSC wants to ensure that every person receives the care they need and that it is provided with the dignity they deserve.

This is a complex area and a range of options is being considered. DHSC believes that a stable social care provider market and a qualified and committed workforce will be central to their ambitions for raising the quality of, and access to social care.

DHSC wants to empower recipients of care, by supporting people to live independently in their own homes and communities, for as long as possible.

DHSC also wants to improve the information provided to the public on the social care system, enabling them to plan for their care and make better choices. DHSC has made the commitment that nobody needing care should be forced to sell their home to pay for it.

## Impacts on Education and Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

### Recommendation 9

*Delivering effective support for children and young people with SEND during a public health crisis was inevitably a massive challenge, to which some local authorities were unable to rise. The pandemic demonstrated and exacerbated a widely acknowledged pre-existing crisis in SEND provision. As set out in our interim Report, many children and young people received little or no support for three months. The Government must now prioritise its SEND review,*

*launched over a year ago, and bring forward as a matter of urgency reforms which address fundamental problems of funding, consistency of support, accountability and integration of services, identified by the Education Committee and the National Audit Office in 2019. The outcome of the SEND review must be published no later than the first quarter of 2021 and set out the Government's plan to reach a sustainable funding model while achieving the core aims of the 2014 reforms. (Paragraph 98)*

The COVID-19 pandemic has unavoidably delayed the completion of the Review. The SEND Review remains a key priority for this government and it is fully committed to delivering real change.

The Review team has used this time to ask fundamental questions, and has drawn on the best evidence available and expertise from children, young people, families, and people across education, health and care to answer them.

It is clear that there is some great practice, but it is not yet common practice. It is equally clear that the issues the SEND system faces are very significant. Nevertheless, the Department for Education (DfE) thinks it is possible to deliver the vision of the 2014 SEND Reforms on a financially sustainable basis, while improving the experience of accessing support.

DfE do want to get this right, and that means consultation. DfE intends to publish proposals for consultation in the spring of 2021, and are thinking carefully about the best time and method to consult so everyone can fully engage with that exercise.

## **Recommendation 10**

*We recommend that funding for the remaining tranches of the universal catch up allocation be increased by around £211 million, to allow mainstream schools to receive £240 per pupil with an EHC plan or receiving SEN Support, ring-fenced for their catch-up support in this academic year. We further recommend the Department procure an additional strand of specialist provision in the National Tutoring Programme, designed to support pupils with EHC plans and those receiving SEN Support, across all schools. (Paragraph 105)*

The DfE has applied additional weighting to specialist settings—special schools, alternative provision and hospital schools—recognising the significantly higher per pupil costs they face.

DfE have looked carefully at the basis on which funding is allocated to SEND pupils and have extended the higher rate of £240 per place to special units within mainstream schools. Those schools' second and third payment allocations will be uplifted to ensure they receive the full amount during this academic year.

All schools should use the total catch up premium funding available to them as a single total from which to prioritise support for particular pupils, including children with SEND or EHCPs, according to their need.

To help schools make the best use of this funding, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has published a support guide for schools with evidence-based approaches to catch up for all students and a further school planning guide: 2020 to 2021.

DfE are committed to ensuring that the National Tutoring Programme remains as inclusive as possible. When selecting our approved Tuition Partners, DfE worked with the Education Endowment Foundation to ensure that tuition providers had relevant experience in working with children who have SEND in both mainstream and specialist settings so that as many pupils as possible can be supported.

DfE understands that it is important that tutors are able to adapt their provision to suit a range of needs, however it is equally important to recognise that academic tutoring will not meet the needs of every pupil. That is why school leaders have the flexibility to spend the £650 universal catch-up premium (which is weighted towards specialist settings in recognition of the higher costs of provision in these settings) in the way that best meets the needs of their pupils.

26 of our 33 providers are able to support students with SEND, with 17 of these also able to support students in special school settings.

In February 2021, the Government appointed Sir Kevan Collins as Education Recovery Commissioner to advise how to help pupils make up their learning over the course of this Parliament. The Education Recovery Commissioner will engage with parents, pupils and teachers in the development of this broader approach which will examine a range of options to help education settings use evidence-based interventions to support their pupils to make up lost learning. DfE will share further details in due course.

As part of this, also in February 2021, DfE announced a £700m plan to continue to support young people catch up on lost learning, including an expansion of our successful tutoring programmes. This includes a further allocation of £83m to expand the National Tutoring Programme for 5 to 16-year-olds in 2021/22.

## National Strategy for Disabled People

### Recommendation 11

*Addressing perceived weaknesses in the Government's consultation and engagement with disabled people must form a key strand of the proposed National Strategy for Disabled People. The Government must consult widely with disabled people and their organisations on ways to embed in the Strategy genuinely effective mechanisms by which disabled people can influence policies and practices which directly affect them. (Paragraph 112)*

Where possible and appropriate, the Government seeks to engage with disabled people as part of its decision making. The Disability Unit has undertaken extensive engagement with disabled people in preparation of the UK National Strategy for Disabled People.

This includes hosting numerous online workshops and roundtable meetings on a whole raft of themes and cross-cutting issues, such as: Transitions to Adulthood and Outcomes; Being Part of a Community; Internet and Website Accessibility; Accessible Built Environment; Assistive Tech and Economic recovery to name a few.

The Unit has worked across government with a plethora of stakeholders representing many disabled people and ensuring a wide section of impairments are covered, such as Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee meetings - DfT's statutory advisory committee.

The Disability Unit recognises that research conducted by disabled people, or focused on their everyday experiences can often illuminate these experiences in a way that traditional research cannot. Which is why the unit has also undertaken specific research focused on the lived experiences of disabled people to inform the strategy which will also invite public policy makers to draw on this type of work as a key source of insight in the future.

This is all in addition to the numerous discussions with existing stakeholders fora, such as the Disabled Charities Consortium, the Disabled Peoples' Organisations Forum, and the Regional Stakeholder Networks. All of these fora are connected to other networks and groups. For example, one of the RSN regional groups undertook some lived experience information gathering research which provided valuable insight from nearly 400 disabled people.

The Disability Unit has also undertaken work to ensure a wide variety of disabled people are provided the opportunity to share their views through the UK Disability Survey, launched on 15 January 2021. As of 8 March 2021, over 15,000 people had responded.

The survey seeks views from disabled people, parents and carers, and the wider public and forms an important part of our wider engagement with disabled people to inform the strategy and guide public policy making in the future.

The Minister for Disabled People has regular engagement with disability stakeholders, individually and in fora like the Disability Charities Consortium. As part of its COVID-19 vaccine deployment deliberations, the Minister for Disabled People and Minister for COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment both attended the DCC meeting on 26 January 2021. This was attended by a consortium of 10 of the UK's largest disability charities. Both Ministers fielded questions from the DCC and members of the Regional Disability Stakeholder Network - a network of 225 disabled people, their organisations, parents and carers across 9 regions in England. The issues raised were then fed into the Vaccine Deployment teams for their consideration, and have helped improve overall plans.

Furthermore, The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) places a strong emphasis on engaging with stakeholders to inform health and disability policy. The Department has hosted a series of workshops across the country where local disability organisations and disabled people have shared their experiences of DWP services and priorities for future changes. DWP has continued this engagement since Covid-19 with a series of virtual events with charities and disabled people. This is in addition to engagement through existing forums with national organisations. The Green Paper will be strongly influenced by the views of disabled people and representatives from disability organisations, drawing on the significant engagement conducted so far and from future events.

## Diversity and inclusion in practice

### Recommendation 12

*We recommend Ministers and officials involved in communicating public health messages to disabled people should undergo training in psychologically informed communications which take fully into account and empathise with disabled people's lived experience. (Paragraph 117)*

The House of Commons offers a range of support on demand for Members' Professional Development, covering parliamentary skills, office essentials, developing expertise, representation and engagement and personal impact. The House provides Disability Awareness—'Getting it Right on Disability' training to support the staff of the MPs particularly those with management responsibilities.

The Civil Service is committed to developing inclusive workplaces and currently provides two development courses for officials on disability issues:

- 'Becoming Disability Confident' to raise awareness of disabilities in the workplace and understand the different types of disability which staff may encounter.
- 'Disability Inclusive Management' to explore what an inclusive management approach looks, sounds and feels like, as well as the behaviours that can enable or impede that approach.

## Accessible Communications

### Recommendation 13

*We recommend the Cabinet Office implement in full the list of accessible communications asks from RNID and other charities. We expect real progress to have been made towards this by the time the government responds to this Report and urge full implementation no later than the end of the first quarter of 2021. (Paragraph 124)*

It is vital that public information on COVID-19 is accessible to all, which is why the Government is committed to improving key COVID-related communications in a way that is accessible and inclusive. Progress in this area means that:

- Important health communications, for example, regarding COVID-19 symptoms, Stay Alert and NHS Test and Trace content, are available in alternative formats, including Easy Read, British Sign Language and Audio.
- COVID-19 statements and speeches from the Prime Minister are now also made available in transcript form on GOV.UK, aligning with accessibility standards.
- The BBC News Channel now broadcasts government press conferences with British Sign Language (BSL), and iPlayer uploads shortly afterwards and since 21 May 2020, the BBC has made their BSL interpretation video feed available to all other broadcasters and to Number 10, for use on government social channels.

In this important endeavour, the Government has welcomed many partnerships, including with disability organisations, that have helped to get critical messages and advice across to everyone. For example, The Senior Lead on Accessible Information, and colleagues from the National Resilience Communications Hub, meet disability groups on a monthly basis through a communications working group. The group is briefed on the latest COVID-19 guidance and accessible assets, and works to ensure that communications to disabled people continue to be accessible and timely.

The Disability Unit, part of the Equality Hub at the heart of government, worked with the RNIB to transcribe [gov.uk](http://gov.uk) pages on general COVID-19 guidelines and financial advice into spoken word formats. This guidance was made available on RNIB phone lines.

The Government has made significant progress on the issues identified in the list from RNID and other charities, which outlined a set of concerns relating specifically to disabled people and the availability of accessible information during the pandemic. The full list can be seen in Annex A.

## Recommendation 14

*We recommend the Liaison Committee of the House of Commons review the adequacy of funding, technical capabilities and expertise available to support live BSL interpretation and subtitles of select committee proceedings on [www.parliamentlive.tv](http://www.parliamentlive.tv). We further recommend that the House of Commons Commission make it an objective to ensure that a greater proportion of the coverage of the House is fully accessible to Deaf people via the provision of live BSL interpretation and subtitles of debates. (Paragraph 127)*

These recommendations are for consideration by the House of Commons Liaison Committee and House of Commons Commission. The Government awaits views on these matters with interest.

## Call for an Independent Inquiry

### Recommendation 15

*In the light of starkly disproportionate and tragic data on death rates from coronavirus of disabled people, including shocking figures for deaths of people, including young people, with learning disabilities, there must be a discrete independent inquiry into the causes. It must be a wide-ranging inquiry, including consideration of the role of the Government's and public authorities' policies and decisions in adverse outcomes for disabled people. The independent inquiry must be established as soon as we have gained control of the pandemic, which we all hope will be in the first half of 2021. (Paragraph 134)*

The Government has always been clear that there will be opportunities to look back, analyse and reflect on all aspects of COVID-19.

For now, the Government is focused entirely on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and saving lives.

## Accessible Communications

### Recommendation 16

*We recommend the Accessible Information Standard be extended to apply to all public health messages from government departments.*

It is vital that public information is accessible to all. Organisations providing NHS care and publicly funded adult social care providers must comply with the Accessible Information Standard (AIS) to meet the *communication* needs of patients, service users, parents and

carers with a disability, impairment or sensory loss. Under existing legislation, the scope of the AIS is limited to organisations which provide NHS care and/or publicly funded adult social care. Although government departments are otherwise not required to comply with the AIS, under the Equality Act (2010) and Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), all government departments are required to have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

That is why the Equality Hub reissued guidance to all Government Departments last year, reminding them of their duties under the Equality Act and The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018, with specific reference to accessibility of COVID-19-related communications. The guidance included advice and insight for effective practice and references for further support.

The Government is committed to improving key COVID-related communications in a way that is accessible. The response to Recommendation 13 and Annex A set out actions taken by the Government to improve the availability of accessible information during the pandemic.

## Annex A

---

*Further information on the implementation of the list of accessible communications asks from RNID and other charities.*

### Setting up the COVID-19 Communications Working Group with disability stakeholders

Stakeholders requested regular ongoing communication with the Senior Lead on Accessible Information to ensure that accessibility is built into communications from the outset and that accessible material is communicated to disabled people.

The Senior Lead on Accessible Information and colleagues from the National Resilience Communications Hub meet disability groups on a monthly basis through a communications working group. Set up in May 2020, this comprises representatives from the Disability Charities Consortium: Disability Rights UK, Scope, RNIB, RNID, National Autistic Society, Sense, Leonard Cheshire Disability, Mencap, MIND, MS Society and Muscular Dystrophy UK. The group is briefed on the latest COVID-19 guidance and accessible assets, and works to ensure that communications to disabled people continue to be accessible and timely.

The National Resilience Communications Hub has also worked with disability stakeholders to co-create communications assets targeted to disabled people and the general public, including an animation about face coverings, a set of exemption cards for people who are exempt from wearing a face covering and for those who have difficulty with social distancing, and an animation about social distancing to remind the public that some people are less able to do so.

Relevant communications and marketing assets, information and guidance are made available in a range of accessible formats including BSL, large print, audio, EasyRead and Braille, including via a partnership with the RNIB.

### Accessible Broadcasting

To ensure those who use BSL can receive the latest COVID-19 updates from the No10 COVID-19 press conferences live, the government provides live BSL interpretation which is available on all the Number 10 social media channels, the BBC News channel and iPlayer. This BSL feed is also made available to other broadcasters for them to include in their live coverage.

### Accessible Social Media

The Government Communication Service continues to embed good practice for accessible social media in our communications including via training for government communicators.

The Government Communications Service has issued five principles for inclusive communication to all staff. These principles set out that all government and public

communication must be clear, comprehensible and accessible for all audiences. The principles include advice on how to make communications accessible across a range of platforms.

The Government Digital Service provides webinars on digital accessibility via the GCS website; raising the awareness of the importance of accessible communications across the profession and training government communicators to create clear, impactful and accessible communications as a standard.

The Government Communications Service in collaboration with Government Digital Service also issued a guide to accessible social media, to support government departments when communicating COVID-19 messaging to the public.

### **Accessible communications**

As a matter of course, COVID-19 announcements and publication of new guidance are supported by a range of alternative formats including BSL with voiceover, large print, audio formats and braille available by order.

Most recently the COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021 Roadmap, Winter Plan, the regional tiers and national lockdown were published in accessible formats. These were published on social media channels, on gov.uk and issued to stakeholders to disseminate via their owned and earned channels to maximise reach. Further accessible communications assets are made available to stakeholders via Public Health England's Campaign Resource Centre.

The Department for Health and Social Care partnered with the RNIB to ensure that shielding letters for people who are clinically extremely vulnerable are available in Braille through the RNIB phone line, as well as being available in other accessible formats.

Cabinet Office, in consultation with disability stakeholders, has produced guidance setting out how to develop accessible communications. Cabinet Office has also worked with local authority communicators to increase their skills in delivering accessible communications, including providing advice about accessible formats, social media and phone lines.

### **Accessible websites**

Government websites and mobile apps must meet the Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations which came into force for public sector bodies on 23 September 2018. All websites in scope of the regulations needed to be compliant by 23 September 2020 (or immediately if launched later) and mobile apps in scope will need to be compliant by 23 June 2021.

Websites and mobile apps that are not in scope of the new regulations are still subject to the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 in Great Britain or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland.

As with accessible social media, we continue to embed good practice within the government communications profession.

Government communicators have access to training which sets out best practice and advice about digital communications and accessibility.

### **Accessible contact methods**

Public Health England has created vaccine guidance in alternative formats including Easy Read and Braille for people with visual and hearing impairments. In order to identify which formats are required, NHS data on people's preferred formats is used prior to sending letters out. Further information including booking information is in development in alternative formats by NHS England.

The phone line on the letter is accessible for people with hearing impairments. People can use the phone line or an online booking system to book a vaccine and they have a choice as to where they go to ensure their accessibility needs are met.

At vaccination sites there are facilities for people with hearing impairments. NHS England and Public Health England have taken on board stakeholder feedback and are working to ensure that consent forms available at the vaccination sites are accessible for people with visual impairments.

### **Accessible apps**

Government websites and mobile apps must meet the accessibility regulations which came into force for public sector bodies on 23 September 2018. Mobile apps need to be compliant by 23 June 2021.

The NHS Test and Trace app was developed with an accessibility specialist and insights from people with learning disabilities and other requirements to ensure it is usable and accessible.

The app works with the built-in accessibility features on iOS and Android phones such as screen readers, magnification and colour preferences. The text has been reviewed by a Level 8 copywriter to ensure accessibility of a reading age of 8.