

## **Written evidence submitted by the Greater Manchester Disabled People's Panel (CVD0034)**

### **Who we are:**

The Greater Manchester (GM) Disabled People's Panel is an independent strategic body made up of 14 Disabled People's Organisations from across Greater Manchester (see Appendix 1). It is the only regional city panel of its kind in the UK and was established in 2019. All members are disabled people and we seek to influence policy to support the rights of disabled people in Greater Manchester. We also scrutinise, consult, and advise the Mayor Andy Burnham and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

By Disabled People we mean anyone facing disabling societal barriers due to their impairments or conditions and this includes mental health, hearing or visual impairments, learning disabled people, neurodiverse people, and those with chronic illness or fatigue.

### **Our Submission to WEC:**

We submitted a list of issues in April 2020 to the WEC's call for evidence for its inquiry "Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics"

In April and May 2020, we undertook a Greater Manchester-wide survey to identify the issues facing disabled people during the Covid-19/Coronavirus Pandemic. The evidence from our GM Big Disability Survey Covid-19 has now been submitted to the relevant Greater Manchester Authorities. The Survey questions focussed principally on social care, access to food and medical supplies and PPE. We are also submitting recommendations relating to Disclosure, Face masks, Employment, Education and Transport based on the lived experience of our Panel Organisations and their members. Our submission below includes our findings from the Survey and our recommendations.

### **GM Big Disability Survey – Covid-19:**

From the outset of the pandemic, member organisations of the Panel have been working to support disabled people, many of whom have been isolated from information, support and access to basic provisions. The Panel has met on a weekly basis since mid-March, sharing information, resources and inputting wherever possible the voice and experiences of disabled people. Having recognised the impact digital exclusion and isolation would have from the onset of the pandemic, the Panel sought to make Community Hubs more accessible, known and available to disabled people. Throughout the initial crisis stage, when working to improve the situations most affecting disabled people, the Panel were asked for the evidence it had of disabled people's experiences.

To support the existing lived experience, knowledge and expertise of the Panel, two surveys were therefore commissioned to evidence the impact of the pandemic on disabled people across Greater Manchester. In order to make this gathering of information and data

accessible, many Panel member organisations supported disabled people to complete the survey, including over the phone.

In addition to the Panel members widely circulating the surveys amongst their members and networks, the surveys were hosted on gmconsult.org, shared through social media, included in mainstream media press releases and circulated through partner agencies in order to hear from a wide variety of disabled people.

Once the survey was closed, GMCA provided an impartial analysis of the data. The findings of the survey confirmed the Panel's assertion that people were being disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The survey confirmed that disabled people are experiencing social isolation, reduced social care support, issues relating to access to food, medicine and information, and a severe impact on mental health.

## **1. Key Findings**

Two surveys were commissioned to understand the views of disabled people since the outbreak of Covid-19. 677 people took part in the full survey and 630 (93% of respondents) of these identify as disabled. An easy read version was also available and this had an additional 259 participants, 60% of which identified that they had a learning disability.

20% of participants of the full survey received a letter from the Government to indicate that they were in the 'high risk' group for the Covid-19 outbreak. Of the 80% that did not receive this letter, 57% reported having support needs of which only 19% are getting all of their needs met.

90% of respondents said that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health.

31% of respondents to the full survey were not at all aware of the community hubs. Accessibility to the hubs varied slightly by impairment with those who identified their impairment as 'hearing' having the highest proportion of respondents that found the hub not accessible at all.

A third of disabled people believe that their local authority is not doing anything significant whilst 76% of disabled people are dissatisfied with the help provided by the government. A third of disabled people believe that the government is neglecting disabled people.

56% of respondents had experienced some difficulty sourcing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

62% of respondents have experienced one or more health visit being stopped due to Covid-19.

A third of disabled people are worried about their housing situation and 37% said that their housing was not accessible or only partially accessible.

Disabled people are less satisfied with their care plans since the outbreak of Covid-19. Prior to the outbreak, 58% felt satisfied or very satisfied and this has reduced to 35% after Covid-19.

## 2. Recommendations

The survey and report explored the experiences of disabled people during the initial crisis phase. As we ease out of this phase of lockdown, disabled people are at significant risk of being further marginalised and excluded.

The Panel makes the following recommendations:

- **Equality Impact Assessments:** The Panel recommends that all public bodies providing services to disabled people in Greater Manchester should undertake Equality Impact Assessments of their Covid-19 responses and involve disabled people in the assessment of these. The recommendations from these assessments must then be actively put in place, to ensure the recovery phase and any future peaks do not further negatively impact on disabled people.
- **Digital Inclusion:** The Panel recommends that digital exclusion is recognised as an urgent priority (56% of digitally excluded people are disabled people (ONS 2019)). Digital exclusion is severely impacting upon disabled people during this pandemic. The Panel recommends the provision of digital devices to enable digital inclusion. The Panel also recommends that the device itself will not solve digital exclusion, but that the costs of data/broadband and the technical support and training must also be included for the successful inclusion of disabled people.
- **Accessible Information:** The Panel recommends that accessible information be produced consistently. Access to information is vital to enable disabled people to make informed choices about their lives. Public health information and government guidance in particular must be concise, accessible and clear to enable disabled people to make informed choices to ensure their safety. The Panel recommends that information should be provided in an accessible format to every disabled person (as per Accessible Information Standard). Accessible formats include easy read, large print, braille, audio and BSL.
- **Include Disabled People in Decision Making:** For the recovery transition and the aftermath of this pandemic not to perpetuate the same isolation from services provision and support in the future, the Panel recommends disabled people's organisations are included in all levels of decision making. Disabled people and our organisations must be involved in the development of systems and policies from the very onset, and at local, regional and national levels. The situations faced by disabled

people in Greater Manchester and nationally exposed the lack of consideration and inclusion of disabled people in national emergency planning.

- **Isolation, Safety and Mental Health:** Prior to the pandemic, mental health services were already heavily impacted by austerity, leading to widespread shortages in mental health support services. It is critical that disabled people – and others experiencing mental health distress – are able to access support. The Panel recommends in order to combat the numerous, urgent mental health crisis many disabled people are in (including social isolation; anxiety & depression; increased risk of domestic abuse; food insecurity; access to CAMHS and addiction) that there is an urgent prioritisation of funding and resourcing of mental health support.
- **Support independent living for disabled people:** Long term strategies must be developed to support independent living in the community, reversing the effects austerity has had on disabled people's rights to live their lives in a place of their choosing, with access to the required support. The Panel recommends a re-prioritisation of independent living, and that this needs to be recognised as an equal, vital right, in accordance with Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People.
- **Personal Assistance / Carers:** The Panel recommends that measures including clear avenues for accessing PPE; flexibility in direct payments being used to pay for alternative PAs or equipment; LA and providers creating a "pooling mechanism" for emergency PA/carer cover; and pre-emptive permission to pay family/friends if PAs/carers have to self-isolate be put into place to prevent current crisis situations for disabled people as we move into the recovery phase, and to improve the emergency planning should there be future peaks or crisis situations.
- **Statutory Standards, Social Care Assessments and Health Care:** The Panel recommends that the Care Act 2014 standards be kept as the minimum required standards. The Panel recommends these measures be implemented to ensure that disabled people do not continue to experience unnecessary consequences, on top of the pandemic itself.
- **The development of a BAME disabled people's organisation:** Despite extensive cross-circulation of the survey, BAME disabled people were underrepresented. The Panel recommends the development of a BAME disabled people's organisation. Panel members offer to support the development and creation of a 'BAME' pan-impairment disabled people's organisation in Greater Manchester.
- **The development and resourcing for a disabled people's organisation in each of the 10 Greater Manchester boroughs:** The current boroughs without an established local disabled people's organisation (Bolton, Bury, Oldham and Trafford) corresponded with the lowest contributions from disabled people in these areas. In order to ensure localities are including disabled people in their decision making the Panel recommends the development, resourcing and inclusion of disabled people's

organisations within each of the boroughs in which there is currently a gap. There are Panel members who can support this work.

- **Employment:** The Panel recommends that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, local authorities and other key public anchor organisations in each Greater Manchester borough conduct an urgent Equality Impact Assessment as part of their COVID ‘return to work’ plan and engage with disabled employees to agree reasonable adjustments. The Panel also recommends that the GMCA and GM Employment Charter ensure that clear guidance and standards are developed to ensure disabled employees within all Charter Supporter organisations are supported to return to work.
- **Education:** The Panel are concerned that children who have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are not receiving the same level of support. The Panel has been told that some children with EHCP were unable to continue attending mainstream schools, and that little or no support was provided. The Panel recommends that Greater Manchester should aspire to have a fully supported inclusive education system.
- **Utilise the knowledge, insight and value of the lived experience of Disabled People’s Organisations:** The Panel recommends the expertise, advice and guidance that the Panel and disabled people’s organisations can provide be fully utilised, in order to “build back better” with disabled people.

The Panel presented its findings and recommendations to the Members of Parliament representing Greater Manchester constituencies, elected members and senior council officers as well as the GM Mayor Andy Burnham and other regional leaders at a briefing event on 30th June 2020. Leaders and politicians have shown a willingness to listen and engage with our issues. The full Survey report is available here:

<https://gmdisabledpeoplespanel.com/gm-big-disability-survey-covid19/>

### **Nationally extended recommendations:**

The impact of austerity has undermined the infrastructure that allowed the views of disabled people to be properly considered. The national picture of austerity has had a detrimental effect on the lives of disabled people on a local level. Therefore, although the Panel’s remit is Greater Manchester, the Panel has recommendations for the wider national context:

- The Government should require all local authorities and councils to ensure the development and resourcing of disabled people’s organisations in their areas and provide adequate funding to local councils to do so;
- City regions, such as Greater Manchester, should establish panels with a similar remit to the Greater Manchester Disabled People’s Panel;
- All local authorities and other key public anchor organisations should conduct urgent Equality Impact Assessment as part of their COVID ‘return to work’ plan and engage with disabled employees to agree reasonable adjustments;

- The Government should ensure that we have a national fully financed and supported inclusive education system;
- The Government should publicise without delay its social care green paper. Its scope should cover all disabled people regardless of age. It should look to establish a professional structure and remuneration for social care staff to ensure that the work of care workers, and the people who receive this care, are valued.

## **Evidence and recommendations post-survey:**

### **Disclosure**

Employees and students, who cannot safely return to work or education, face an enormous pressure to disclose their disability and/or long-term health conditions in order to access support. This has been an issue throughout the pandemic, with individuals being forced to disclose, to receive food deliveries, etc. This has led to Disabled people being seen as ‘burdens’ rather than the environment being inaccessible.

**The Panel recommends employers, schools and universities and service providers comply with their anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments to avoid the unnecessary distress of forced disclosure.**

### **Face masks**

Face masks place D/deaf individuals at a significant disadvantage, as face masks restrict lip-reading and also impair audio quality and attenuate speech. This poses significant communication challenges for individuals with hearing difficulties. Some individuals will also be unable to wear face masks, as a result of mobility difficulties and/or neurodiversity. While these individuals are exempt from wearing face masks, there is a risk of discrimination, harassment and abuse on public transport and in public venues if sufficient information is not provided to raise awareness. Already Panel members have reported harassment in person and “shaming” of disabled people on social media for not wearing masks.

In anticipation of the problems disabled people may face when not wearing masks on public transport, Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) has produced a flash card for those exempt from wearing face coverings.

**The Panel recommends that transparent face masks should be made compulsory in public buildings and workplaces with posters/leaflets to raise awareness of issues associated with non-transparent face masks. The Panel also recommends a national communications campaign to explain reasons why someone may not be wearing a mask and identify penalties that protect disabled people from hate crime. The Panel welcomes initiatives such as TfGM’s Journey Assistance Card (Exemptions Card) but also recommends the evaluation of the effectiveness of these cards in reducing hate crime on public transport.**

### **Education**

- **Fines for non-attendance at school:** the Government's message that anyone who does not attend school in September will be fined, will disproportionately affect disabled children/young people who will be experiencing high levels of anxiety about returning to school.
- **EHCP post lockdown:** the Panel are concerned that there will be an increase in mainstream schools in September saying that they are unable to meet the needs of disabled children/young people. This was already a major issue before the pandemic.
- **Return to study in Higher Education:** in some cases, universities in Greater Manchester have undertaken EIAs / risk assessments for return to study. However, the practicality of any introduced measures will need further review once students return to campus. This will require consultation with disabled students at all stages of the process.
- **Financial support:** The majority of disabled students rely on Disabled Student's Allowance to fund their reasonable adjustments. As a result of the pandemic disabled students have found that the support required has changed significantly, leaving them without these adjustments to enable remote working. To make changes to this support, a new application is required. Due to remote working, it has also become more challenging for individuals 'shielding' to process claim forms for their support. This not only leaves disabled students without support but also has a detrimental impact on their mental health and wellbeing.
- **Inaccessible Higher Education Teaching and Learning:** universities are moving to online learning. While the possibility for remote learning and working will have a positive impact on some disabled students, it could also have negative effect if not properly assessed.
- **Education and training to prepare for work:** the Panel has several concerns about education when it is a pathway into work. Even before the pandemic disabled people were more likely to be out of work. The accessibility of Adult Education and vocational skills courses is essential. Financial pressure already exists on education providers to do more of the courses with best financial return rather than those which need more one-to-one support. The safety of courses is also a concern as well as apprenticeships and on-the-job training. In addition, pre-work support from community-based organisations may be threatened as funding tightens due to reductions in Local Authority, public sector, Trust and foundation Funding.  
**The Panel recommends the prioritisation of Adult Education funding and ring-fencing Adult Education funding for those disproportionality affected by Covid-19.**

## Employment

- **The National Association of Disabled Staff Networks in Universities:** is a member of the Panel and has identified a number of barriers to employment. The University of Manchester has already announced that significant financial measures are necessary

to reduce costs, including voluntary redundancy schemes. Measures for returning to work to abide by government guidelines (e.g. social distancing) have also been announced. However, not all of these policies have been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment to ensure that they are not disadvantaging groups with protected characteristics. Disabled staff make up a significant portion of the university community (4.3% staff, from HESA 2018/19).

- **Access to Work:** similarly to disabled students, many disabled people rely on Government schemes such as Access to Work to fund reasonable adjustments. The move to home and remote working has led to a change in support required by disabled employees. Requesting changes to an individual package can be time-consuming and increases pressure on disabled people to return to work when it might not be safe to do so.
- **Job security:** Disabled people are twice as likely to move out of employment than non-disabled people, with 1/3 of disabled people on part-time contracts ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/875199/employment-of-disabled-people-2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/875199/employment-of-disabled-people-2019.pdf)). There is concern that disabled individuals will be at more risk of financial schemes to cut pay costs. If disabled individuals are unable to perform their job due to lack of reasonable adjustments or are currently on furlough schemes, this could place them at more risk of being chosen as potential candidates for these schemes. As the furlough scheme is gradually being phased out, there is concern that Disabled people will be forced to return to work when it not safe for them to do so. For disabled staff who fall in the ‘shielding’ category, return to work would be high risk and may force them to take sick leave or put their job at risk.

**The Panel recommends that the Greater Manchester Employment Charter delivers events and good practice guidance to ensure disabled employees retain work. The Panel also recommends that the Government, employers and public authorities monitor and publish data relating to disabled people and employment, including before and after the pandemic.**

- **Return to work:** Current measures being put into place within the workplaces for returning to work have the potential to discriminate against disabled employees. For example, one-way traffic systems could not provide an accessible route for wheelchair users and individuals who are blind or have visual impairments. It has also been reported to the Panel that employers have not received guidelines or support on how to guarantee hygiene security to enable disabled employees to safely return to work. Cohabitors (family members, flatmates, etc.) of disabled people are being encouraged to work / return to work. Even if a disabled person’s employer is acting appropriately, it does not mean that co-habitors' employers also will be. It is also unclear what support will be given to disabled employees if they become ill after returning to work.

- **Safe travel to work:** disabled employees have raised concerns with the Panel about using public transport to get to work. Many disabled people do not drive or cycle.

**The Panel recommends that the Government reminds employers that the Equality Act has not been suspended during the pandemic and about their duties to avoid laying disabled people off work and look into ways for disabled people to continue to work from home if appropriate.**

- **Getting into Work:** it is clear that there will be less employment opportunities going forward. Disabled people already find it harder to obtain work and there is a disproportion number of disabled people who are unemployed. Disabled people are likely to be pushed to the back of the queue in a recession. Moreover, Work Programmes / Working Well programmes will be most effective with people nearest the jobs market often resulting in disabled people being left further behind. The longer time for which many disabled people will have to shield will increase barriers to accessing work.

**The Panel recommends that work programmes are required to prioritise certain groups and ensure a certain percentage of clients are disabled people. Increased rewards could be provided to incentivise work programme providers. The Panel also recommends that Greater Manchester undertakes local positive action to enable disabled people to rise to top of the ‘pile’ of job applications**

## **Transport**

Panel members have reported that fewer disabled people are using public transport.

**The Panel recommends that transport providers monitor use of their services by disabled people, engage with Disabled People’s Organisations and publish their results.**

## **Planning**

The Panel is concerned that proposed changes in the planning system will affect the use of Design and Access Statements and reduce the need for developers and planners to make reasonable adjustments and to use inclusive design planning processes from the start of projects.

*July 2020*

## **Appendix 1:**

### **Greater Manchester Disabled People’s Panel Members**

Breakthrough UK

Disability Stockport

Embrace Wigan & Leigh (co-opt)

GM Autism Consortium Advisory Group

Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP) (convenor) Manchester Deaf Centre  
Manchester Disabled People's Access Group (MDPAG)  
Manchester People First  
Manchester Disabled People Against Cuts (MDPAC)  
National Association of Disabled Staff Networks in Universities  
National Federation of the Blind UK (NFBUK)  
People First Tameside  
Rochdale and District Disability Action Group (RADDAG)  
Salford Disability Forum

**Associate Members**

Action Together  
Activity Alliance  
Better Things  
Beyond Empower  
Bury Society for Blind and Partially Sighted People  
Bury U3A  
Change Communic8te Bury  
Lifeshare  
Maddchester  
Pegasus Riding  
Proud and Loud Arts  
Rochdale Parent Carer's Voice  
RNIB  
Seashell  
Tameside Autism Group  
Trafford Hard of Hearing