

Written evidence submitted by Scope (CVD0039)

Scope was pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics.

This document serves as an addendum to our original submission and provides an update to that document, which was submitted in April.

1. The day-to-day impact of coronavirus on disabled people

Transport

- 1.1. As lockdown has been eased and new regulations around wearing face coverings on public transport have come into force, Scope welcomes the government's clear list of exemptions for people who cannot be expected to wear face masks (1).
- 1.2. However, government regulations - including exemptions - do not currently apply to taxis and private hire vehicles. This means that disabled people could be negatively affected by blanket rules for passengers and drivers on wearing face masks and could face discrimination if they are not able to comply. Such discrimination would be a breach of the Equality Act 2010 (2).
- 1.3. We also know that for some disabled people, social distancing or travelling alone on public transport will not be possible.
- 1.4. As such, it is essential that staff fully understand the guidance, including what exemptions are in place, and can recognise that a degree of flexibility may be required to enable disabled people to travel safely - for example by not wearing a face covering - so that disabled people are not fined, or exposed to abuse from other passengers.
- 1.5. Prior to the pandemic, almost half of disabled people already encountered negative attitudes from transport staff or members of the public (3). As lockdown eases, there is a risk such attitudes could be heightened, and it is a real concern that disabled people who cannot meet safety measures for legitimate reasons could face further discrimination.
- 1.6. It is essential that staff are confident in conveying exemptions clearly to other passengers so that disabled people are not faced with further negative attitudes from fellow passengers who do not understand the rules.
- 1.7. As part of plans to avoid further spread of COVID-19, government asked that the public should try to walk or cycle as much as possible and avoid using public transport (4).

¹ DfT (2020) Exemptions - people who do not have to wear a face covering <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-travel-guidance-for-passengers#exemptions-face-coverings>

² Equality Act (2010) <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

³ Scope (2019) Travel Fair report <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/travel-fair/travel-fair-report-summary/>

⁴ GOV.UK (2020), Coronavirus (COVID-19): safer travel guidance for passengers. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-travel-guidance-for-passengers#walking-and-cycling>

- 1.8. For some disabled people, this simply will not be possible. Scope research has found that a third (32 per cent) of disabled people use cars most days, almost half (43 per cent) rely on buses or coaches several times a month, and a third (30 per cent) use taxis regularly (5).
- 1.9. Changes to public spaces to facilitate better walking and cycling access, such as car-free zones in town and city centres, must be made in collaboration with disabled people so that local authorities can fully understand the potential impact of these changes on disabled people.

Recommendations:

Government should ensure that licensing authorities for taxi and private hire vehicles clearly set out guidelines around face mask exemptions to ensure that disabled people do not face discrimination or access refusals.

Ensure that rules around safety measures and exemptions are clearly communicated to staff members so that disabled passengers do not face additional discrimination.

Ensure that the impact on disabled people of a renewed focus on walking and cycling is considered at all stages when developing new policies and regulations.

Shopping

- 1.10. As lockdown has eased, we have seen the Government announce plans to end shielding and the distribution of food boxes.
- 1.11. Despite revised shielding guidance, the emotional impact and anxiety around the pandemic remains the same. A third of disabled people told Scope that they will not leave their homes when shielding ends.
- 1.12. The rolling back of measures that have supported many 'vulnerable' people access essentials during the pandemic creates considerable uncertainty and anxiety for many disabled people who still don't feel safe.
- 1.13. It is also essential that Government rethinks their current definition of vulnerability to include those who are not on the shielding list but who are in vulnerable circumstances because of the pandemic.
- 1.14. Members of Scope's research panel highlighted issues with the current use of 'vulnerable' or 'vulnerability'. They feel unsure whether they refer to old people or disabled people and why their conditions sometimes are not considered serious enough to get them additional support.

⁵ Polling was conducted by Opinium in June 2019 on behalf of Scope. 2,004 adults in the UK with long term impairments or conditions took part. The survey was conducted online and the sampling was non-probability based.

- 1.15. There are many reasons why disabled people might need continued support to access food and essentials. As lockdown eases, it is vital that Government does not overlook those who aren't clinically vulnerable but may still require additional support to access food and essentials.
- 1.16. Additionally, with the Government now imposing local lockdowns, it is vital that the support measures many disabled people have relied on to access essentials remain in place in the event of a local lockdown.

Recommendations:

The Government must ensure that measures introduced to support disabled people remain in place, particularly in case of further local lockdowns. Government should also ensure that all disabled people who have struggled to access essentials are given the support they need going forward, including those who are not clinically vulnerable.

2. The impact of coronavirus on disabled people's financial stability

- 2.1 Scope's original submission welcomed the decision by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to make changes to the benefits process during the pandemic, including the temporary removal of conditionality and sanctions and suspension of reviews and reassessments across all benefits.
- 2.2 These changes represented a significant shift in disabled people's interactions with the benefit system, such as a guarantee of consistent financial support, which continues to be vital beyond the pandemic.
- 2.3 Even with shielding set to pause, many disabled people do not feel safe leaving their home. Scope research shows that one in five will not leave home until there is a vaccine or effective treatment.
- 2.4 Disappointingly, the DWP confirmed it would be gradually re-instating conditionality rules for claimants from 1 July (6).
- 2.5 Scope has long called for an end to conditionality and sanctioning, and believe that it should not be reintroduced at all, let alone at such an early stage when many disabled

⁶ Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (29 June), Work and Pensions Oral Questions. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-06-29/debates/96E905A4-7108-4F01-9654-9173AD957BDB/Covid-19MeetingIncreasedDemandForServices>

people are still shielding, or don't feel safe to end shielding, and the labour market so significantly impacted.

- 2.6 However, if conditionality is to be reinstated, it is integral that the Department follows through with their assurance that Claimant Commitments are reasonable for the 'new normal' (7).
- 2.7 Unrealistic and inappropriate work-related requirements would be extremely detrimental to disabled claimants during this uncertain time, particularly the heightened risk of financial loss through sanctions.
- 2.8 The reintroduction of conditionality has coincided with the restoration of other measures which could result in financial loss for disabled people, such as review and reassessment activity for Personal Independence Payment (PIP).
- 2.9 Resuming PIP reviews and reassessments at this stage shows little regard for the financial situation many disabled people currently find themselves in.
- 2.10 PIP assessments are not fit for purpose, with 76 per cent of decisions overturned at appeal stage (8).
- 2.11 Disabled people are relying on consistent financial support at this time, but instead many now face a real risk of substantially reduced income.

Recommendations:

If conditionality is reinstated, the DWP must abide by their assurance that Claimant Commitments are reasonable for the 'new normal'.

The DWP should reconsider its decision to reintroduce PIP review and reassessment activity in order to provide disabled people with vital financial security during this time.

July 2020

⁷ House of Commons (1 July 2020), Universal Credit: Written questions – 64921.
<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-06-25/64921/>

⁸ Ministry of Justice (2020), Tribunals Statistics Quarterly: January to March 2020.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-january-to-march-2020>