

Written evidence submitted by Eleanor Shaw (Mrs0063)

I am writing in response to the Government's call for evidence on Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics. I am writing from a personal view of a young person with hearing loss.

Whilst I appreciate the Government's necessary response in the form of strict measures, I believe that people of protected characteristics have been omitted from the equation of consideration for two reasons:

- Inability to access urgent medical care;
- No access to information in sign language.

1. Firstly, I will address a problem I have personally experienced during this time regarding needing appointments. I am 22 years old and suffered sudden unexplained hearing loss – literally overnight – in December 2019. My GP made an urgent referral to see an ENT specialist, with the initial appointment made for 10th March 2020. However, this appointment was cancelled and rescheduled for 1st April, and was again cancelled due to Coronavirus. Thus, four months later I still have not seen a specialist, and this has exacerbated both my general anxiety and tinnitus. To suddenly lose a significant proportion of your hearing and to not have any support, this has been an extremely worrying and daunting time, resulting in feeling secluded. As a young person, this is even more difficult to navigate as advice is often aimed at age-related hearing loss in the elderly, thus is irrelevant to me.

Therefore, whilst I understand why the consultants have been drafted in to help with supporting patients with Coronavirus to ease the burden on frontline staff, people like me who need urgent medical help have been left behind, demonstrating unforeseen consequences of 'taking away' the doctors people may need to see urgently. On a personal note, in the time that has passed while I am still waiting to see ENT, I could have been fitted with hearing aids and assigned a hearing therapist, so could have something to help me hear better and the support to come to terms with my sudden hearing loss, for instance. Also during this time I have lost yet more hearing, which is not curable and can never be restored, with my deteriorating condition making things incredibly frustrating as I cannot access the help I need and am desperate for. Not only have I been waiting four months, but even the first appointment given was over the 6-week timeframe for urgent referrals, meaning I have waited so much longer to start with.

Therefore, I ask that the Government quickly puts in place a system as soon as possible whereby people with urgent referrals for medical conditions are able to be seen by the relevant specialists, hopefully very soon.

2. Secondly, as someone with a hearing impairment, I am unable to hear a lot of spoken audio. This means that I find written or signed information very useful, and this is important to those in the Deaf community. Although I am not solely reliant on sign language, some people in the Deaf community are, meaning that it could be a barrier to communication when such provisions are not in place. Hence, the Government's daily briefings have not gone far enough in supporting the Deaf community because no sign language interpreter has been instated. This essentially cuts the Deaf community off from

the information given, meaning they are missing out on vital advice. I feel this is a simple measure that could be implemented, with the likes of the Scottish Government having had sign language interpreters from the outset of daily briefings, meaning it is not difficult to fulfil this need. Therefore, this is an easy measure which could be implemented immediately, enabling the Deaf community to access the important information just as the rest of society is able to.

In conclusion, I sincerely hope that the Government will now see that people under protected characteristics have been affected disproportionately during the pandemic. I hope the Government shall consider and heed these views and suggestions seriously in order to help those with protected characteristics feel not left behind or left out in these challenging times.

April 2020