

Written evidence submitted by A Bennetton (CVD0002)

I am a 58 year old disabled person. Whilst I am not 'officially' vulnerable, my family and I had particular concerns about how I would be treated if I became exposed to Covid 19 and I have therefore been effectively shielding since before lockdown officially started.

I have seen no evidence to suggest that the Government consulted with any disabled people or the organisations representing them at any point during the pandemic. For instance, the daily briefing has no sign language interpreter and no captions/subtitles even for the parts that are clearly prepared speeches, and the Governments explanation for this (lack of space in the room used) is laughable. I have noted that the daily briefings for all other parts of the UK and other countries all include an interpreter.

A further example is the Governments definition of 'vulnerable'. Whilst those advised to shield should obviously be in this group, there are large numbers of disabled people who are not officially vulnerable but who, like me, have opted to shield anyway or who have needs which the Government has made no attempt to address. Had disabled people been consulted at an early stage, the Government would have been aware that, for example effectively limiting supermarket deliveries to the officially vulnerable group would have a significantly adverse effect on those disabled people who cannot shop independently (or at all) whilst maintaining social distancing, including wheelchair users and those with impaired sight.

If I had not had family to shop for me I would have been entirely unable to obtain food for at least the first month of lockdown. Even had I not been shielding, it is impractical for a wheelchair user to attempt to shop whilst maintaining social distancing - purchases are limited to the amount that will fit in one carrier bag as that is all I can carry, necessitating multiple visits per week, and I cannot reach at least half of the supermarket shelves and have to rely on someone else to pass items to me.

A further issue which I have been made aware of by my son is that supermarkets have apparently decided that the Equality Act doesn't apply during the pandemic and they therefore have no obligation to make any reasonable adjustments. In particular, all of the disabled parking spaces at my local supermarket have been blocked off to allow for queuing, there are no seats available or priority system for those unable to stand for long periods and staff automatically refuse assistance when requested, e.g. reaching items from top shelves, but also refuse to allow two people to shop together.

The Government, had they consulted disabled people, would have been able to predict all of the above issues and make allowance for them. In particular, the Government should have made it clear that the Equality Act continues to apply during the pandemic, and by making specific references to adjustments necessary for disabled people, they could have set an example for the rest of the population rather than making it abundantly clear (not least with the lack of an interpreter at the daily briefing) that the needs of disabled people are to be ignored at best.

After 6 weeks of not leaving my home I opted to go for a 'walk' (in my wheelchair) in my local area. I have not repeated the experiment because other pedestrians made no allowance for the fact that I cannot simply step into the road to maintain social distancing and because I was repeatedly startled by cyclists approaching at speed from behind, where I can neither see nor hear them, and then abused for not moving out of their way. I have heard of people with guide dogs having similar issues.

My mother, who lives more than 60 miles from any family member, is in the officially vulnerable group, as is her sister who lives with her. They are 80 and 75 years old and both have significant pulmonary issues, but even so they were entirely unable to obtain a supermarket delivery slot or even click and collect for more than 6 weeks. They had to rely on their local corner shop delivering whatever they had been able to obtain, but at much greater cost than the budget supermarket they usually use.

On the subject of cost, whilst the Government has increased the level of Universal Credit, it has not similarly increased legacy benefits or pensions even though the additional costs of the pandemic - increased food costs and delivery charges now slots are available - are affecting everyone. I estimate that my living costs have increased by at least £15 per week, and again were it not for family members providing support, I would have been struggling financially on my ESA payment. I imagine elderly and disabled people are disproportionately affected by this particular discrimination and I am surprised no one has yet challenged the Government over it.

The reason I decided to shield from an early stage is that, according to the guidance issued at the beginning of the pandemic, I would be considered to be 'frail' (scoring 6 or 7) and would therefore have been low priority had ICU beds or ventilators had to be rationed. I am in fact not frail at all even though, because of my disability, I do need a considerable amount of support. I have no underlying medical condition which might have affected my chances of surviving COVID and my disability does not in any way affect my expected life span. Whilst this guidance was subsequently amended, but only after a considerable outcry from disabled people and organisations representing them, I am sure I am not alone in still being terrified that if I catch this virus I will not receive the same standard of care as a non-disabled person.

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