

## **Written evidence from the Greater Manchester Disabled People's Panel (COV0206)**

The Greater Manchester Disabled People's Panel is an independent strategic body made up of 14 Disabled People's Organisations from across Greater Manchester. All members are disabled people and we seek to influence policy to support the rights of disabled people in Greater Manchester.

In April and May 2020, we undertook a Greater Manchester-wide survey to identify the issues facing disabled people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey was in two formats: standard version and easy read. The findings from the surveys have shaped our responses to the Inquiry's questions. Our submissions below aim to address all the questions of the Inquiry.

Our Panel is concerned about the direction of human rights fulfilment. The Panel is concerned that for disabled people the impact of measures taken to address COVID 19 will be regressive, continuing the downward trend of the realisation of rights over the past decade. The impact of austerity has undermined the infrastructure that allowed the views of disabled people to be properly considered.

**High risk criteria and “vulnerability”:** To be UNCRPD and human rights compliant the Government should amend how it speaks about people's rights. The term “vulnerable” is disempowering to disabled people and undermines people's ability to assert their rights.

The Government should amend its restrictions of who is prioritised for support. 93% of our survey respondents identified as disabled of which 20% of participants received a letter from the Government to indicate that they were in the 'high risk' group. Of the 80% that did not receive this letter, 57% reported having support needs for example with obtaining food or medicines of which only 19% are getting all of their needs met. 10% said that they were having none of their needs met. The large proportion of disabled people who did not fit the initial government-issued shielding criteria but had support needs is significant and confirms what the Panel knew already from its members. Many disabled people knew that they should be taking additional precautions and this was corroborated by their GPs. Many of these disabled people did not meet the initial shielding list. This left disabled people, who knew that they should be taking precautions, unable to access the support

being implemented for those with the shielding letter. Many respondents mentioned the particular difficulty in accessing food delivery slots from supermarkets. For the 10% who were not even getting their nutritional needs met, their right to life was engaged.

**Digital Exclusion and Accessible Information:** For disabled people to enjoy fulfilment of their rights during the pandemic it was essential that they were receiving information that protected their right to life and their right to non-discrimination. Almost all public health messages during the pandemic have been in a digital format. 31% of respondents to the survey were not at all aware of the Community Hubs, which had been set up in each borough to coordinate food parcels, medicine etc. The Panel has been aware of multiple individual disabled people across Greater Manchester having been left completely without access to food, some going days without it. The Panel had also been made aware of individuals who should have been shielding not having access to support, and therefore travelling on public transport and entering shops and pharmacies in order to access food and medicine. 11% of disabled people answered that they do not use a digital device. An exploration of the reasons for this shows that 24% needed support to help them access a digital device, and that this is not available. The Panel attempted to support people to bridge the digital divide, but there will be digitally excluded people whose experiences have not been captured by our surveys. Additionally, disabled people who live in institutions and care homes are unlikely to have accessed the survey. The Panel recommends that the Government takes steps to recognise digital exclusion as an urgent priority. We recommend the provision of digital devices to enable digital inclusion as well as the costs of data/broadband, technical support and training.

Even if people were aware of community hubs, 43% of respondents stated that the Community Hubs were not accessible. The Panel recommends that accessible information be produced consistently. 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.

**Personal Protective Equipment:** the issues which arose from our survey regarding PPE engaged right to life and right to respect for private and family life. 506 participants remarked on their access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). 57% of respondents had experienced some difficulty

sourcing PPE if it was needed whilst 35% found it neither easy nor difficult and only 8% said that it was easy to obtain PPE. Panel members were aware that many disabled people who use personalised independence payments (PIP) to employ PA's directly (as opposed to employed through social care) struggled to access protective equipment, as they were not recognised as needing it.

**Access to medical care:** There has been a significant reduction in health visits during the coronavirus outbreak, with 62% of respondents from the standard survey experiencing one or more health visits that had stopped due to the Covid-19 outbreak and a further 26% reporting that the amount of health visits had reduced. Likewise, in the easy read survey, 46% of respondents had had a medical appointment cancelled. By being unable to access their usual healthcare, some disabled people may have experienced a decline in their health and wellbeing, and therefore an increase in their support requirements/decline in their impairment.

**Right to Education:** The Panel is concerned about the status of EHCP's during the COVID crisis. We are concerned that disabled children are not getting the level of support to fulfil their right to education and engages the right to non-discrimination. The Government should implement a fully supported inclusive education system which is maintained in all emergency situations. In relation to older and adult students, 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 learning.

**Social Care and independent living:** The Panel has been concerned about the easements of the Care Act 2014. We believe that these standards should be kept as the minimum required standards to ensure that disabled people do not continue to experience unnecessary consequences, on top of the pandemic itself. 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. 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.

**In conclusion:** 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. The situations faced by disabled people exposed the lack of inclusion of disabled people in national emergency planning.

*22/07/2020*