

Mr Scott Watkin BEM, Emily Stewart, Gabby Gibbons, Greg Hill – Written Evidence (LBC0097)

This submission is by the SeeAbility associates team. SeeAbility is a charity that supports people with learning disabilities and autism, and many of the people supported have sight loss.

We are a team of three people led by our mentor Scott Watkin BEM who is the charity's Head of Engagement.

We all have different disabilities, as does Scott, but that doesn't define us and our team is all about ensuring people with disabilities have a voice and develop into leaders, and inspire more people with disabilities too.

We have been talking a lot about the impact of Covid 19 and wanted to share our thoughts for this inquiry.

We have been learning lots of new skills or spending time on things we enjoy doing indoors, because of the lockdown. Important things like learning to take medication without the need of support, through to making craft cards and brewing beer! As a team we set up our own fundraising challenge and raised more than £2000. We have also been writing blogs and improving our writing skills and getting used to new technology. All in all it has been a learning experience and good for team building.

These are the positive things we have been doing.

However, as people with disabilities we have noticed lots of mixed messages from government. This makes it difficult to plan your life when there is already uncertainty. It has really affected our routines, where we go, who we see. It has been hard to listen to the news it has been frightening and depressing sometimes. Some of us have chosen to avoid the news or limit to listening just in the morning and at the end of the day.

Maybe some good things will start to happen in daily life. We hope people will be more considerate towards people with disabilities. People might be more careful about spreading the infection. But so far not really seeing much change – in fact people seem to be more impatient and not socially distancing even if it's obvious you have a disability and need more time or space. One of us has sight loss so it is hard to judge distances anyhow when being out and about.

We worry about what services will be left and how people will come back together. As an example, one of us goes to church, and we wonder how the church services will work when everyone has to keep their distance.

We have all struggled with our mental health in lockdown but we have all supported each other as a team. We don't think government realise what the change in routine and restrictions can do to people's mental health. We talked about this as being a 'ticking timebomb'. Some of us coped OK at the start then 'hit a wall' some of us struggled straight away.

Even if you feel well it is hard to live with the uncertainty, when the government says one thing then it does another. It is important that the government makes things a lot clearer about the risks and what is happening when.

It is great that there is more in the news and more discussion about social care, and stories of staff who have gone the extra mile. It's difficult for people who don't use social care to understand what support is, and how it can help people of our age, and not just older people. Staff work so hard but are not well paid. Some of our staff have been just brilliant.

We hope in the future that social care will get the money it needs, but we worry that the government and media have short memories. The financial situation makes us worry that people's support will be cut and people will not have the energy to fight for their support.

We have all learnt new ways of using new technology, like Zoom for meetings and this has brought us together as a team as we see and speak to each other more often. We have all got new technology like a laptop, and new phone, but some of us need more help getting used to the new kit or using new ways to communicate, like Twitter. We are all looking to help each other as some of us have more experience than others.

Technology is fine and can keep you connected – but it can be hit and miss and hard to use - and it's also important to have face to face contact when you need it. This is really important for the NHS to remember – everyone is excited about health appointments being done remotely but we worry that if people with learning disabilities aren't seen face to face, their health needs might be overlooked or forgotten about.

In conclusion, we do think that people with disabilities and people supporting them have found a voice in this pandemic. People are starting to be more aware and question why there is discrimination, particularly for people with learning disabilities. We aren't going to accept being back of the queue any more, or that our lives aren't equal. It is great that this inquiry is giving people a voice and a chance to express themselves as to what needs to change.

18 August 2020