

Disabled people's access to food and the effectiveness of the Government's response to reported problems

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Disability Rights UK's vision is to create a society where disabled people have equal power, rights and equality of opportunity. Our mission is to campaign for the rights of all disabled people to be included in every aspect of life. We bring the lived experiences of disabled people to everything we do. We challenge policy makers, institutions and individuals to remove the barriers that exist for us. We strongly believe in the lived experience of disabled people; that drives everything we do. We collaborate creatively to propose new ways of working, challenging policymakers, institutions and individuals to remove all the barriers that exist for us in every part of society.

Four strategic priorities guide our work. Firstly, building a movement of disabled people; bringing the lived experience of thousands of disabled people into our policy work. Second is independent living; we campaign for disabled people to have equality in everyday life and for the support that we need to live the lives that we choose, with choice and control over how we live them. Our third priority area is around inclusive economic opportunities. We want to ensure that disabled people have opportunities to work and have the money they need to meet the additional costs of disability. This includes having a fairer benefits system and enabling us to thrive in employment and enterprise. Finally, we focus on influencing public attitudes and behaviours by creating a positive narrative about our lives and the contribution we all make to our society.

During the Coronavirus Pandemic, we have listened to disabled people across the country to understand how they are being affected and integrated our findings into our policy work. The latter has focussed on healthcare, social care, and access to food. Lindsay Lee's contribution clearly describes what should happen, if United Nations and World Health Organisation guidance is followed, to create a disability inclusive response to Covid-19. However, the reality, for disabled people in the United Kingdom falls far short of this. Disabled people have reported receiving Do Not Resuscitate letters, unsolicited by them and without their consent to this form of care. They have received follow-up telephone calls from doctors and GPs to talk to them about signing these Do Not Resuscitate documents, in case they end up in hospital with coronavirus, in order to authorise that course of action in advance! Imagine being one of those disabled people receiving such a letter, already fearing the greater risk of contracting coronavirus and being hospitalised by it. Just what does this approach say about the value of your life and the kind of value the government and society places on disabled people and our wellbeing? This is counter to Article 11 of the UNCRPD which requires states to prevent 'discriminatory denial of health care or health services or food and fluids on the basis of disability'.

Brian Sloan's essay (above) eloquently sets out the problems with 'easing' duties on local authorities in their provision of social care. In addition to these issues we have highlighted issues around access to adequate protective equipment and infection control guidance across social care settings, particularly for the 70,000 people receiving that care in their own homes. For example, it took many weeks for guidance to be to those individuals on the need to self-isolate or what should be put in place if the team of care workers they employ have to isolate.

The food crisis which has affected disabled people during the pandemic, reflects the government's failure to consider our needs, prevent discriminatory practice and consult disabled people and disabled people's organisations during their response to Covid-19. As Professor Anna Lawson points

out, this is now subject to a class legal action. The problems arise as disabled people have been segregated into different groups. The shielded group (those regarded 'clinically vulnerable'), the nearly two million people eligible for the government's food parcels and support packages, and the almost ten million disabled people in the UK who are not on this list. This latter group, for whom standard methods accessing food safely vanished during lockdown, have also found it impossible to access food delivery slots online and the allocated shopping slots at supermarkets. In part this was because they are excluded from the shielding list but also because the shopping slots for older people and carers of those shielding were too early in the morning and because there was no protocol in place to embed socially distanced support assistance from supermarket staff.

These circumstances call into question the adequacy of the due regard paid by both the government and supermarkets to their Equality Act duties in enabling access to food orders and delivering food. Disabled people have also reported the exclusionary impact of social distancing and queuing measures adopted by supermarkets in their buildings, especially for those who are blind or visually impaired or those who have a learning disability.

The other big concern for us has been about the terminology and language that's been used by government and the wider response to the pandemic. Many disabled people have found the return to describing disabled people as 'vulnerable' problematic. For many of us, this is because such language obscures our status as rights holders, with personal autonomy, casting us being perceived as 'weak' or 'at risk'. The shift obfuscates our protections under the Equality Act 2010 and the UK's commitments to the UNCRPD.

As we adjust to another 'new normal' as we begin to exit lockdown measures in July, and with the shielding programme due to end in September, how do we win back our hard fought rights so eroded by the Coronavirus Act 2020? How can disabled people gain a seat at the decision-making table as the government plans the economic and social recovery from the pandemic? We need government to establish a Covid-19 Inclusive Response and Recover Group, of experts by experience with disabilities and Disabled People's Organisations. For disabled people, I'd urge you to join Disability Rights UK and become part of that movement to inform our policy work and lobbying.

Recommendations:

- 1. Government must establish a Covid-19 Inclusive Response and Recovery Group, of experts by experience with disabilities and Disabled People's Organisations, to ensure disabled people are central to decision-making on the economic and social recovery to the pandemic and ongoing healthcare guidance.**
- 2. Government must provide local authorities with resources to enable them to hold Citizens' Assemblies for *Homes fit for the Health of the Nation*, in order to place disabled people's independent living at the heart of 'building back better'.**
- 3. Government must produce urgent guidance on supporting access to food for disabled people during the current coronavirus crisis and future pandemics which is aligned with duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the United Kingdom's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.**