

PRESS RELEASE

14 January 2025

Disability Rights UK, Inclusion Scotland, Disability Wales and Disability Action Northern Ireland criticise discrimination against Disabled People in Covid-19 vaccine & therapeutics response

At a hearing for Module 4 of the Covid Inquiry in London today, appearing on behalf of four national Disabled People's Organisations, Counsel Danny Friedman KC criticised discrimination against Disabled People in the vaccine and therapeutics rollout citing *"patterns of repeated disadvantage on a widespread scale"*. Friedman KC revealed that the government received proposals from its Disability Unit in November 2020 which provided *"essential practical means for a targeted and effective rollout of vaccines and therapeutics to Disabled people"* but that *"none of the proposals were developed"*.

The Disabled People's Organisations challenged the narrative that the vaccine and therapeutics response was *"something that the UK did well,"* identifying shocking inequalities resulting from a failure to engage with Disabled people and their organisations at each stage, from development of Covid vaccines and therapeutics, to prioritisation, to delivery and accessibility.

Examples included that despite Public Health England publishing data that showed young adults aged 18-34 with learning disabilities were 30 times more likely to die from Covid-19 than young non-disabled adults, they were not properly prioritised for vaccination. Even when 'Cohort 6' was expanded to include those categorised as having "severe and profound learning disabilities", that change was made without acknowledging that there is no generally accepted definition of this term; it was not coded on GP and other databases; and Learning-Disabled people and those caring for them do not necessarily self-define as such.

Vaccine prioritisation also failed to recognise the major role played by unpaid carers, informally employed carers and personal assistants in supporting Disabled people in their homes. Where carers and assistants provided support in the home, they were not called for vaccination at the same time as those working in care homes.

With regard to inadequate accessibility, Friedman KC revealed that, amongst other things, the vaccine rollout remarkably included examples of d/Deaf people receiving telephone calls and blind people receiving letters without Braille purporting to invite them for vaccination. Booking processes predominantly comprised online systems when it was known that Disabled people were less likely to have essential digital skills or internet access.

Finally, the DPO asked the Inquiry to recognise those who could not receive the vaccine on medical grounds or for whom the vaccine was ineffective. The Inquiry was invited to consider government decisions around access to therapeutics that have left many of these individuals still shielding and unable to return to their pre-pandemic lives.

This week, the Inquiry will hear more evidence on how d/Deaf and Disabled people were failed by the vaccine and therapeutics rollout, when Disability Rights UK's CEO, Kamran Mallick, gives evidence on Wednesday 15th January.

Nuala Toman, Head of Innovation and Impact at Disability Action Northern Ireland said:

“The failure to prioritise Disabled people in the vaccine rollout reflects systemic inequality and neglect at its worst. Despite clear evidence of heightened risk, practical proposals to ensure Disabled people could fully benefit from vaccines and therapeutics were not forthcoming. This Inquiry must address the impact of this in terms of risk to life and health in the context of the disproportionate numbers of Disabled people who lost their lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lessons must be learned to ensure that Disabled people are never again neglected within life-saving public health measures.”

Georgia Bondy, COVID Inquiry Manager for Disability Rights UK said:

“The government’s decision to ignore the advice of its own Disability Unit is shocking and has resulted in years of jeopardy for Disabled people in the UK.”

Jim Elder Woodward, Co-convener of Inclusion Scotland, said:

“Inclusion Scotland received evidence of poor practice in vaccine delivery (both who was eligible and how it was rolled out) which could have been mitigated if planning had included Disabled People’s Organisations, who have the requisite knowledge based on our own and our members’ lived experience, across the UK.”

Rhian Davies, Chief Executive of Disability Wales, said:

“The discrimination faced by Disabled people during the vaccine roll-out compounded the entrenched inequality and exclusion experienced from the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ignoring the advice of the UK Government’s own Disability Unit only to be shamed into action by high profile celebrity campaigns adds insult to injury resulting in Disabled people yet again paying with their lives and their long-term health and wellbeing.”

Notes to editors

The DPO are represented in Module 4 by a team at Bhatt Murphy led by Shamik Dutta and Caleb Simpson with counsel Danny Friedman KC of Matrix Chambers, Kate Beattie of Doughty Street Chambers and Robbie Stern of Matrix Chambers. Module 4 of the Covid-19 Inquiry will look at and make recommendations on the Vaccine and Therapeutic programmes of the UK Government and Devolved Administrations. The hearings are taking place in London between 14 to 31 January 2025.