

We are writing to you in the midst of an unprecedented time of confusion and crisis for everyone in the UK, with people still struggling to adapt to a new and very different way of life due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Like everyone else, we understand that our politicians needed to implement the lockdown measures in order to protect people's health; however, over the course of this prolonged period of lockdown, we have found that people with a disability have been largely ignored, in a number of ways, and it is this matter that we wish to address with you today.

Let us begin with the letters sent out by the Prime Minister, to inform everyone how the lockdown would be implemented, and what this meant for people who are visually impaired. For some unknown reason, these letters weren't adapted for those with a visual impairment, which made reading and understanding the Government's message extremely difficult. The sending of these in other formats such as in Braille, large print or audio, would have made a very real difference to so many people; but it wasn't done.

Why did no-one in the UK Government, or in any of the devolved administrations, consider the needs of the visually impaired, as they prepared to tell us about the restrictions? In addition to this, people all over the country have relied a lot on the daily TV briefings to stay up to date with the latest developments, but for those with a hearing impairment it was extremely difficult to do so. For example, in Scotland & Wales there was someone signing for viewers as part of the daily briefings, but this didn't happen for the UK-wide briefings. Why was this not considered?

Adapting to this 'new normal' has been a challenge for everyone, but has been much more difficult for those with sight issues, and the longer the lockdown continues the bigger impact it is having. For example, even going to the shop for essentials has been very stressful. Many of us who are visually impaired rely on Guide Dogs, which are trained to show us into shops and take us around on a pre-trained route; but the new rules have caused many problems in this type of situation.

There have many examples of blind and partially sighted people being subject to abuse. For example, an article on the BBC Wales website (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-52968192?fbclid=IwAR1_vmZfaHfb_z8CGsvHyAvBe2facQBZxve4AzmA9byJcZKT_dhRWOvoQwYQ) highlighted how [REDACTED] was abused by other shoppers after her Guide Dog led her to the shop door, and she was yelled at for not queuing. As she says, "The dog doesn't know there's a queue because he's just been trained to show me where the door is, but then I've been verbally abused." There have also been many incidents of members of the public shouting at visually impaired people for getting too close to them in shops, even though this is done inadvertently, as we are often unable to see them clearly.

We raise these issues because little thought has been given to assisting the blind and visually impaired. The signs employed by supermarkets, shopping centres and outlets, to indicate the new paths that people should follow, are based on the premise that people can see them; yet so many can't. Was there any consideration given to the visually impaired when all of this signage was being introduced? If not, why not? Business owners, and the general public, need to be made aware of these very real issues, and understand that these public places need to be adapted for us.

The changes in public transport have also had a negative effect. Naturally, those with a significant visual impairment are unable to drive, so rely heavily on public transport to get around. Yet we have had to face a situation where available passenger numbers have been reduced by 25%, thus making access to public transport much more problematic.

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Did the decision-makers think about people with a disability when these cuts to public transport were introduced? Was there any discussion about giving priority to such people, considering that they **never** have access to a car? It seems as if we are simply expected to somehow find a new way of travelling.

We are confident that we speak on behalf of the vast majority of people with a disability when we say that we feel very let down by the Government, and there is a sense that we have been ignored and forgotten about. The Equality Act of 2010 was supposed to help people like us, and remove much of the vulnerability we often feel, but it seems as if this legislation has been completely overlooked as decisions have been taken over the past few months. How has this been allowed to happen?

One of the reasons we are writing to you is because we feel it is important that there is greater awareness around these matters, and to ensure that we are not set aside and forgotten as we move forward. In addition, we believe that it is right and fair to raise questions about the decision-making processes of the devolved and UK Governments, and ask what consideration was given to vulnerable people before all of these changes were announced.

These are vitally important matters which have had a significant impact on tens of thousands of people right across the UK, and we hope that you can be part of the solution, as we seek to bring a greater understanding of our needs to those in positions of power.

We are also working on a petition to the Welsh Government on this issue (<https://petitions.senedd.wales/petitions/200123?fbclid=IwAR2KkWJ2OwocyA576EaZfRzqTPDs7SrgxZ2lazoTRAp9W1kWAZR78WE0dQw>) in which we hope to change and challenge society's perception and explain how adaptable businesses need to become to ensure that we are all part of an inclusive society.

We would be happy to arrange a virtual meeting via Zoom with you and your team to discuss the issues we raise in our letter and would value that opportunity to do so.

Thank you for taking the time to read our letter, and for giving consideration to our concerns. We look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] – Disability Rights Campaigner

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] – Disability Rights Campaigner

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] – Campaign Coordinator