

To: Secretary of State for Work and Pensions; Minister of State for Disability, Work and Health

From: NR Disability Unit

SCS clearance: Hannah Rignell, Deputy Director

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## Publication of Cross-Government COVID-19 Disabilities Measures

### Issue

1. To agree to publish a package of cross-government measures to respond to the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on disabled people.

**Timing:** As soon as possible. A decision by the 3rd February would allow us to publish in advance of the next updated estimates of COVID-19 related deaths by disability status on the 11th February.

**Recommendation:** Recommend that the package of measures is published by DWP/Disability Unit with a written ministerial statement to demonstrate government commitment to tackle the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on disabled people.

### Context

2. There is a growing stakeholder-driven narrative that disabled people are being forgotten and left behind throughout the pandemic. According to a letter to a number of government ministers from Scope in Jan 2021 '*Disabled people have routinely told us that they have felt forgotten by Government during the pandemic*'. We know that disabled people are disproportionately impacted and that **59.2% of people who died due to COVID-19 were disabled**. The next updated estimates of COVID-19 related deaths by disability status will be published on the 11th February.
3. A number of stakeholders are endorsing the narrative that disabled people are being 'left behind' during the pandemic. This feeds into media criticism, such as Scope's "Won't Be Forgotten" campaign, which states that 1 in 4 disabled people feel forgotten by the government, and Sense's 'Forgotten Families' campaign which highlights the difficulties for families with children with complex needs.
4. The government is committed to tackling the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19. The Race Disparity Unit (also part of the Equality Hub alongside the Disabilities Unit) has published a package of measures to address the disproportionate impacts ethnic minority groups through a quarterly report on progress to address COVID-19 health inequalities. With another update due to be published w/c 8th February. **There is an expectation that a publication will also follow on the actions the government is taking to support the disproportionate impacts on disabled people.**

### Package of measures

5. In November 2020, government departments were asked to develop ambitious proposals to address the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on disabled people, as set out in **Annex A**. This is a **cross government package totalling at least £57m**. There is an additional £5m worth of commitments awaiting confirmation of funding, which, if secured, brings the total package to **c£62m**. Some of the measures have

already been announced; when this is taken into account **at least £18.7m is 'new'** (not previously announced).

6. The package includes commitments from the Disability Unit, DWP, DHSC, DfT, DCMS and BEIS and looks comparable to the Race Disparity Unit autumn publication.
7. The package spans: (i) data/evidence building (ii) infection control measures to reduce mortality for disabled people, especially in care home settings (iii) ameliorating secondary impacts (including education and digital exclusion), and (iv) accessible communications. The package was agreed pre-vaccine, however, it would be sensible to include lines on vaccine measures to ensure that the publication fully reflects current issues.
8. **A key part of the package is about improving the data**, in line with the work on race, to improve the government's understanding of the impacts on disabled people, and improve the response going forward through greater data collection and analysis by the Office for National Statistics.
9. A few specific measures are stated below:
  1. **Digital exclusion: £2.5M** to reduce the digital exclusion of people with disabilities by providing basic devices, data and digital support to people with learning difficulties or severe impairments. (DCMS)
  2. **Support more low-income families with disabled children: Additional £5m** invested to support low-income families with disabled children who have been hard hit by the pandemic by investing in the Family Fund to provide goods, grants and services on top of statutory entitlements. (DfE)
  3. **Improve education provision for children with disabilities: £4m** for a training provider to provide Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) training for all 24,000 schools and colleges in England on how to best support SEND disabled pupils, including digital education provision. (DfE)
  4. **Improved communications:**
    - i. **Ensure that those with disabilities receive COVID-19 guidance and communications in a timely and accessible way** by creating a 'rapid accessibility content team' to produce content in alternative formats and to act as a focal point for communication via relevant channels and groups. (CO)
    - ii. **Ensure disability charities receive the most up to date and accurate information** via a central HMG focal point to circulate to their networks. (CO)
    - iii. **Community champions** to disseminate key messages in local communities. (MHCLG)

#### Stakeholders

10. This is a strong and comprehensive cross-government package, comparable to the package agreed for other disproportionately affected groups, addressing a number of the issues identified and reported by stakeholders. We have tested the package of measures with a small number of trusted stakeholders who are supportive.
11. However, it is important to note the current media and stakeholder landscape on disability. There is a strong narrative from stakeholders, echoed by the media, that disabled people have been left behind during the pandemic. Some more vocal quarters

of the disability lobby have criticised the Government's COVID handling at various stages. If Ministers do decide to announce, there may be some criticism in some quarters for doing too little, too late. For example i) for not prioritising all CEV disabled people for the vaccine, ii) greater clarity for working age CEV disabled people's access to furlough if requested to work, but unable due to CEV status, and iii) addressing the lack of in situ BSL interpreter (this has been addressed by ensuring BSL is available via the BBC but remains contentious for some stakeholders). However, a measured publication is preferable when judged against the criticism that will build for not doing anything (which appears in stark contrast to announcements on ethnic minority groups).

## Options

12. There are 4 main options:

1. **Do not publish the package:** This misses the opportunity to demonstrate the government's commitment to tackling the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and respond to stakeholder complaints that disabled people are being forgotten by the government.
2. **DWP/DU publish with a Written Ministerial Statement: We recommend this approach.** It demonstrates government commitment to tackle the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 as a precursor to the manifesto commitment to launch the ambitious National Strategy for Disabled People. It could be supported by a more detailed letter from the Minister for Disabled People to the Women and Equalities Select Committee (WESC) chair.
3. **Publish as part of the HMG response to the WESC:** This risks looking reactive.
4. **Include the package of measures in the National Strategy for Disabled People.** Stakeholders have significant concerns about the real time disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on disabled people and are keen to understand what the government is doing to address this. Publishing as part of the Strategy misses the opportunity to share good news demonstrating what the government is doing to address the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 now.

13. Our recommended option is **option 2 - a DWP/DU publication with a Written Ministerial Statement.**

## Timing and next steps

14. The next updated estimates of COVID-19 related deaths by disability status will be published on the 11th February and we recommend publishing in advance of this to demonstrate that the government is taking action. There is a risk that this could draw attention to the issue of higher mortality for disabled people, however we are more likely to influence coverage in a helpful direction if we have something positive to say. This also aligns well with the timing of the publication of the next quarterly report on progress to address COVID-19 health inequalities by the Race Disparity Unit.
15. If you agree, we will work with communications colleagues to draft a written ministerial statement for a February publication, supported by additional communications activity (such as social media).