



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Ministerial
Correspondence
Caxton House
Tothill Street
LONDON
SW1H 9DA

I&S

www.gov.uk

ministers@dwp.gov.uk

Mr **Name Redacted**
PD [@equalityhumanrights.com](mailto:pd@equalityhumanrights.com)
UK Independent Mechanism (UKIM)

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Dear Chief Commissioners and Chairs,

Thank you for your letter dated 23 October. You asked that future pandemic response planning and the development of a national disability strategy across the UK are shaped by the rights and obligations set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I apologise for the delay that has occurred in replying.

We are fully committed to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which we ratified in 2009. The UK as a general principle does not incorporate international treaties into domestic law. However, the rights of disabled people under this Convention are largely reflected and given effect in existing domestic policies and legislation, including the Equality Act 2010 in England, Scotland and Wales, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland.

The Equality Act 2010 enshrines the rights of people in England, Scotland and Wales with any of nine protected characteristics to live free from discrimination, harassment or victimisation and have equal opportunities in domestic law. It systematically ensures consideration of the rights of disabled people by public authorities, at both national and local levels, through the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).

We are clear that consideration of equality impacts must be integral in all key policy decisions, and that all equality and discrimination laws and obligations continue to apply during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government recognises that disabled people will have particular needs that must be accommodated on the road to recovery. These have been, and will continue to be, considered as part of the PSED process.

In addition, I can assure you that this Government is fully committed to supporting disabled people affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. We are ensuring that disabled people continue to have access to employment support, disability benefits, financial support, food, medicines, as well as accessible communications and updated guidance.

Ministers have a duty to Parliament to account, and be held to account, for the policies, decisions and actions of their departments and agencies. I, together with the Minister for Care, the Minister for Children and Families, and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, gave oral evidence to the sub-inquiry on disability and COVID-19 access to services on 2 September. Evidence submitted included Government support during the pandemic for disabled people to access health and social care, food, education, accessible communication, and engagement with disability stakeholders.

Engaging and involving disabled people and their representatives in COVID-19 policy development is crucial in addressing the challenges they face at this time. The Cabinet Office Disability Unit works with disability stakeholders and across Government Departments to ensure that the needs of disabled people are considered in the Government's response to COVID-19.

The UK Government remains committed to ensuring that disabled people can play a full role in society, with a manifesto commitment to publish a National Strategy for Disabled People. The strategy's significance is even greater as we rebuild the UK's economy and society following the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategy will take into account the impacts of the pandemic on disabled people and will focus on the issues that disabled people say affect them the most in all aspects and phases of life.

We are engaging with disabled people's organisations, including through the Regional Stakeholder Network and the recently established Disabled People's Organisations Forum and other meetings, and are encouraging Government Departments to better engage with stakeholders on policies that matter to disabled people. We will also, through online engagement

and other routes, enable disabled people to directly share views and insights on key challenges, as a central voice as the strategy is developed.

We will also continue engaging with the Devolved Administrations. The strategy will focus on what is important to disabled people across the UK, taking into account devolved powers where applicable. It will also celebrate the achievements of the Scottish and Welsh Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive and set a clear way forwards for shared policy areas that remain the remit of the UK government.

The National Strategy for Disabled People will build on evidence and data, and critically on insights from the lived experience of disabled people. It will look at ways to improve the benefits system, opportunities and access for disabled people in terms of housing, education, transport and jobs. The strategy will include existing commitments, such as to increase special educational needs and disability funding and support pupils, students and adults to get careers advice, internships and transition into work, whilst identifying further opportunities to improve things.

I hope you will find this reply helpful.

Kind regards,

Personal Data

Justin Tomlinson MP

Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work