

MIG Commission - Disabled People

The Department for Communities is fully committed to supporting people with disabilities and health conditions progress towards, move into and stay in employment.

It does this through a number of programmes.

Provision of Disability Programmes

- The Department works in collaboration with our contracted providers of disability programmes to mitigate any impact of COVID 19 on people with disabilities.
- We are committed to work with and support these providers deal with the challenges that COVID 19 will face.
- The Department has taken steps to ensure our contracted disability providers continue to be funded and are able to provide one to one support remotely, through our programmes. This ensures people with significant disabilities continue to receive support from their designated support officers.

- **Workable (NI)** – provides support to assist people with disabilities integrate into the workplace, and helps those who are in danger of losing their job due to their disability, keep their jobs. As of 7 May 2020 there are 766 participants on Workable (NI).
- **Employment Support** - offers opportunities to people with a disability who, although capable of meaningful employment, were unable to obtain unsubsidised jobs due to the severity of their disability. As of 7 May 2020 there are 392 participants on Employment Support.
- **Access to Work (NI)** provides assistance to clients when there are additional costs created because of their disability. Face to face engagement for new applications for AtW have been suspended due to COVID 19. The Department continues to process Access to Work payments for clients in order to maintain financial support to clients still availing of Access to Work (NI) provision. For the period 24 March 2020 to 8 May 2020, a total of 425 payment have been processed for Access to Work NI.
- As we put plans in place to recover from COVID 19, we will ensure the needs of disabled people are considered on an ongoing basis.
- We are fully aware that not all support can be delivered on line as some of those with disabilities may not have IT facilities and/or skills to use this channel for support.

Provision of Disability Support

- An Emergencies Leadership Group has been established by Minister Hargey to coordinate and address Covid-19 related issues in NI, including those affecting disabled people. The Group has a wide community representation including DfC, Red Cross, Advice NI, Inspire, CFNI, NICVA and Volunteer Now.
- DfC has established a free phone Covid-19 Community Helpline in partnership with Advice NI. Up to and including the 10th May there have been 14,881 calls presented (12,103 calls answered), with 1,614 SMS and 3,764 emails received.
- A range of statutory, voluntary and charity organisations are involved in the Covid Community Helpline including DfC, DoH, COPNI, HSCNI, NICCY, Age NI and Disability Action NI. Over 90% of calls made to the Helpline are being answered and waiting time is under a minute.
- A “Partner Directory” has been created for use by Community Helpline operators in answering (and referring on to the relevant experts) Covid-19 related queries. Whilst primarily created for Helpline operators it is also of use to others involved in assisting people affected by Covid-19 issues. The Directory is a living document and has been shared amongst the Social Policy Branches in DfC.

- The Covid-19 Community Helpline has been included on the “Helplines NI” website. The website details over fifty helplines and has now been updated to include 20 new UK and NI helplines set up directly in response to Covid-19. (www.helplinesni.com).
- In collaboration with other departments, Health and Social Care Trusts, Councils and local community organisations, DfC is leading on a programme to distribute free food to vulnerable people across NI.
- There have been 66,535 food parcels delivered from 24 council distribution centres during April and May 2020.
- DfC has secured agreements from Tesco, Asda, Sainsburys and Iceland to prioritise delivery slots for people shielding during the pandemic. Anyone in need of the scheme must fill in a form on the NI Direct website. A GP letter advising self-isolation is required. DfC officials will check eligibility and share details with the supermarkets who will then contact customers directly to advise of available delivery slots. This has been an issue consistently raised by the disability sector.
- A temporary remote sign language interpreting service, funded by DfC/DoH, has been introduced in NI for Covid-19 related matters.

Impact of COVID 19

- Disability Action have undertaken a survey (9-30 April 2020) of 404 participants to ascertain the impact of COVID 19.
- Respondents describe high levels of personal and household stress as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic. 72% of respondents indicated that the impact of socially isolating was affecting their mental health and emotional wellbeing.
- Other comments relate to significant reduction or cessation of the social care support received relating to day centre closures, domiciliary care and respite. Some respondents also indicated they stopped domiciliary carers or personal assistance due to a lack of PPE and concerns about catching Covid-19. 156 of those caring for someone with a disability indicated Covid-19 had significantly increased their caring responsibilities and they were struggling to cope.
- 209 respondents indicated they were having difficulties accessing medicine and shopping, and 191 had not received community support to do so.

- There has been an increased need for support as both employees and employers are extremely anxious around current economic uncertainties and the potential for disproportionate impact on disabled people both economically and in their mental wellbeing.
- Support is also continuing for those employees who fall into the 'furlough' category who are seeking high levels of support in terms of reassurance, managing stress and maintaining the skills/strategies required of them to re-enter the workplace.
- Work and Wellbeing have regular meetings with NIUSE and will engage with them on the delivery of employment services to people with disabilities to access and stay in employment.
- The Northern Ireland Executive has published a Pathway to Recovery (<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-executive-approach-decision-making>). As this plan is implemented, the Department will monitor the ongoing impact of COVID 19 as Northern Ireland recovers from COVID 19.