

Witness Name: Angela Matthews

Statement No.: 1

Exhibit: AM

Dated: 29 April 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANGELA MATTHEWS

I, Angela Matthews of the Business Disability Forum of Dowgate Hill House, 14-16 Dowgate Hill, London EC4R 2SU will say as follows: -

1. I make this statement about the Business Disability Forum's views on the economic interventions taken by the UK Government and Devolved Administrations in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in response to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry's Request for Evidence under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006, dated 4 March 2025, in relation to Module 9 of the Inquiry.
2. The facts and matters contained within this statement are within my own knowledge unless otherwise stated, and I believe them to be true. Where I refer to information supplied by others, the source of the information is identified; facts and matters derived from other sources are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.
3. I make this statement on behalf of the Business Disability Forum and confirm that I am duly authorised to do so.

Business Disability Forum and our work

4. Business Disability Forum is a not-for-profit membership organisation working to transform the life chances of disabled people through business. Our membership community consists of over 600 businesses, who we work with at every level, from

Board to entry level, and across all areas of an organisation, from recruitment and human resources to comms and procurement.

5. Business Disability Forum advises, supports and encourages businesses (many of them global) to become more disability inclusive through our webinars, resources, and Advice Service. We work with Government by representing the voice of employers and disabled employees. We also provide evidence-based thought leadership on how business affects the lives of disabled people, and we facilitate opportunities for businesses to share practice and work together through our sector and topic-based taskforces and networks.
6. Business Disability Forum's policy and research function is designed to represent our members' views on government policy issues and development. We undertake research with our members to test policy ideas and find out what they think, and they we work with government on what we think would make things easier for businesses so they can improve experiences of their disabled workers and customers.
7. I am the Business Disability Forum's Director of Public Policy and Research. I lead our policy and research team which specializes in UK work, health, and disability policy. I am also an adviser to and research partner on several academic research projects related to health, disability and inclusion, and inclusive employment. I regularly contribute to publications on HR and disability, and have given evidence before various Parliamentary Select Committee inquiries.
8. The other key person who works on policy at Business Disability Forum is our Chief Executive, Diane Lightfoot. Both Diane and I engage with the government on behalf of Business Disability Forum as key stakeholders.
9. We have constructive relationships with various government policy teams on business topics – namely, work and health, employment and equality legislations, technology, and government support and accreditation schemes such as Access to Work and Disability Confident. It is usual for us to be invited as a stakeholder by the government on whatever is happening to the economy at the time insofar as it affects provision of support to or employment of disabled people.

Economic vulnerabilities of disabled people

10. Disabled people experience three key economic vulnerabilities, which existed before the pandemic, and which continue to exist.
11. Firstly, disabled people incur additional costs because of their disability every month, which is currently an average of £1,010 per month to have the same standard of living as non-disabled people. Please see the Scope report, *Disability Price Tag 2024: Living with the extra cost of disability* [AM/01-INQ000596808, p10].
12. Secondly, disabled people often need adjustments to get into work and take part in recruitment and assessment tasks. The most common adjustment disabled employees need or ask for is flexibility, including home working, because of their disability. Much of this is due to difficult and inaccessible transport infrastructure which makes commuting and travelling to work exhausting, painful, entirely undoable without an unreasonable journey time (see the Transport for All report, *Are we there yet? Barriers to transport for disabled people in 2023* [AM/02-INQ000596807]). This need for adjustments can often mean they are overlooked if the employer cannot or does not make adjustments for disabled candidates. In fact, research by Leonard Cheshire at the beginning of the pandemic showed that 1 in 5 employers are hesitant to employ a disabled person [AM/03-INQ000596809, p122].
13. Thirdly, many disabled employees do not have a good experience of work when they are there. 28 per cent of disabled employees (n=1,480) told us as part of *The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey 2023* they are considering leaving their job because of how they are treated by their employer [AM/04-INQ000596810, p101].

Business Disability Forum's work during the pandemic

14. Business Disability Forum did not take part in any activity to facilitate or inform the government economic response to the pandemic.
15. During the pandemic, Business Disability Forum continued to be part of the same stakeholder groups that it was already in. This is how we usually work with government, so the nature of our relationship with government did not change during or because of the pandemic.

16. Given that Business Disability Forum is not a disabled people's organisation (DPO), we were not invited to participate in the Disabled People's Organisation Forums held by the government. We are part of the Disability Charities Consortium, but this does not involve DPOs.
17. An example of our engagement with government during the pandemic is the written evidence I submitted to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry in April 2020 about the unequal impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people with protected characteristics **[AM/05-INQ000596811]**.
18. During the pandemic, we engaged with the government as we always would. We were not consulted by the government in relation to any specific economic interventions or their monitoring during the pandemic.
19. As a membership organisation, the majority of Business Disability Forum's focus during the pandemic was to support our members and their workers and customers.
20. We did undertake a short piece of research, entitled '*Business as (un)usual: how business have responded to Covid-19*' **[AM/06-INQ000596806]** to find out how our members were responding to the pandemic, but we did not do this as a representative piece of research for the government or to inform their response.
21. Our business model does require us to work constructively with government departments, local authorities and devolved administrations on a wide range of projects and issues, and this has only strengthened since the pandemic because we have intentionally grown the reach and impact of our policy and research function; it was unrelated to the pandemic.

The economic impact of the pandemic and the government's response

22. Business Disability Forum does not have any evidence to be able to provide an overview of the economic impact of the pandemic on businesses, disabled employees, or carers. Similarly, we do not have any evidence regarding the impact of Long Covid as we do not undertake condition-specific projects at Business Disability Forum.

23. At a high level, we consider that a weakness of the overall economic response to the pandemic by the government insofar as it related to disabled employees was that there was a lack of inclusive communications. Many disabled people were not able to access the information that was needed on social media platforms, and the government did not lead the way, for example by not providing key information in audio, Easy Read, sign languages, and large type fonts. Additionally, there was an over-reliance on providing information via the internet during the pandemic, and many people with disabilities rely on libraries, day centres, and other community group areas to access computers to get online. We discuss this issue further in our publication exhibited to this statement at [AM/05-INQ000596811]. In particular, we say [AM/05-INQ000596811, p261-262]:

*2.1 Our overall concern, during any pandemic or other national emergency, is that people have all the information and instructions they need. This has not been the case for many disabled people. Many social media and other media channels have produced **inaccessible information** for many people; but the main concern is that the UK Government should be ensuring it is 'leading the way' on this issue. For example, there is still a lack of key information in audio, Easy Read, sign languages, and large type fonts, meaning a significant proportion of people are unable to access the information and instructions from the Government that others can get.*

*2.2 This is further enhanced by over-reliance on people having **access to the internet**. Many people with disabilities and long-term conditions rely on libraries, day centres, and other community group areas, particularly to access a computer and get online. It was notable and commendable that the Government produced an Easy Read version of the Prime Minister's letter on Coronavirus, but this could only be accessed by going online and finding it on the Government's website. This requires knowledge of where communication about Coronavirus sits, as well as navigating the Government's at times complex website structure which many people with learning disabilities are likely to find difficult without support. This is alongside the continued legacy of Ofcom's research in*

2016 which found that 2 in 10 people with learning disabilities said their disability limits their use of a mobile phone or the internet.

3.1 A physical copy of the Prime Minister's letter was sent to the country's 28 million households. Whilst we appreciate that the letter was produced quickly, there are improvements that could have meant it was more accessible and inclusive and thus more effective in getting vital messages across. The two sides of A4 letter included an A5 leaflet, which is small for many, with important information and instructions in graphics which would be difficult for many to work out. **Neither the letter nor the leaflet mentioned that this information is available in other formats if needed.**

3.2 Among the UK's 66 million residents, RNIB reports around 2 million have sight loss; Mencap reports 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability; the British Deaf Association cites 87,000 as the figure of Deaf people in the UK who use British Sign Language to communicate; and the Government's own figures state that almost 900,000 of people in the UK do not speak English well or at all. The media reported that sending the Prime Minister's letter to the UK's 28 million households costed around £6million – yet **millions of people were unlikely to be able to read it.**"

24. However, in terms of evaluating the government's response to the pandemic, we appreciated the speed at which decisions needed to be made by politicians and policy-makers. In an ideal world, there would have been time for co-productive decision making and consultation, but that was not realistic in a health pandemic situation that had not been anticipated.

25. It was clear to us the officials who engaged with us were working as hard as they could and that information was reaching the media before officials, but the context of this unprecedented situation was understood. We felt we were being spoken to as much as possible with the information that stakeholder engagement teams in government had.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

PD

Signed: _____

6 May 2025

Dated: _____