

- i. **Witness Name: Dan Scorer**
- ii. **Statement No: 1**
- iii. **Exhibits: 8**
- iv. **Dated: 12th May 2025**

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DAN SCORER

I, Dan Scorer, acting as Head of Policy, Public Affairs, Information & Advice at the Royal Mencap Society will say as follows:-

1. I make this statement in response to a request from the Inquiry to provide evidence for Module 9, detailing the impact of economic interventions during the pandemic on people with learning disabilities.

Mencap

2. Royal Mencap Society is a registered charity that works across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We provide social care support to 4,000 people with a learning disability. We also provide employment support, such as supported internships and are an Ofsted registered provider. We have helplines in England and Wales, to provide advice and support to people with a learning disability and their families. We campaign and seek positive change for people with a learning disability and their families, and our current strategy aims to make the UK the best place for people with a learning disability to lead happy and health lives, with a focus on-
 - Increasing participation in paid employment from the current low rate of around 25% (DS/07-INQ000596844), as well as securing a social security system that is fair and provides an adequate level of support.
 - Tackling barriers to people being able to access timely and high quality healthcare and preventing avoidable deaths.
 - Increasing funding for social care, addressing unmet need, and securing greater reward and recognition of the social care workforce

- Addressing the cost-of-living crisis, with a focus on financial support and wider accessibility of utilities and financial services
- Ending the detention of people with a learning disability and autistic people in mental health hospitals under the Mental Health Act when they do not have a mental health issue.

Pre-existing Economic Vulnerabilities before the pandemic

3. People with a learning disability have one of the lowest rates of employment amongst disabled people- at around 25% (DS/07-INQ000596844), compared to 50% for disabled people overall, and around 76% for the general population. This means that people with a learning disability largely rely on social security to support them in terms of meeting the extra costs of being disabled (Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payment (PIP)) and employment related income replacement (Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or Universal Credit (UC)). This reliance on social security means that people with a learning disability are more likely to live on fixed costs with very little if any buffer to absorb financial shocks such as the pandemic.
4. Disabled people went into the Covid-19 pandemic with weaker living standards, increased poverty and higher rates of material deprivation as exemplified in the following ways:
5. **Disability poverty rates pre-pandemic:** In 2017/18, 31% of the 13 million disabled people in the UK lived in poverty – around 4 million people (DS/02-INQ000596842). By contrast, the poverty rate among non-disabled people was 20%. This gap in poverty rates has persisted over time. An additional 3 million non-disabled people in poverty lived in a household where someone was disabled, meaning that, overall, nearly half of the 14 million people in poverty were affected by disability (DS/02-INQ000596842).
6. **Food insecurity pre-pandemic:** In late 2018 over 7 in 10 people who used Trussell Trust food banks said that at least one disability or health condition affected their household. The prevalence of learning disability was 13% (DS/01- INQ000596847).

7. **Inadequacy of benefits:** Before the pandemic, disability benefits were already inadequate and were not commensurate with the extra and unavoidable extra costs that people with a learning disability face. A family where at least one person received disability benefits had a much higher risk of being in poverty – 37% compared with 28% of families where at least one person is disabled but in which no one received disability benefits (DS/02-INQ000596842).

Pre-existing Economic vulnerabilities faced by those who care for those with learning disabilities

8. Prior to the pandemic, families caring for a disabled child were already significantly financially vulnerable, and this trend only worsened during the relevant period of the inquiry, as many vital services that families relied on changed or closed. In particular, the following themes are noted:
9. **Increased likelihood of poverty:** The poverty gap between carers and non-carers has persisted for ten years. Before the pandemic, nearly a quarter of all informal carers were living in poverty in 2017/18, which amounted to more than a million people (DS/02-INQ000596842).
10. **Impact on work and earning:** The inability to work is the key driver for poverty among carers. In 2017/18, 36% of working-age carers of disabled people were not in work, compared with 23% of non-carers. This gap had grown during the six years preceding the pandemic (DS/02- INQ000596842).

Regional variations

11. During the relevant period of the inquiry, different economic challenges have faced those with learning disabilities across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Social security has over recent years started to become devolved, with policy diverging. For example, in Scotland, from early 2022, the Scottish government gained oversight of the Scottish equivalent of Personal Independent Payment (England and Wales), which is Adult Disability Payment (ADP). Policy around assessment is substantially different in Scotland, with disabled people reporting more

positive experiences of the benefit and its associated assessment and re-assessment processes.

12. Vital schemes, such as employment support for disabled people, have also been subject to different funding streams across the countries. For example, in Northern Ireland there was significant uncertainty in the build-up to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund replacing European Structural and Investment Funds in 2022, as the successor funding scheme.

Mencap's Role During the Pandemic

13. The March 2020 decision by the UK government to uplift the standard allowance within Universal Credit and the basic element of working tax credit by £20 per week or £1,000 per year, was welcome. However, this uplift was not made available to disabled people on legacy benefits, such as Employment and Support Allowance, which was the subject of a High Court case in 2021. This was, in our view, a major omission on the part of the government, and unfairly discriminated against disabled people.
14. As a member of the Disability Benefits Consortium (“DBC”), Mencap was closely involved in the important work that the coalition undertook during the pandemic to understand the financial impact being experienced by disabled people. DBC published in February of 2021, in the report *Pandemic Poverty: Stark choices facing disabled people on legacy benefits* (DS/03- INQ000509881). The report outlined the key finding that, for 95% of respondents, their costs had increased as a result of the pandemic. Additional spending on food was the major concern reported (95% of respondents), as well as additional costs relating to utilities, managing health and travel.
15. Crucially, as a result of these increased costs, two thirds (67%) of disabled claimants had to go without essential items at some point during the pandemic. Almost half (44%) of disabled claimants were reporting being unable to meet financial commitments such as rent and household bills.
16. In August 2021 DBC released further research- ‘The Millions Missing Out’ (DS/04- INQ000596841). This highlighted that for the vast majority of disabled people, their financial position had deteriorated during the pandemic due to the extra utility and

other costs being faced, and that this was combined with the withdrawal or change to key services, such as social care support.

17. The nature of our relationship with the UK government on economic issues did not substantially change during the pandemic.
18. Relating to the economic response during the pandemic we had ongoing engagement with the Department for Work and Pensions. This focussed on the government's policy of not including disabled people on legacy benefits within the £20 per week increase to the Universal Credit standard allowance.
19. We did not commission work of our own on the economic response to the pandemic. However, as outlined above, we worked within the Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC) coalition, which did carry out survey work amongst disabled people on the economic impact upon them during the pandemic.

The Economic Impact of the Pandemic

20. For those with a learning disability, we observed a disproportionate economic impact, material hardship and inequality (either caused or exacerbated) as a result of the pandemic from December 2019 to June 2022. In particular, the following are noted -
21. **Debt and low financial resilience:** In mid-2020, households affected by disability were in greater levels of debt than other households: 32% had arrears with fuel bills and 41% of disabled people referred to food banks were indebted to the DWP (DS/01-INQ000596847).
22. **Income inequality:** Throughout 2020 –2021, the share of disabled people who reported being materially deprived (34%) was almost three times the share among non-disabled people (13%) (DS/05-INQ000596846). Towards the end of the pandemic, the gap in median household income between adults with a disability and those without was 44% (excluding disability benefits on the grounds that it is intended to compensate for the additional costs of having a disability).
23. **Food insecurity:** People living in families where someone was disabled (38% of the population) accounted for 63% of all food insecurity experienced in 2022/23. This

compares with 58% before the covid-19 pandemic (2019/20) (DWP, Household Food Security Status). Food insecurity relates to where people do not have reliable access to sufficient affordable and nutritious food.

24. **Fuel poverty:** Disabled people were also more likely to live in a cold home during the pandemic. Two-fifths of disabled people (41%) in a Resolution Foundation survey from 2023 (DS/05- INQ000596846) said they could not afford to keep their homes warm, almost twice the amount of non-disabled people (23%). This was particularly dangerous for people with a learning disability, as they are more likely to have co-occurring health conditions that are exacerbated by cold homes and which make supply of heating vital, as acknowledged in the 2022 LeDeR (Learning from Lives and Deaths, (DS/06- INQ000596843)).
25. **People with a learning disability going without essentials:** Mencap's 2022 Big Learning Disability Survey of 2,000 people with a learning disability found that almost a quarter (24.3%) of respondents reported that they did not have enough money (DS/07- INQ000596844).
26. Towards the end of the pandemic, Mencap's Policy Shapers (a group of people with a learning disability and their supporters) were asked about the material hardship they had faced over the previous 6 months. 20% of respondents had skipped meals to save money and one third of respondents had not turned the heating on when they needed it. A family carer responded saying: *'My daughter has a special diet for her health and well-being. It is becoming worrying to be able to afford her necessities. I am skipping meals so that she may have what she needs.'* Another family member said that they were struggling to make ends meet and that *'Essential equipment is costing more to keep charged. I don't know how we will keep the lights on or heating on come winter.'* (DS/08- INQ000596845).
27. **Poverty rates at the end of the pandemic:** Reported foodbank usage has increased by 80% for people in families where someone is disabled since 2021/22, compared with an increase of 36% for people in families where no one is disabled (DWP, Food Banks used by the household of the individual).
28. **Day services and social care support:** In June and July 2020, Mencap ran a survey to gather the experiences of family carers in relation to social care provision for their loved one with a learning disability. This was undertaken to establish what

changes to support were being experienced, and the impact this was having on people, for example in terms of independence, skills and wellbeing. Over 1,000 family members took part. 67% said their family member's needs had increased during the pandemic, but a lack of social care support negatively impacted people with a learning disability in a number of ways, including their mental health (69%), *relationships* (73%), physical health (54%) and *independence* (67%).

29. We heard from families whose loved ones with a learning disability were previously independent and confident but, since their support was taken away, had 'lost their life skills'. A 57-year-old mother commented regarding her 22-year-old son, "He was at residential college supported by an active programme of learning and life skills. This has stopped since mid-March. He has regressed, he has become subdued and is ripping his clothes and being destructive".

30. **Accessing face-to-face services:** People with a learning disability told us that the 'default to digital services', precipitated by the pandemic, made it harder for them to manage their money. In February 2024 we ran online focus groups with people with a learning disability on access to banking. One participant reflected on changes to access, saying, *'Since the pandemic bank support has been not great. It's difficult to get appointments., it's not as easy as it used to be.'*

Economic impact on those caring for people with learning disabilities

31. The pandemic further impacted on those in caring roles for individuals with a learning disability. By way of context, around 40% of parents with a disabled child leave employment, with a further 30% reducing their working hours. Whilst Carers Allowance is often claimed by family members, who are providing over 35 hours a week of care, the benefit provides minimal replacement of lost income being paid at £81.90 per week in the 2024-25 financial year, an effective hourly rate of £2.34.

32. Carers who care for less than 35 hours a week are not eligible for Carers Allowance, but they may still find their ability to work and their earning ability impacted by their caring responsibilities.

33. Research by the Disabled Children's Partnership (Failed and Forgotten, 2023), immediately post pandemic, set out that-

- Half of parents of disabled children are unable to work and have experienced poverty, because of lack of support for their child.
- Three in four parents have had to give up employment or their whole careers, due to lack of support.

34. In June and July 2020, Mencap ran a survey to gather the experiences of family carers in relation to social care provision for their loved one with a learning disability. Over 1,000 family members took part and the following was noted:

- Caring for someone around the clock while day services are closed and respite hours are cut took a shocking toll on the wellbeing of family carers.
- Over half (52%) of family carers said that they struggled to cope with supporting their loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Three quarters said the situation had been detrimental to their own mental health (75%), relationships (60%) and their physical health (61%).

Strengths and weaknesses of the overall economic response and recommendations

35. In considering the strengths and weaknesses of the government's economic response in relation to people with a learning disability, the uplift of the standard allowance within Universal Credit and the basic element of working tax credit by £20 per week or £1,000 per year, was a positive intervention that alleviated potential hardship. However, its impact for people with a learning disability was severely limited and undermined by the fact that most were still on 'legacy' benefits, and so not able to benefit, as the government did not apply the uplift to disabled people claiming legacy benefits, such as Employment and Support Allowance.

36. The pausing of benefit deductions between April-July 2020 was a second positive intervention that alleviated hardship at a time of significant financial stress for households. However, the period of the pause was too short, and significant further benefit could have been had from its extension.

37. The closure of many care services for people with a learning disability, and their slow or non re-opening post pandemic, had a massive impact on family carers in terms of

their physical, emotional and financial wellbeing. This also impacted on carers' ability to move into or sustain employment.

38. Many people with a learning disability became isolated and depressed during the pandemic, with support services closed, and this for some people caused regression and moved them further away from goals around greater independence and participation in the labour market.
39. In thinking about overall recommendations that we would ask the Chair to consider, we would start with the training and familiarisation of officials: Officials, if drafted in from other parts of government, need to undertake rapid familiarisation and induction with key stakeholders and teams in the sector(s) to which they are going to be making policy. Government departments and public bodies, at the start of the pandemic, failed to make full use of their own learning disability specific policy specialists. All public bodies should have robust mapping of their in-house expertise relating to the development of policy and guidance, so better use is made of specific existing teams.
40. There is a high level of risk within rushed and closed drafting of national guidance by bodies such as 'Covid cells', without adequate rapid engagement and consultation with relevant stakeholders to work through unintended consequences, unforeseen issues and implications relating to the Equality Act 2010. In future, public bodies should have established and well supported networks with key stakeholders to ensure that rapid consultation and development of guidance can be achieved within agreed timescales. The previous government's Disability Action Plan (5th February 2024) set out important commitments in relation to involving disabled people in emergency and resilience planning and lessons from Covid-19 need to be included within the development of the Action Plan's work.
41. In terms of accessibility of information, guidance must be made available in formats, such as easy read, that are accessible for people with a learning disability, so they can understand how services are operating and how they will be supported. Extensive promotion of accessible guidance needs to take place, working with stakeholders. Accessible information needs to be released at the same time as standard versions of information, not days or weeks later, which places disabled people at a substantial disadvantage.

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.

Signed:

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Dated: 12th May 2025