

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled people in Lancashire

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	3
Survey Findings	4
<i>Has covid affected your support?</i>	4
<i>Are the restriction rules clear to you?</i>	4
<i>Who tells you about changes to the restriction rules?</i>	5
<i>Has going out and about changed for you?</i>	6
<i>What has been bad and good this past year?</i>	7
Survey Recommendations	8
<i>Recommendation One: Law, Guidance and The Equality Act</i>	8
<i>Recommendation Two: Proving disability status</i>	8
<i>Recommendation Three: Consistent accessible store signage</i>	9
<i>Recommendation Four: Update the priority register</i>	9
<i>Recommendation Five: NHS PPE/Covering approval</i>	9
A1: Government timelines of lockdowns/announcements	10

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Firstly, we would like to thank the project funders: [The National Emergencies Trust](#) and [Disability Action](#). The NET Coronavirus Appeal funding allowed us to reach out and offer additional support (if needed) to minority communities that we may not have otherwise been able to reach. It also allowed us as an organisation to see and learn how far we could reach with the survey; by looking at alternative ways of collecting the data and ensuring it was completely accessible to all.

Secondly, we would like to thank all the respondents of our survey – without the diverse range of responses and conversations we had with disabled people, we would not have been able to ensure that this report was a true reflection of the feelings of the community. These are authentic voices of disabled people taken by an authentic disabled people's organisation.

I would also like to take this moment to thank my DENW colleague, Georgina Joyce. Gena has been a great asset to the research project. By being the voice on the telephone, it allowed those that were unable to complete the research electronically or via video call to make sure that their experiences were heard and recorded anonymously. It also meant that participants could be signposted to other support that they may not have known was available to them.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Link Project began on the 18th of January 2021 and ended five months later on the 25th of June 2021. During this time, we setup various ways for disabled people across Lancashire to let us know about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We devised many ways for people to complete the survey, including:

- An online survey which was located on a dedicated website that we had full control of.
- Via telephone for those that were unable to complete the survey electronically.
- Online focus groups for different sensory disability groups.
- Via SMS text message for individuals.
- Via WhatsApp for individuals.
- Via an accessible Word document for individuals.
- Via Zoom and Teams video calls for individuals.

Having many different ways of people completing the survey meant that we could reach different communities that may have been otherwise hard to engage with.



In the first month, we built up a database of organisations within the local area that we felt may have access to the communities that we wanted to connect with. We sent out regular updates to them all. We also sent a copy of the poster via the post to all the local GP surgeries and asked them to display it so that we could connect with people that may not have access to the internet.

With the online survey, we wanted to make sure it was accessible to as many participants as possible – we made sure that the survey was signed in British Sign Language with both captions and a voiceover. It was also accessible to those



participants that use assistive technology. We put a lot of effort into doing this – we wanted to make sure that there wasn't a reason for someone being unable to complete it. Feedback we received with how the survey was presented was extremely positive – with one participant saying it was the "best survey they had completed, as it is completely accessible".

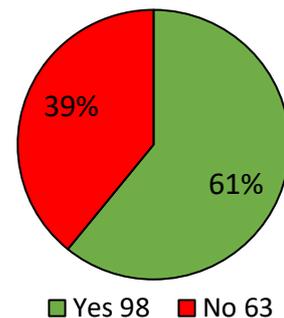
We wanted to make sure that the survey could be completed as quick as possible as disabled people may not be able to spend thirty minutes to an hour on a multiple page survey. We went with six basic questions, which then had optional boxes that people could tell us why they chose that option if they so wanted to do so. At the end of the survey, we then asked if they would be willing to tell us how they identify based upon the minority groups of people that we wanted to target the survey towards.

Survey Findings

Over the survey period, we received one hundred and sixty-one individual responses to our survey.

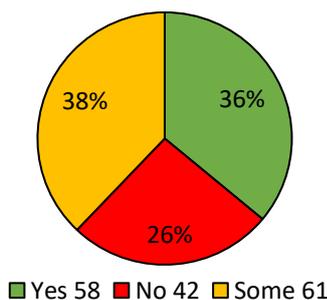
Has covid affected your support?

The first question that we asked was if the respondents felt that their support had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. When thinking about this question, we asked them to think about people or organisations that may have supported them in the past but were not able to because of local restrictions that they were under. This could have been a family member, a carer, support worker or a local charity that used to offer activity services. 98 of the 161 respondents said that they had been affected.



Are the restriction rules clear to you?

The second question was if the restriction rules were clear to them. When looking through the comments that were entered alongside their answer, a recurring theme was that the disabled people understood most of the rules - it was non-disabled people that were denying "reasonable adjustments" when it came to exemptions and access to public places. Non-disabled people were also purchasing and using "exemption"

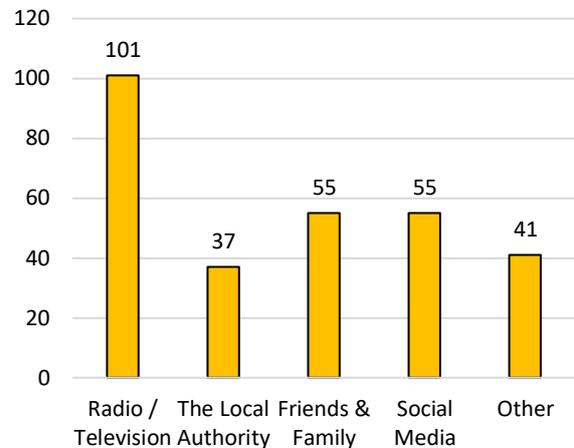


lanyards from the internet and falsely claiming they had a medical exemption; the [hidden disabilities lanyard](#) had become appropriated during the pandemic and falsely used as a symbol of mask exemption. This meant that disabled people that had hidden disabilities and were historically using these lanyards to show that the wearer may have needed support in a public space were being incorrectly challenged. There was also a rise in counterfeit Sunflower Lanyards on various websites, and [The One Show](#) (BBC One) covered this in January 2021.



Who tells you about changes to the restriction rules?

For the third question, we wanted to know where disabled people typically found out about changes to these rules. This question was a multiple choice one – they could choose more than one option if they wanted to. The most-used and most-trusted source was Radio and Television, where 101 of the 161 respondents were using it as their trusted source. Some of the comments that were entered along-side these choices were, however, that they had become fixated on these statistics briefings; which was then having a negative impact on their mental health and anxiety levels – whilst they were also quickly becoming overwhelmed with the amount of information that they were receiving on a daily basis. They suffered with information overload.



There was an entire section of disabled people that were being excluded during these daily briefings – Deaf BSL users. Not only did the government spend two point six million pounds on refurbishing their briefing room into a White House-style briefing room, they also did not allocate space on their Coronavirus briefings for a BSL interpreter. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were including Sign Language interpreters on their briefings, and yet our own government refused to do so.



Ultimately, they were rightly challenged. Over a hundred and fifty thousand Deaf BSL users were not receiving information on changes to the law, health information, or on how to keep themselves safe in their first language (British Sign Language) during the pandemic. This led to a movement on social media called [#WhereIsTheInterpreter](#), led by Lynn Stewart-Taylor – which has now ended with a [Judicial Review](#).

One of the positives coming from the COVID pandemic is this Judicial Review – if it were not for the government's public failings on an epic scale regarding the lack of access, this campaign may not have gone as far as it would have done pre-pandemic.

Another concern that was highlighted within the responses to this question were in relation to social media; how fake news was able to spread like wildfire on the platforms. It became so big a problem that the major platforms like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) had to come up with new ways to try and stop the spread of misinformation and scaremongering. It only got worse, however, when the vaccine rollouts began. Anti-vaxxers were using these platforms to spread complete fabrications and conspiracy theories about the vaccines, and [Parliament released information](#) on this topic.



For the respondents that chose 'other', responses were mostly care staff or agencies. Their support providers had been filling in the information gaps.



Has going out and about changed for you?

95% of respondents said that going out and about had changed for them in some way; whether that be what things were like for them when they were out, or if they actually were able to get out at all.

A recurring issue that disabled people were having was the lack of support to even manage to get out of the house. Some care agencies abandoned their clients, leaving them alone for months on end; and some had to do things for the client. By doing things for the client, it meant that their independence was being eroded away. The British Medical Journal [released an article](#) in September 2020 titled: "Care during covid-19 must be humane and person centred". Whilst on the topic of care, allow me to draw your attention to this article that the CQC [published a report](#) on DNACPR (do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation), and how the health system had failed to communicate with patients that they had put this on their health records – resulting in deaths that could have been prevented.

It wasn't all doom and gloom when it comes to the responses we received to this question – some care agencies had come up with alternative ways to do things for the client; although the individual was still losing some of their independence.

For the clients that were unable to leave their homes at all during the pandemic, they had to rely on supermarket delivery slots. The visually impaired and blind community were hit really hard by this as they were not automatically added to the priority list,



meaning they were often unable to get delivery slots. It hit them even harder when they were forced to actually go to the stores – shelves were often short of groceries, and deals that would normally be available to them were sold out. There were reports that other sighted shoppers regularly failed to socially distance, meaning that there were times when there could potentially be a confrontation between them when they reach over the top of them or bump into one another.

RNIB [launched a campaign](#) titled "Coming out of lockdown, together", campaigning for everyone to maintain the space, be patient and be helpful. They also supported the [Government's campaign](#) "Championing equal access on public transport" saying that:

"it's everyone's journey" brings together those who want to improve public transport for disabled people and deliver real change. It has been developed by the Department for Transport in partnership with industry, disability groups and disabled people.

Source: [HM Government](#), 2021

Something else that had happened with the major supermarkets was that they had taken over disabled parking bays close to the store entrances for things like click and collect, or queuing to get inside. This meant that often the disabled people themselves were unable to actually enter the shops.

The lockdown restrictions made it extremely difficult for disabled people to travel; an anxiety had set in over the risk of virus transmission as well as mask shaming. In the U.K., [mask shaming](#) is where people are harassed because of their inability to wear a face mask due to a medical exemption. Some shops had begun banning people from entering if they were not wearing a mask; they were being discriminated





against based on their disability. We had hundreds of disabled people contact us from up and down the country – whether it be because refusal of access or where disabled people were unable to work because their place of work was forcing all their workers to wear masks. Despite the EHRC [producing advice for retailers](#), we still are hearing reports that even now, the practice is still going on. They also [produced a guidance for employers](#).

For some people, being unable to travel adversely affected their mental health. Being unable to attend the funerals of close friends or family, meant that there has been no closure for them. The restriction rules also mean that there was a limit to the number of people able to attend the venues (if at all).

What has been bad and good this past year?

For a lot of the respondents, a recurring theme was one of isolation. Some hadn't seen friends or family in over a year, so for those that need support from them then it has been virtually invisible; it has been a lonely time for them. A survey on the general population by Ipsos Mori in 2020 says that:

"... the COVID-19 pandemic could have a 'profound' and 'pervasive impact' on global mental health now and in the future and calls for research on mental health and brain science to be central to the global response to the pandemic."

Source: [Ipsos Mori](#), 2020

Another by-product of the social isolation has been the risk of an increase in domestic violence and aggression. We saw some responses from disabled people that told us that they had seen more anger from family / partners directed towards them. Refuge recorded an average of over 13,000 calls and messages between April 2020 and February of 2021 to its National Domestic Abuse helpline. The UK government hopes to have their new [Domestic Abuse Act](#) come into force at some point in 2021/2022.

On a more positive note, the pandemic has allowed people to spend quality time with their family. It has also allowed disabled people to do things around their home that they had been putting off, as well as learn new skills.

For some, the shift to digital-first has been easy. The country shifted everything online, meaning that for some their work had become more accessible to them.

For years, disabled people have been campaigning for flexible working arrangements – employers have been reluctant to allow homeworking. The pandemic hit and employers were suddenly able to implement ways for people to work from home – it was all suddenly possible. It was the same for education, where disabled students had previously been asking for the ability to study remotely if they needed.



It has also allowed disabled people to do things around their home that they had been putting off, as well as learn new skills.



For others, however, the shift to digital-first has been extremely difficult. Age or a lack of access to technology means that some have had no contact with anyone outside of their four walls. A lack of hardware or lack of fast internet access has meant that they have been left out. One of the considerations we had to make when undertaking this project was how we would engage with these disabled people – and by setting up the telephone and SMS options, we were able to have them take part.

Survey Recommendations

Recommendation One: Law, Guidance and The Equality Act

The main complaint that disabled people had was in regards to the rules, the guidance and the advice. The country had so many different ones for different areas, there was often confusion as to what was law and what was just advice for people to stay safe. This led to the general public making assumptions about who was allowed to do things and who was not – including the mask exemption status of many disabled people. The government need to make sure that the public are aware of what is the law and what is not. Things that should have been law, for example the Equality Act and reasonable adjustments needs to be taken into consideration when briefings are taking place. The Prime Minister needs to ensure that disabled people's support mechanisms are not wiped out in one fell swoop with the introduction of a Coronavirus Act that removed the rights of many of the population.



Changes to the law need to be available in accessible formats as soon as the announcements are made.

Recommendation Two: Proving disability status

Pre-1999, local authority social services departments used to issue what was called a "green card". This was a card used by disabled people to prove that they had a disability.



When this was scrapped, there was no easy way to prove that someone had a disability or was disabled - not every disabled person claims Disability Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payment, so may not have "proof" of their disability available. What this has meant is that many different types of commercial evidence cards have popped up over the years, which not every business recognises or knows about.

Then there's the sunflower lanyard scheme – with the appropriation of this as a "mask exemption" status, it has begun to erode away at the validity of such a scheme; people have started questioning those that are wearing them because of the widespread availability that there is to purchase them.



Recommendation Three: Consistent accessible store signage



We had reports from visually-impaired people that were struggling with signage that helps keep them safe – for example floor markings that show which direction shoppers have to follow when in the stores. The hand sanitisers that are in stores need to be more visually prominent and have a stark contrast between the colour of the sanitiser and what it is attached to. Some also expressed concern over how many people touch the manual dispensers on a daily basis in respect of contact points for people to contract the COVID-19 virus (and variants). The government could work with disability charities to come up with a visual framework that businesses should use to have consistency across the UK and is easier for visually impaired shoppers to understand what the signage means.

Recommendation Four: Update the priority register

We had reports that some disabled people in Lancashire have struggled with getting onto the priority register to access home delivery slots. The government should setup a system where people that aren't on the register can submit their details to join it easily, ensuring that it is accessible to all.



Recommendation Five: NHS PPE/Covering approval



The system to certify PPE for use in medical settings and non-medical settings needs improving. We have fast approval of vaccinations etc, but there is still a lack of approved clear masks that are suitable for use with GPs and hospital staff to make it easier for deaf and hard of hearing people to lipread them. [For the one system](#) that was approved by the NHS, businesses that wanted to purchase some of them had to purchase in bulk and import them from America, with heavy costs involved.



A1: Government timelines of lockdowns/announcements

The UK government have made many announcements since the beginning of the pandemic back in March 2020. We have included the information below:



16 March 2020

PM says “now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel”.



19 March 2020

PM says the UK can “turn tide of coronavirus in 12 weeks”.



23 March 2020

PM announces the first lockdown in the UK, ordering people to “stay at home”.



25 March 2020

Coronavirus Act 2020 gets Royal Assent.



26 March 2020

Lockdown measures legally come into force.



16 April 2020

Lockdown extended for at least three weeks. Government sets out five tests that must be met before restrictions are erased.



30 April 2020

PM says we are “past the peak” of the pandemic.



10 May 2020

PM announces a conditional plan for lifting lockdown, and says that people that cannot work from home should return to the workplace but avoid public transport.



1 June 2020

Phased re-opening of schools in England.



15 June 2020

Non-essential shops reopen in England.



23 June 2020

PM says UK’s “national hibernation” coming to an end – announces relaxing of restrictions and the 2m social distancing rule.



29 June 2020

Matt Hancock announces that the UK’s first local lockdown would be applied in Leicester and parts of Leicestershire.



4 July 2020

UK’s first local lockdown comes into force in Leicester and parts of Leicestershire. More restrictions are eased in England, including reopening of pubs, restaurants and hairdressers.



18 July 2020

Local authorities in England gain additional powers to enforce social distancing.



The impact of COVID-19 on disabled people in Lancashire



3 August 2020

Eat Out to Help Out scheme, offering a 50% discount on meals up to £10.00 per person begins in the UK.



14 August 2020

Lockdown restrictions eased further, including reopening indoor theatres, bowling alleys and soft play.



14 September 2020

Rule of six – indoor and outdoor social gatherings above six banned in England.



22 September 2020

PM announces new restrictions in England, including a return to working from home and a 10pm curfew for the hospitality sector.



30 September 2020

PM says UK at a “critical moment” in the crisis and would “not hesitate” to impose further restrictions as needed.



14 October 2020

A new three-tier system of COVID-19 restrictions starts in England.



31 October 2020

PM announces a second lockdown in England to prevent a “medical and moral disaster” for the NHS.



5 November 2020

Second lockdown comes into force in England.



24 November 2020

PM announces up to three households will be able to meet up during a five-day Christmas period of 23 to 27 December.



2 December 2020

Second lockdown ends after four weeks and England returns to a stricter three-tier system of restrictions.



15 December 2020

PM says Christmas rules will still be relaxed but urges the public to keep celebrations “short” and “small”.



19 December 2020

PM announces tougher restrictions for London and South East England, with a new Tier 4: “Stay at Home” alert level. Christmas mixing rules tightened.



21 December 2020

Tier 4 restrictions come into force in London and South East England.



26 December 2020

More areas of England enter Tier 4 restrictions.



The impact of COVID-19 on disabled people in Lancashire



4 January 2021

PM says children should return to school after the Christmas break, but warns restrictions in England will get tougher.



6 January 2021

England enters third national lockdown.



15 February 2021

Hotel quarantine for travellers arriving in England from 33 high-risk countries begins.



22 February 2021

PM publishes a roadmap for lifting lockdown.



8 March 2021: Step 1

Schools in England reopen for primary and secondary school students. Recreation in an outdoor public space will be allowed between two people. "Stay at Home" order ends but people encouraged to stay local.



29 March 2021: Step 1

Outdoor gatherings of either six people or two households to be allowed, including in private gardens. Outdoor sports facilities to reopen. "Stay at Home" order ends but people encouraged to stay local.



12 April 2021: Step 2

Non-essential retail, hairdressers, public buildings to reopen. Outdoor venues including pubs, restaurants, zoos and theme parks reopen as well as indoor leisure. Self-contained holiday accommodation opens. Wider social contact rules continue to apply in all settings – no indoor mixing between different households allowed.



17 May 2021: Step 3

Funerals and linked commemorative events following a death, weddings or civil partnership ceremonies, wedding receptions or civil partnership celebrations may take place in COVID-Secure venues. Holiday accommodation reopens.



Postponed: Step 4

Complete release of all lockdown restrictions was due to happen on the 21st June – this has now been delayed by at least four weeks.

The above table is a text version of the timeline taken from the image on the [Institute for Government website](#).