



Statement from Imtac on living with COVID-19

(May 2020)

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Making our information accessible

As an organisation of and for disabled people and older people Imtac recognises that the way information is provided can be a barrier to accessing services and participation in public life. We are committed to providing information about our work in formats that best suit the needs of individuals.

All our documents are available in hard copy in 14pt type size as standard. We also provide word and pdf versions of our documents on our website – www.imtac.org.uk. In addition we will provide information in a range of other formats. These formats include:

- Large print
- Audio versions
- Braille
- Electronic copies on disc or via email in PDF or word
- Easy read
- Information about our work in other languages

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.

The aim of Imtac is to ensure that disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

Introduction

Imtac has developed this statement in response to the current crisis created by the COVID-19 virus. It sets out how COVID-19 (and the measures taken to combat it) have impacted on the lives of disabled people and older people as well as the principles the Committee believes Government in Northern Ireland must adopt as we learn to live with the virus for the foreseeable future.

Impact of COVID-19 on disabled people and older people

Imtac recognises that COVID-19 has had a major disruptive, and in some cases a tragic, impact on every household in Northern Ireland. For many disabled people, older people and carers the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown measures have been particularly acute.

These impacts include:

- Many older people and disabled people being at greater risk from the virus compared to the rest of the population. Debate about limiting access to COVID-19 hospital treatment and more broadly hospital admissions has added significantly to anxiety for many older people, disabled people and carers.

- A removal / reduction of access to the key services and support many older people and disabled people rely on for independent living including access to food and other supplies, access to health services, access to education services and access to social care and support services.
- A major impact on the finances of many households including loss of employment and other reductions in household incomes. Many older people, disabled people and carers have faced additional costs associated with being at home all the time.
- The impact of self-isolation on the health and wellbeing of many older people, disabled people and carers with previous support mechanisms, such as reliance on other family members, disrupted.
- Barriers to taking exercise created for some disabled people, older people and carers due to the measures introduced to discourage travel and gatherings.
- The introduction of social / physical distancing measures has created barriers within the built environment and has limited physical access to essential services for some disabled people and older people
- Confusion around who is required to shield / self-isolate, the support that is available to them and who is eligible.
- Barriers created by higher levels of digital exclusion amongst older people and disabled people and barriers created by poor digital infrastructure in some rural areas.

Initial response to COVID-19 in Northern Ireland

Imtac recognises the scale and unprecedented nature of the challenge faced by Government in Northern Ireland when lockdown was introduced suddenly in March 2020. The Committee commends the swift response by all Ministers and Departments in introducing a series of emergency measures designed to support individuals and communities to cope in extraordinary times.

Given the urgency that was required it is perhaps inevitable that not every issue or concern has been addressed. However, the Committee believes there are many more positives than negatives to be taken from the response in Northern Ireland, including partnership working across statutory, community and business sectors and a flexibility of response rarely seen in more normal times. From the Committee's perspective it is essential that this flexibility is retained as we move forward to the next phase of dealing with the pandemic.

The Committee wishes to record its gratitude to all involved in the development and delivery of the emergency response including the essential workers from public and community transport and, of course, our healthcare workers who have been in the frontline fighting COVID-19.

Living with COVID-19 – “The New Normal”

It is increasingly clear that we will be living with COVID-19 and all its implications for the foreseeable future and that the virus will continue to have severe impacts on the day to day lives of everyone. The scale of the challenges for Government and society adapting to the “new normal” are immense. For many disabled people, older people and carers the “old normal” often did not work for them and Intac has major concerns that disabled people, older people and carers may potentially be left behind as we emerge from the current lockdown phase of the pandemic.

The Committee believes it is essential that Government in Northern Ireland develops an inclusive response to next phase of dealing with COVID-19, building on existing support for those who may continue to need to self-isolate whilst ensuring others are able to undertake daily activities as restrictions are eased. Central to developing an inclusive response to COVID-19 must be assessing plans and actions against the human rights and freedoms set out in each of the articles of UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD).¹

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>

Each of the Articles of UNCRPD is important in their own right. However Imtac has identified the following five matters as its priorities in responding to COVID-19:

- 1. Building on the recent endorsement of key principles by the Minister for Health², Government must maintain a commitment to upholding Articles 10³ (Right to Life) and 25⁴ (Health) of UNCRPD in its approach to dealing with COVID-19, providing disabled people, older people and carers with reassurance they will have equal access to hospital treatment and health services.**
- 2. In line with Article 21⁵ of UNCRPD Government must take all steps to ensure that communication around the next phase its response to COVID-19 is accessible to all members of society building on positive steps to date including the provision of ISL and BSL interpreters at daily briefings.**
- 3. In line with Articles 19⁶ and 28⁷ of UNCRPD Government must prioritise measures in the next phase of its response to COVID-19 that support the rights of disabled people to live independently in the community and with an adequate standard of living and social protection, with a particular focus on those most at risk from COVID-19.**
- 4. In line with Article 9⁸ (Accessibility) Government must take steps in the next phase of its response to COVID-19 to ensure reasonable adjustments are made to reduce the impact of social / physical distancing measures on the accessibility of the built environment (including footways and green spaces) and the availability of and**

² <https://www.disabilityaction.org/news/minister-swann-endorsement-key-principles>

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-10-right-to-life.html>

⁴ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-25-health.html>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-21-freedom-of-expression-and-opinion-and-access-to-information.html>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-19-living-independently-and-being-included-in-the-community.html>

⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-28-adequate-standard-of-living-and-social-protection.html>

⁸ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-9-accessibility.html>

access to transport services taking into particular account the rurality of Northern Ireland.

- 5. Underpinning its entire approach, and in line with Article 4⁹ of UNCRPD (General Obligations), it is essential Government establishes, without delay, a mechanism to consult with and actively engage with disabled people (including disabled children) in planning and delivering the next phase of its response to COVID-19.**

Our role

During this initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis Imtac has supported the efforts of Government in Northern Ireland, using our links with disabled people, older people and linked organisations to keep people informed of the available support. As we move to the next stage it is vital that Government develops an inclusive response, recognising the importance and value of direct engagement with disabled people, older people and carers to ensure that no one in our society feels left behind. Imtac has already started to work with colleagues in the Department for Infrastructure to advise and support planning for the next phase of the response and we would welcome the opportunity to assist in the planning and delivery of a wider, inclusive Government response.

⁹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-4-general-obligations.html>