**Statement from Imtac on living with COVID-19**

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 who will be able to access to COVID-19 treatment has added significantly to anxiety for many older people, disabled people and carers.
* A removal / reduction of access to 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 created for some disabled people, older people and carers being able to take exercise due the measures introduced to discourage travel and gatherings.
* Barriers created within the built environment for some disabled people and older people because of the introduction of social / physical distancing measures.
* Some confusion around who is required to shield / self-isolate, what support is available and who is eligible.
* Barriers created by higher levels of digital exclusion amongst older people and disabled people.

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 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 here, including partnership working across statutory, community and business sectors and a flexibility of response rarely seen in more normal times. From the 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 it’s gratitude all involved in the development and delivery of the emergency response including the other essential workers (including those working in 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 carers the “old normal” often did not work for them and Imtac has major concerns that disabled people, older people and carers may be left behind as we emerge from the current lockdown phase of the current pandemic.

For the Committee it is essential that the Executive in Northern Ireland develop an inclusive response to next phase of dealing with COVID-19, supporting those who will continue to need to self-isolate whilst ensuring others are able undertake daily activities as restrictions are eased. Involving disabled people, older people and carers in planning for the future is key to achieving this. To assist Government Imtac has set out below its six key priorities:

1. **The next phase of the response to COVID-19 must be assessed 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]](#footnote-1)**
2. **As a matter of urgency, the Executive must state its commitment to upholding Articles 10[[2]](#footnote-2) (Right to Life) and 25[[3]](#footnote-3) (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 treatment and health services.**
3. **In line with Article 21[[4]](#footnote-4) of UNCRPD the Executive 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.**
4. **In line with Articles 19[[5]](#footnote-5) and 28[[6]](#footnote-6) of UNCRPD the Executive 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, supporting all the people who will continue to need to self-isolate.**
5. **In line with Article 9[[7]](#footnote-7) of UNCRPD (Accessibility) the Executive 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 distancing measures on the accessibility of the built environment (including footways and green spaces) and transport services.**
6. **Underpinning its entire approach, and in line with Article 4[[8]](#footnote-8) of UNCRPD (General Obligations), it is essential the Executive establish, without delay, a mechanism to consult with and actively engage with disabled people (including disabled children) during the next phase of its response to COVID-19.**
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> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-10-right-to-life.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-25-health.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <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> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <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> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <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> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-9-accessibility.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-4-general-obligations.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)