19 March 2020

Dear Minister

**National Disability Strategy and COVID-19**

Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance (ROFA) , a national network of organisations run by and controlled by disabled people, wrote to you on 20/02/20 introducing our alliance and requesting urgent engagement with ROFA and UK Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) in the development of the new National Disability Strategy (NDS).

As we have not had a reply we are writing to you again about the NDS but also to raise some extremely urgent issues and asks disabled people have in relation to the COVID-19 emergency which we detail later in this letter.

We understand that the government has been engaging with some disability charities and regional forums about the NDS but we have not been approached as the national alliance of Disabled people’s organisations (DPOs) nor are we aware of any other approach to DPOs.

This is deeply disappointing and simply not acceptable. ROFA members met with Karen Jochelson, Head of the Office for Disability Issues, Jean Prague Special Adviser Cabinet Office and other civil servants in February 2019 to stress the importance of specific engagement with DPOs and to clarify expectations of engagement with DPOs that the UNCRPD requires.

Unfortunately, our concerns, like those of the UN Disability Committee, appear to have been completely ignored despite the fact we have a new government that states it ‘wants to level up’ and address the imbalances in our society.

As detailed in our previous letter of the 20 February specific and meaningful engagement with DPOs, as the representative organisations of disabled people, is not only the right thing to do but it makes policy and business sense.

Now that the country is understandably grappling with the COVID-19 emergency we are asking that the government pauses its work on the strategy for the next 3 months and in this time reaches out to DPOs and ROFA to carry out specific discussions with us about the best way to engage with Disabled people and DPOs with the aim of agreeing a strategic DPO NDS engagement plan that can then be implemented when work on strategy begins again hopefully in late summer/early autumn.

As stated we also want to take this opportunity to detail DPOs priority issues and asks that the government needs to urgently action if disabled people, who make up a very sizable proportion of the at risk group, are to be kept safe and well over this very challenging time .

We have grouped our asks under key areas of policy:

Social care and Personal Health Budgets (PHBs)

All eligible users of social care and PHBs are Disabled people who are at greater risk than the general population and therefore need the following action/protection:

* Local authorities co-produce with Deaf and Disabled People’s Organisations (DDPOs) contingency plans for safeguarding Disabled people who may be at risk of not receiving the care and support they need as a result of COVID-19
* With immediate effect stop social care charging or defer charges
* Increase Direct Payment (DP) rates to cover additional/longer term sick leave and related issues with recruitment
* Urgently recruit social care/home help staff and personal assistants (PAs) to cover for sickness
* Provide Direct Payment social care/PHB users and PAs with personal protective equipment (PPE) and coronavirus guidance in the community
* Suspend restrictions in Direct Payments agreements about employing relatives and paying cash
* Local authorities to contact all direct payment users providing guidance on protecting health of the Direct Payment users and their staff, clarifying responsibilities towards staff who are off sick or self-isolating and what to do in a case of a package breakdown
* Pay broadband and internet costs so Disabled people self-isolating can keep in contact
* Fund local DDPOs services to run virtual and phone peer support networks and advice services
* All councils should suspend restrictions in Direct Payment agreements about employing relatives, and also possibly allow DP users to make payments in cash.
* National ruling that enables DP users funded by social care can be use their budget to buy personal protective equipment (e.g. Gloves, Gels, etc)

Welfare

* Increase statutory sick pay (SSP) rates to either full pay equivalent or align with the Living Wage rates and ensure from day one and to all workers including the self-employed, and people on casual and zero hours contracts.
* Suspend mortgage and rent payments
* Scrap sanctions and all conditionality, including attending appointment at the Job Centre plus, participating in work related activity and undertaking work search
* Suspend migration to Universal Credit
* Provide financial support from day 1 of Universal Credit and remove the 5 week wait for first payment
* Provide emergency funding and/or supplies to foodbanks
* Suspend all reassessments
* Allow in claimants favour all Mandatory Reconsiderations and Tribunals.
* Default to granting awards until the emergency is over.
* Introduce interim assessment phase payments equal to statutory sick pay for people making new claims of Personal Independence Payment, Employment Support Allowance, Universal Credit.
* As Universal Credit does not give enough to live on, it must be increased and all rent (LHA) and personal allowances increased to real world living amounts.
* Suspend ‘Bedroom Tax’ deductions
* Organise foodbank deliveries for Disabled people who need them and can’t get to the foodbank.
* Ensure supermarkets provide free home delivery food supplies to people self-isolating

Health

* Provide Disabled people with direct access to medical advice and treatment because of their at-risk status
* Prioritise the regular testing of Disabled people and social care staff including personal assistants and support/home care workers for Coronavirus
* Urgently produce and share accessible guidance on coronavirus, health guidance and support available including in Easy Read and BSL
* Recognise that Disabled people have an equal right to life as non-Disabled people – access to equipment and medical care should not be restricted on the basis of impairment.
* Ensure medicines and medical supplies can be delivered to Disabled people in their homes where needed.
* All health and care staff should be regularly tested, even if they are not displaying any symptoms. All new health and care staff should also be tested before starting work.
* Co-produce a plan to support people in mental distress with mental health user and survivor groups

Rights and Inclusion

* No National Disability Strategy without us! – delay the strategy and draw up a plan of engagement with DDPOs to co-produce it and a disability action plan
* Fund fully accessible independent advice and advocacy services at a Local Authority level in partnership with DDPOs to provide Disabled people with support and guidance on accessing benefits etc. These need to be fully accessible including providing: online, phone, BSL video and in person, outreach and home visiting services
* Funding for civil society organisations, including DDPOs to fund online community peer support and networking
* Hate crime incidents are already increasing so the CPS, police forces and Police commissioners must effectively monitor hate crime against Disabled people and take appropriate action
* All elected representatives need to champion the message that every life is of equal value
* TV news media to provide bsl interpretation for all coronavirus announcements and news broadcasts for those needing bsl alone at home
* Government pamphlets and key publications to be available in easyread
* Support for self-isolating disabled people with pre-payment meters who don't use smartphone or internet and can't get to shops to top up even if they have enough money

Work

* Access to work support must be available and easily accessible to enable people to work from home
* Ensure Disabled people having to self-isolate have full protection of the Equality Act under disability discrimination and have their job protected

Disabled Children

* Support made available in the home for Disabled children whose schools have closed
* Additional Social care support for disabled parents to look after their children

We would appreciate the chance to discuss the above issues and actions at the earliest opportunity

We look forward to hearing from you

Yours sincerely

Mark Harrison

On behalf of the ROFA Steering group