

'Women and Equalities Committee: "Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services" Written Evidence

Coronavirus and the unequal access to public services and spaces for Disabled people

Wheels for Wellbeing, an advocacy charity for Disabled cyclists, is concerned that the mobility needs of Disabled people is being neglected in temporary infrastructure schemes designed to enable social distancing.

During lockdown, Disabled people are more likely to have shielded or found drastically reduced opportunities for accessible physical exercise, experienced interrupted health care treatments etc.. This will have had a greater detrimental impact on their physical and mental wellbeing than the rest of the population. Being isolated indoors for prolonged periods leads to a greatly increased risk of ill health, and greater care needs. The Chief Medical Officer recommends that every adult, including Disabled people, should aim for a minimum of 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity exercise to improve their mental and physical health. Even before lockdown Disabled people were 50% less likely to achieve this.

Walking, wheeling, and cycling reduce isolation and loneliness. They all provide mobility and independence, allowing Disabled people to access their community as well as improving their mental and physical health. For many, cycling is easier than walking, and electric cycles make distances, hills, and carrying shopping easier. Some of us use bicycles or adapted cycles (such as tricycles or handcycles) where others use rollators or mobility scooters.

Like the rest of the population, Disabled and older people urgently need to return to our responsibilities as employees / employers / care-givers / volunteers / grand-parents etc., and this will rely on first rebuilding our health and fitness. This cannot happen without safe, accessible public spaces and transport networks and measures to return and extend access to active mobility for all. The accessibility of public spaces and transport networks is prerequisite to the access of numerous services, including healthcare, education, access to food, economic independence, and social contact.

Wheels for Wellbeing's [research](#) shows that the three main reasons why Disabled people do not cycle more are inaccessible infrastructure, the prohibitive cost of mobility equipment and the failure to recognise cycles as mobility aids on a level with mobility scooters. None of these issues have been addressed during the Covid pandemic, despite broader increased support for active travel. Little attention has been paid to ensuring that temporary infrastructure is fully inclusive, to provide subsidies for those wishing to purchase an adapted cycle, or to recognise the importance of cycles as mobility aids. These inequalities existed before the pandemic, but the impact of Covid has made these issues more pressing.

While we welcome the increased government and local authority support for walking and cycling, we fear that, unless Disabled people and our organisations are involved in the co-production of public spaces in these times of rapid change, our communities could become more inaccessible, not less, with disastrous consequences for millions of Disabled individuals and their families.