

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP c/o The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

16 April 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

COVID-19 and the accessibility of public health information for disabled people

We are a group of leading disability charities, championing the rights of people with sight and hearing loss, autistic people and people with complex disabilities. We are writing to you to express significant concerns about the accessibility of public health information in relation to COVID-19 and the significant risk this poses to disabled people and the nation as a whole.

There is a community of people that we represent who are not receiving vital public health information in a way that they can access or understand. Examples we are currently seeing include the letters recently issued to the extremely vulnerable and the shielding telephone helpline, as well as information shared on broadcast and social media.

Including only those with moderate to profound hearing loss and those with moderate and severe sight loss, we are talking here about a population of over 4.5 million people who are missing out on vital public health information at this critical time. Significantly, these groups are also likely to be over represented in those who are at risk of becoming severely ill as a result of COVID-19. Over 70% of people aged over 70 have hearing loss, one in five people aged 75 and over have sight loss and many in these groups have comorbidities.

We're also concerned that many of the 700,000 autistic people living across the UK, who struggle with communication and processing information, are not able to fully understand or engage with really vital public health information. This is leading to heightened anxiety and uncertainty for many people during an already difficult time – communication must be as clear and direct as possible.

The inaccessibility of public health information brings significant risk to disabled people themselves but also to their communities and the NHS, with the potential to undermine national efforts to delay the spread of the virus.

We appreciate that in such a highly-pressured, fast-moving situation, crucial information must be communicated to the public extremely quickly. It is vital, however, that despite these pressures, accessible standards are upheld, to ensure information reaches those who need it the most.

In England, the NHS should be following the Accessible Information Standard, providing information in people's preferred format. The Equality Act also requires all service providers to make "reasonable adjustments" to support disabled people, including providing information "in an accessible format".

We are able to offer very simple solutions to this challenge and have produced communication guidance for government departments and health and social care services, for example. Yet, as individual charities and as a collective group, we have engaged with a

number of officials on this issue though haven't yet seen the improvements in accessibility needed to prevent risk to these vulnerable groups and the wider population.

As the public face of this campaign, we believe personal leadership on this issue, including the identification of a national senior lead in this area, is urgently needed.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Atkinson, Chief Executive, Action on Hearing Loss

Tom Wright, Chief Executive, Guide Dogs

Caroline Stevens, Chief Executive, National Autistic Society

Matt Stringer, Chief Executive, RNIB

Richard Kramer, Chief Executive, Sense

James Watson-O'Neill, Chief Executive, SignHealth

Charles Colquhoun, CEO, Thomas Pocklington Trust

Fiona Sandford, CEO, Visionary

cc. The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Justin Tomlinson MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work