

**PRESS RELEASE**

**Disability Action Northern Ireland criticise ‘heartbreaking irresponsibility’ in pandemic political leadership at Covid Inquiry in Belfast**

At the conclusion of Module 2C of the Covid Inquiry in Belfast today Disability Action Northern Ireland (DANI) have criticised political leaders in Northern Ireland and called for them to be ‘shaken out of their complacency’. The closing speech delivered on DANI’s behalf by Danny Friedman KC instructed by Bhatt Murphy noted that one quarter of the population of Northern Ireland is Disabled. Nevertheless, to say Disabled people were largely invisible during Covid decision making and their voices unheard was a ‘literal statement of events’. Elderly people who survived the Troubles died. Disabled people, who do not enjoy proper enfranchisement under the political system, died and otherwise suffered. Northern Ireland failed its Disabled people because by comparison with the other parts of the UK, government in Northern Ireland was the least focussed on Disabled peoples’ issues. DANI called for Northern Irish ministers to ‘feel the embarrassment’ of that comparison.

The closing speech also emphasised:

- Northern Ireland’s constitutional arrangements have produced peace, but are yet to produce good government.
- TEO and the Executive Committee in the first wave effectively abdicated decision making to the Chief Medical Officer.
- A succession of witnesses, from civil servants to advisers, to ministers right up to the Deputy First Minister and First Minister had admitted failing Disabled people and failing to properly consult them in Government decision making.
- The Department of Health, as Robin Swann accepted, left its nation in a state of serious risk because it did not ring the alarm bell early or loud enough to prompt Ministerial colleagues to stand up whole society preparedness for the pandemic.
- The Civil Contingency framework was last updated as long ago as 2011 and neither compelled planning, nor checked it. It left the state unconscionably unprepared for a pandemic
- The first and only dedicated ministerial meeting with Equality Groups during the first six months of the pandemic was with a group of local charities concerned with shielding on 15 July 2020, they did not meet with any Disabled People’s Organisations;
- There needs to be a Lead Minister and Department focus on Disabled people, but the formation and delivery of policy has to work across multiple departments, in health, communities, education and finance. Until Northern Ireland has that capacity for joined up government it is destined to be a state

stuck with barriers and attitudes that work against Disabled people, as turned out to be the case in the pandemic

- A cross governmental response focused on Disabled people never began in Northern Ireland
- Sinn Fein calling to close the schools in the North in March 2020 because the South had done so was a ‘folly’, not just because no one had begun to think about who would look after the children, including those with special needs, but because emptying the schools without lockdowns and furlough schemes could actually contribute to spreading the virus; and could have put lives at risk.
- Likewise, when the DUP used a cross-community vote to defeat the proposed two-week extension of the circuit breaker in Autumn 2020 that would have protected all communities, they did so contrary to a crescendo of advice from SAGE and the Chief Medical Officer that Covid in Northern Ireland was the highest in Europe,
- DANI welcomed the important contribution to change that witnesses across the political and civil service establishment were all so emphatic in their Inquiry evidence that oversight of Disabled people and other marginalised groups was a key failing. It called for Northern Ireland’s decision makers to work together in a state of social partnership with all its people, including Disabled people.

**Nuala Toman of Disability Action Northern Ireland**, said:

“Module 2C of the Covid-19 inquiry has identified weaknesses that are ingrained within our political structures. The consistency of evidence across Departments and from political leaders shows all too clearly the lack of engagement with Disabled people in decision making processes.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a catastrophic impact on Disabled people. Almost two-thirds of the people who died were Disabled people, and Disabled people were forced to live without access to food, medicine, human connection, social care and appropriate education.

Disability Action are calling for Ministers, Departments and Party Leaders from across the political spectrum to act now to ensure that there is strong, sustained and effective engagement with Disabled people in decision-making. Action is required immediately- there is no time to wait. It is past- time to redress the heartbreaking irresponsibility demonstrated by political leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic”.

### **NOTES FOR EDITORS**

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