# Country summary: United Kingdom

## COVID-19 cases

The United Kingdom has recorded 394,257 cases of COVID-19, with 41,777 deaths[[1]](#footnote-1).

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducted a study for England and Wales, and disaggregated COVID-19 related deaths by disability[[2]](#footnote-2) . In this analysis, disabled people represented 16% of the study population but made up for 59% of all deaths involving COVID-19 between March and mid-July 2020, amounting to a total of 27,534 deaths[[3]](#footnote-3). Key findings, gathered by cross-referencing the mortality information with disability status in the census of 2011, included the following:

1. Women with disabilities of 65 years and older were disproportionately affected, making up for 67% of deaths.
2. After adjusting for age, region, population density, socio-demographic and household characteristics, the relative difference in mortality rates between persons with disabilities and persons without a disability was 2.4 times higher for females and 2 times higher for males[[4]](#footnote-4).

As for COVID-19 cases and deaths in care homes, data was collected,, separately for England, Wales and Scotland. For England, it was reported that data on registered COVID-19 deaths among care home residents in England accounted for an estimated 54% of all excess deaths in care homes, and that 28% of all care home resident deaths linked to COVID-19 happened in hospitals[[5]](#footnote-5).

## Emergency, lockdown, and confinement

England did not declare a state of emergency. However, it adopted the Coronavirus Act 2020, granting the government emergency powers to tackle the public emergency[[6]](#footnote-6).

This legislation suspended some provisions of the Care Act 2014[[7]](#footnote-7) , relating to the rights of persons with disabilities and suspension of the work of the Social Care Ombudsman[[8]](#footnote-8). The Act gave powers to the central and local government to reduce the rights of disabled people to care, education and mental health protections[[9]](#footnote-9). Several civil rights organisations have contested the act, precisely because of the rights limitations it entails, and, on September 9 2020, Baroness Jane Campbell and Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, sent a letter to the Health Secretary on behalf of 30 peers urging for the restoration of the rights of persons with disabilities[[10]](#footnote-10) s[[11]](#footnote-11). Finally, ahead of a review of the Coronavirus Act, to take place in the House of Commons on September 30, Disability Rights UK called on the Government to reconsider the Act, and cancel the provisions that are affecting the legal rights of persons with disabilities[[12]](#footnote-12)

Given these r concerns, Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) launched an inquiry to investigate 17 possible breaches of rights committed by the UK Government against persons with disabilities during the pandemic[[13]](#footnote-13).

As for exceptions for persons with disabilities, the government decided that some groups of persons with disabilities were exempt from requirements to wear face masks[[14]](#footnote-14). However, Government announcements on masks did not mention these exceptions, and persons with disabilities faced discrimination and hate crimes in public settings for not wearing masks[[15]](#footnote-15).

## Involvement of organizations of persons with disabilities

Informal consultations were held with DPOs, even though the UK Government made little effort to involve them at the national and regional level[[16]](#footnote-16). The Disability Minister met with DPOs representatives, and phone calls were held during the crisis. A disability unit was formed a year ago and it has held informal conversations with a wide range of groups and individuals, like big charities, and a DPO Forum has been held every six weeks since July 2020[[17]](#footnote-17).

A coalition of DPOs was able to secure a 1.5 million emergency fund, to be allocated solely to organisations run and controlled by disabled people, and to be used to help DPOs in the response to COVID-19 for persons with disabilities[[18]](#footnote-18).

Among other DPOs, Disability Rights UK was quite active, releasing two official statements:

1. A statement to the NHS on the rights of disabled people[[19]](#footnote-19);
2. An open letter on the Coronavirus bill and its implications on the Care Act 2014[[20]](#footnote-20).

## Communications and announcements

Some form of communication was available in accessible formats, namely:

* General information on COVID-19 on the UK Government’s webpage[[21]](#footnote-21);
* Information in British Sign Language[[22]](#footnote-22).

However, the regularly held Prime Minister briefings are not available in sign language.

## Institutions and closed settings

As mentioned above, some data was collected on institutions and closed settings, but it was not collected nationally.

In April 2020, the Government released guidance on admissions in care homes available in PDF and HTML[[23]](#footnote-23). It also released guidance to support the management of children and young people in residential educational settings, including boarding schools, residential special schools and children’s social care[[24]](#footnote-24).

Finally, while the Coronavirus Act had provided that the power to recommend individuals to be detained under the Mental Health Act could be implemented with the opinion of only one doctor instead of two[[25]](#footnote-25), the decision was never acted on[[26]](#footnote-26).

## Health care

In the health sector, the UK provoked critics from many sides. The concerns were mainly raised by the release of a set of “do not resuscitate” guidelines sent to care homes, which saw such notices directly applied to their care plan[[27]](#footnote-27). Following a public outcry, a joint statement by the Care Quality Commission, British Medical Association, Royal College of General Practitioners and Care Provider Alliance was released and it was made clear that no blanket policies should be adopted under any circumstances[[28]](#footnote-28).

Concerns were also raised by lack of clarity on prioritization of treatment and discrimination. The NHS sent a letter to request clarity over the use of the Clinical Frailty Scale and urging for all treatment decision to not be made on the basis of the presence of learning disability and/or autism alone[[29]](#footnote-29). Consequently, NICE amended their COVID-19 critical care guidelines, protecting the rights of people with autism, “learning difficulties and mental disorders” from unjustified discrimination in access to critical care during COVID-19[[30]](#footnote-30).

The NHS in England also criticized the use of “blanket policies” in the healthcare system during COVID-19[[31]](#footnote-31). Finally, Age UK also criticized the government’s handling of the healthcare system, once again suggesting that the widespread adoption of blanket policies was discriminatory towards elderly people[[32]](#footnote-32).

## Social Protection

The social protection system seemingly did not take into consideration the rights and needs of persons with disabilities until a later stage. The Government was accused by MPs of reckless behaviour in its approach to social care, highlighting the Government’s inability to provide PPEs to the sector and failure to provide testing for social care workers and volunteers[[33]](#footnote-33)

Face-to-face benefits assessments for sickness and disability-related benefits were cancelled for at least three months[[34]](#footnote-34).

In August the Department for Work and Pensions launched a £60,000 COVID-19 grant for persons with disabilities who need to keep working from home and cannot return to their offices. The grant is specifically targeted to those “who are extremely vulnerable, have severe mental health conditions or are physically disabled”[[35]](#footnote-35).

Those with a disability will be able to use the cash to buy specialist equipment, such as a screen reader, video remote interpreting, or support worker services, to enable them to do their job from home.

ONS released a study, based on the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) and a series of statistical bulletins[[36]](#footnote-36), summarizing the social impacts of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities[[37]](#footnote-37). The study generally confirmed that persons with disabilities are facing more challenges and shortcomings than persons without disabilities, and they are generally more worried about their well-being, access to healthcare and mental health than persons without disabilities.

Specific figures[[38]](#footnote-38) indicate that:

* Roughly 75% of persons with disabilities reported being worried about COVID-19 and its effects on their lives.
* 13% of disabled people reported being most concerned about access to healthcare and treatment (compared with 3% of non-disabled people).
* Roughly 25% of persons with disabilities, who were receiving medical treatment before COVID-19, reported only receiving treatment for some of their conditions.
* Around 58% of persons with disabilities reported that COVID-19 affected their well-being, compared with 37% for persons without a disability[[39]](#footnote-39).

## Other comments

Interesting article on children with special education needs and how risk assessment modules were used to prevent them from returning to school instead of being used as a tool to support them[[40]](#footnote-40).

Guidance for local authorities and schools on how to provide services for young people and children with learning disabilities[[41]](#footnote-41).

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3. Compared to the total death toll of 46,314 at the time of the study. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Office for National Statistics, Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by disability status, England and Wales: 2 March to 14 July 2020, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbydisabilitystatusenglandandwales/2marchto14july2020> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. <https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2019-21/coronavirus.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-disabled-people-through-the-coronavirus-outbreak/supporting-disabled-people-through-the-coronavirus-outbreak> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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11. Interview with Disability Rights UK, 8 September 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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14. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/face-coverings-to-be-mandatory-in-shops-and-supermarkets-from-24-july> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Interview with Disability Rights UK, 8 September 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Interview with Disability Rights UK, 8 September 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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