

Weekly Poll - COVID-19 – Physical Distancing

Each week Disability Equality Scotland send out a poll question to our members on a topical issue. For the week commencing 25 May 2020, by request of the [Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland \(MACS\)](#), we posed the following question:

During your daily exercise, or when undertaking essential journeys, have you experienced any issues with physically distancing? (This could be infrastructure barriers such as the width of pavements, pavement clutter and/or public transport barriers such as difficulty receiving the assistance you need to board, seating layout, too many passengers or people not giving you 2 metre space when passing)

- YES –99% (907 respondents)
- NO – 1% (13 respondents)

Comments

We received an overwhelming response to this poll; one of our highest response rates in recent months (920 responses). The issue of social distancing has clearly been concerning for our members. In this briefing paper, we attempt to summarise the main themes and key concerns of our members relating to physical distancing and providing verbatim comments where appropriate to illustrate strength of feeling or personal experience.

Infrastructure

Pavements in general are not wide enough nor equipped to deal with disabled peoples' needs even without the need for physical distancing. This was the view of many of our members. Specific concerns related to narrow pavements, uneven surfaces and a lack of dropped kerbs, making it difficult for wheelchair users to get on and off pavements. Disabled people also found it challenging to maintain 2 metres when queuing at pedestrian crossings.

“Some of the pavements are not even wide enough to pass in my wheelchair never mind physically distancing from others. I have had to take longer detour routes as pavements are too narrow for an A to B journey.”

“I have difficulty enough as not all pavements are dropped. I obviously (in a powerchair) can't just step off if someone comes up behind me or comes toward me on the pavement. Have been stuck in the house as I can't risk being in contact with anyone.”

“We really need better pavement maintenance especially for wheelies. No one can appreciate the pain caused by being thrown around by pot-holes, cracked paving or ridiculous cambers. Unfortunately just now I am being forced into these to try and socially distance.”

“People need priority over cars at pedestrian crossings. You can't keep 2 metres when everyone is queuing to cross.”

“It's impossible to distance when waiting for the green man. It should be on more and for longer and give priority to pedestrians instead of vehicles.”

These concerns were exacerbated by pavement parking and street clutter, further narrowing the space in which to manoeuvre.

“Excessive full width pavement parking, both sides in many areas making pavements totally inaccessible and roads even narrower and therefore not safe.”

“The relaxation of parking enforcement has made more inconsiderate parking and more parking on pavements at a time when we need to use our pavements more.”

“Less people using their cars has shown how inadequate our pavements are and how much they don't support distancing due to the width and people parking on them.”

Street Clutter

There were ongoing challenges faced by disabled people due to obstructions on pathways created by street clutter. At Disability Equality Scotland, we recently raised concerns about proposed amendments at stage 2 of the Coronavirus Bill to increase street furniture for cafes/restaurants. This will reduce the amount of space available for social distancing outside and put disabled people at greater risk. Tables and chairs will decrease space and act as a hazard for people with reduced mobility and visual impairments.

“How are people supposed to distance when the pavements are full of old road signs and bins. Put them on the roads and keep pavements clear!”

“There are too many obstacles on our pavements. I’m trying to stick to 2m while dodging bins, pot-holes and street signs with poor mobility.”

“Advertising board and bins create and obstruction for me and I am also worried about the move to street cafe culture to get some businesses open to help the economy. If these cafes are not designed right and visually impaired and blind people are not involved, they will just create more barriers and it will be even harder to physically distance.”

Attitudes and Behaviours

There was consensus that social distancing was not being adhered to by the general public, with runners and cyclists being highlighted as groups causing particular concern for disabled people when using public pathways.

Several of our members commented on the difficulties posed by cyclists, who were perceived as 'self-entitled' to use pathways, without due consideration for those who cannot easily give way. Also, the close proximity of cyclists, either using pavements or cycling close to the kerb was a concern.

"Some people obviously don't understand the rules and come too close, mainly cyclists and runners."

"(I'm) so fed up with cyclists thinking of no-one but themselves. Pedestrians have no chance given the speed they do and how close they come."

"The majority of people are sensible and realise it is easier for them to move off the path than it is for a wheelchair user. Some cyclists seem to think that shared paths are cycle paths and that they have priority."

"Cyclists come right up beside you and don't even give you time to move aside."

Some respondents suggested that a public awareness campaign highlighting practical examples on how to maintain physical distancing should be developed by the Scottish Government, in partnership with key stakeholders.

"There needs to be a public health message for cyclists and runners to wear face masks. They never keep any distance when they pass so at least face masks would give us some protection from the inconsiderate ones."

"The Scottish Government need to put out a public message or use the daily briefing to alert people to disabled people's difficulties and ask all citizens for more consideration to help everyone physically distance."

Examples of hate crime

Disability Equality Scotland is concerned at the number of responses indicating experiences of hate crime. This is specifically where members of the public have approached and accused disabled people of breaking lockdown or questioned why they are outside; the assumption being that all disabled people should be shielding. There were several examples of disabled people being verbally abused by members of the public, causing anxiety and no desire to be outside.

“Please tell the public not all disabled people are isolating or shielding, and we are allowed out for exercise and don’t need people in our face telling me I should be out because I am disabled. They actually breach the 2m guidance to come to me to tell me to go home and more worryingly don’t see anything wrong with what they are doing or how it affects me.”

“I was told at the bus stop that I should not be out and when I said I was going to work I was asked if there wasn’t a special bus that came for me. This is 2020!”

“I have had a couple of bad experiences with people questioning me why I’m out if I am disabled. I’m now too anxious to go out and staying in even though I know my mental health is deteriorating but it’s embarrassing to be told to get home before you infect people.”

“Attitudes towards disabled people are terrible. I have been asked repeatedly if I’m allowed out because I’m disabled and should not be infecting people.”

“Fed up with people looking at me in my chair strangely then eventually asking if I should be out. Sheer discrimination.”

Public Transport

Examples of this type of discrimination were acutely noted on public transport. There were examples of our members being refused entry onto buses and being questioned as to why they needed to travel. Disability Equality Scotland is very concerned over the levels of misinformation and prejudice our members are experiencing during this period, particularly disabled key workers who continue to provide vital services. This confirms the need for increased disability awareness training for transport staff, something Disability Equality Scotland is taking forward with our hate crime work, on behalf of Transport Scotland.

“I wasn’t allowed on the bus and told I shouldn’t be travelling as I was disabled, and other passengers needed space and the driver couldn’t help me.”

“I went onto the bus and can only use the disabled seats but was told I couldn’t even though they were empty because someone was sitting next to them and I would be too close. They could have asked the people to move but didn’t.”

“I’m a wheelie and key worker and wasn’t allowed on the bus. Initially I was questioned on why I was out and then told I would be able to keep enough space so would need to wait on the next bus. Nobody was in the wheelie space. I think the driver just couldn’t be bothered pulling in right to deploy the ramp. He was parked at an angle when he stopped.”

“I was spat at yesterday for asking someone to clear my space and find a seat 6 feet away! I did not complete my journey on that tram, terminating early and waiting 15 minutes for the next one.”

Passenger assistance

Disabled people have indicated their concerns over passenger assistance in our poll from week commencing 6 April 2020. Feedback from our members reveal that disabled people are being denied assistance during this time. This makes it increasingly difficult for those who must travel.

“I have found physical distancing and getting passenger assistance a bit of a hit and miss depending on staff. Some rail staff are really good, helpful and keep you informed, and some make you feel like an imposition and make you ask for help then say they shouldn’t really come close.”

In recent days, some disabled passengers have noticed an increase in the numbers of people using public transport, which makes physical distancing more challenging.

“I’m a key worker and have been travelling by train and distancing has not been too bad. Absolute joke now. Too many people travelling and not socially distancing.”

“I had to use the bus today and a young man pushed his buggy with baby in it in beside me into the wheelchair space - the driver did nothing so no chance of physically distancing, never mind travelling without the fear of intimidation.”

Active travel

On 26 May 2020 Transport Scotland launched the Transport Transition Plan, with an announcement that there would be increased funding for active travel, including an infrastructure programme for pop-up walking and cycling routes. This involves improvements to existing routes to better enable physical distancing. The general consensus among respondents was that, by nature, ‘active travel’ excludes disabled people and that a similar investment should be made to ‘accessible’ travel.

“Once again disabled people have been forgotten about and from behaviour on the streets the focus has been on active travel to the exclusion of the disabled community.”

“Loads of money about for active travel - throw some our way to help disabled people. As usual left behind and overlooked.”

“More money announced for active travel while accessible travel has been forgotten about. How are disabled people, most of whom do not benefit from the active travel funding going to get about if they don’t have a car like me?”

Shopping

Disability Equality Scotland has already reported on some of the challenges disabled people face with food shopping. Our poll from 20 April 2020 indicated that 69% had experienced difficulties accessing food shopping. Supermarkets have imposed measures to help customers with physical distancing, such as markers on the floor and protective screens at the tills. However, our visually impaired members reported that these are not helpful for them.

“They haven’t given any thought to visually impaired and blind people. The ground and floor markers they are using for distancing are no use to me. I need something with a raised tactile.”

Others reported the stresses of shopping when others are not adhering to social distancing rules. As increased numbers of people return to the shops, disabled people felt more at risk.

“I tried doing my shopping at the weekend, but it was too busy; no-one was distancing and there was no consideration towards social distancing. I

won't be going out again for a few weeks and hopefully I can get a delivery slot as everyone seems to be shopping in person again.”

“Does not appear to be any distancing in shops so it feels very risky when out. I am quite stressed about it all as I am a carer and have been careful not to carry the disease back to my partner I care for. We have managed since lockdown but it's too risky now.”

“In shops there is no assistance for wheelchair users anymore and yet other shoppers can lean across me to get something from the shelf I am nearest to!”

Summary

In summary, the numbers of respondents to this poll indicate the strength of feeling towards this issue. Disabled people want to be able to return to life after lockdown but are anxious about the physical distancing measures in place and whether these are adhered to by members of the public. Equally, there are concerns about the infrastructure of our towns and cities and whether they can support distancing measures of up to two metres. As a member-led organisation and the umbrella body for Access Panels in Scotland, we suggest proactive engagement with disabled people to ensure these concerns are promptly addressed.

In addition, Disability Equality Scotland is most concerned at the levels of abuse disabled people have been subjected to, questioned about their daily movements and made to feel intimidated. We will continue to promote our Disability Safety Hub (www.disabilitysafety.scot) to our membership as well as circulating government guidance in easy read formats so that our members understand changes in the lockdown rules.

Disability Equality Scotland, June 2020

About Disability Equality Scotland

Disability Equality Scotland is a national charity working to achieve full access and inclusion for disabled people in Scotland.

We promote access in its widest sense. This includes access to the built and natural environment and access to the same opportunities as are enjoyed by others in our communities thus promoting a life of dignity, respect and independence. This extends beyond physical access to include access to information, access to inclusive communication and inclusion in decision-making, whether with planners over inclusive design or transport providers about accessible travel.

Our aim is for every disabled person to have the opportunity to participate in a fulfilling life and for their voice(s) to be heard. We represent the views of individuals with any type of impairment, as well as disability organisations and groups who share our values.

We are a membership organisation and as such listen to the views of disabled people and champion on their behalf. We work to influence the policies of the Scottish Government, which affect how disabled people live, and work to encourage others to be inclusive and informed in their attitudes towards disabled people.

We are also the umbrella organisation for all disability Access Panels in Scotland and the principal provider of support and guidance to the Access Panels presently representing disabled persons at a local level throughout Scotland. Access Panels are committed to improving access and equality in its widest form, which means access to the physical environment, Education, Housing, Health, Transport, Leisure & Recreation and Social Justice amongst other areas.