



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

**Oifig an Cheannaire Oibríochtaí,**  
Na Seirbhísí Míchumais/An Rannán Cúram Sóisialta,  
31-33 Sráid Chaitríona, Luimneach.

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7<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Deputy Neasa Hourigan  
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Dublin 2.  
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Dear Deputy Hourigan

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the following parliamentary question, which was submitted to this department for response.

#### **PQ 18889/20**

*To ask the Minister for Health if it is safe for blind persons to use a sighted guide in view of Covid-19 health restrictions; his plans to issue guidance on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter.*

#### **HSE Response**

Under the governance of the HSEs National Integrated Operations Hub chaired by the Chief Operations Officer and work relating to vulnerable people, Disability Operations put a team in place with the responsibility for providing supports and capacity building training for the sector.

A range of guidance material was developed to support people with disabilities, families and staff including;

- Alternative Models of Care (Non-Residential);
- Frequently Asked Questions for People with Disabilities and Carers;
- Streamlined Health Passport for people with disabilities who are admitted to hospital;
- Guidance on Use of PPE in Disability Services;
- Guidance for supporting adults in a community residence/at home;
- Guidance of supporting children in a community residence/at home;
- Support coordination in a pandemic; practical checklist to avoid stressors for service users.

The FAQ, in particular, explained the pathway for supports for family carers and includes dedicated guidance and advice on a range of issues relating to COVID-19 together with a list of local and national helpline numbers.

In addition, a number of specific guidance documents were developed in easy-read version to ensure greater accessibility for service users, families, and carers.

These include;

- Guidance of COVID-19 testing in Disability Services Easy Read Version;
- Guide for Supporting adults in a community residence/at home Easy Read Version;
- Guide for Supporting children in a community residence/ at home Easy Read Version;
- Covid 19 Guide on how to stay connected using communication apps Easy to Read Version;
- Coronavirus (Covid-19) Frequently Asked Questions for people with disabilities and family carers.

I refer also to the following link which is the central repository for accessing these disability specific guidance materials during the COVID-19 emergency.

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/>

Central to the above, there has been continued engagement and liaison with National Disability Representative Bodies on behalf of Service Providers and Family/Service Users & Care Representation Groups representing the interest of service users, their families as well as provider organisations.

These forums work as a team, with each having specific and identified work streams, working through regular tele and video-conference. Taking this approach ensured two-way communication as well as establishing working groups with assigned tasks in response to the COVID-19.

Organisations representing people who are deaf and / or visually impaired noted that tactile interpreters were essential for Deaf Blind persons to communicate in healthcare settings for example in testing centres, hospitals or self-isolation.

The advice given was to adhere to current NEPHET guidance to wear a surgical mask when working within 2 metres of their client. The attached document was developed for Deaf people in general to use when accessing services as growing feedback indicated the health service's lack of awareness regarding Deaf persons' right under the GP Access Scheme to remote or tactile ISL (Irish Sign language) interpreter when accessing healthcare.

IPC (Infection Prevention and Control) confirmed a face visor may be used where a surgical mask is not appropriate for a healthcare worker providing support for a service user, as although not equivalent to a mask, it provides a substantial measure of protection.

Prof. Martin Cormican, National Clinical Lead for HCAI and AMR advises that the general IPC and public health guidance should be followed by both the guide and the guided. When social distance cannot be maintained, guidance includes use of face covering as well as observing strict hand hygiene. Most importantly the guide must not work if symptomatic in any way.

Yours sincerely,



**Dr. Cathal Morgan,  
Head of Operations - Disability Services,  
Community Operations**