

Making Communications Accessible

Most organisations rely on successful communications involving:

- Employee, or prospective employee, colleagues and employer;
- The organisation and the people who want to use its services.

There are over 11 million disabled people in the UK¹, of whom 2.2 million have an impairment which has an impact on communication. It is therefore likely that your organisation has already thought through how to communicate with its public in ways that reach everyone who can benefit from what your organisation has to offer.

This guidance is about how people communicate, and how that can be more, or less, accessible to everyone.

How do you currently communicate?

You probably:

- Send emails;
- Share web-links or web-sites;
- Send written notes;
- Use a notice-board;
- Phone;
- Talk face-to-face, one-to-one or in meetings or other group settings;
- Use body language and facial expression.

¹ <http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/docs/res/factsheets/disability-prevalence.pdf>

Accessible to All, Inaccessible to Some

Reliance on hearing or vision in common ways of communicating risks excluding those whose impairments impact on these senses. But exclusion is not inevitable, and its avoidance does not mean abandoning customary ways of communicating.

Electronic communications can be inaccessible to some blind or partially sighted users. However, assistive technology can often correct this. This might include screen-reading software, such as Jaws, which can read out much of what is on the screen. For blind people who use and prefer Braille, a refreshable Braille display can be added to a PC, allowing the user to read what is on the screen in continuously changing Braille.

Web-sites or emails sometimes incorporate visual displays, such as diagrams or pictures, adding colour or interest, but also risking the loss of important information conveyed in an image. Captioning the image with words that explain its presence can, however, restore the information you intended to convey by using the image, without loss of the colourful addition. Where images 'only' have an aesthetic purpose, then there may be little point in captioning at all. You will know which images carry information and therefore need captioning.

If you are creating your own web-site, then you can build in accessibility features, such as allowing readers to change colours, fonts and font sizes to meet their individual requirements. Adding text-to-speech capability, such as Browse-Aloud, opens up additional flexibility for readers.²

² http://www.browsealoud.co.uk/page.asp?pg_id=80002&tile=UK

Printed communications are accessible to many partially sighted people, but can be accessible to even more if they are in a good, clear 'sans serif' font, such as **Arial**, **Calibri**, or **Verdana**, in point 14 font size or larger.

If your communication is intended for an audience including someone who has limited or no useful reading vision, then you need to re-think your method of communication. The Scottish Accessible Information Forum provides helpful guidance on making electronic and printed information more accessible³.

Personal circumstances as well as individuals' preferences influence the choice of alternative communication where the phone is clearly inappropriate. Type-talk and Text-direct can be accessed using a text-telephone⁴ where phoning really is a better option than emailing a deaf colleague.

Face-to-face meetings which include people whose impairments impact on communications generally do need some forethought and consultation with those you are trying not to exclude.

Deaf participants might lip-read. This is greatly aided by:

- Ensuring that lips are visible – in good light, not covered by hands, facing the person trying to lip-read;
- Attending to seating arrangements. A horseshoe arrangement is often best, where the faces of speakers are visible to everyone else. If you have to use rows of seats facing the front, then make sure that the speaker repeats any comments from the audience;

³ <http://www.saifscotland.org.uk/information-and-advice/general-principles/>

⁴ <http://www.textrelay.org/files/Typetalkleafletv7.pdf>

- Ensuring that someone lip-reading knows the context of the discussion in advance, perhaps giving a written agenda or other indication of what's to be discussed;
- Making sure that only one person speaks at a time. If a deaf participant consents, then you might lay down this ground rule at the start, and also ask everyone to face the person lip-reading when they speak;
- Keeping background noise down.

BSL users might need an interpreter for at least part of the working week, or in some work settings. The Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters (SASLI)⁵ can help with booking. It's important to make sure that anyone using a communication support worker (including those who have a speech impairment) is given equal opportunities to contribute to discussions, as well as to 'receive' information and input from other people.

Distributing written materials, such as agenda or PowerPoint slides, in advance, allows people to print in a format that best suits them. This also gives everyone an opportunity to think about the matter in hand before they meet. Reading out contents of PowerPoint slides enables deaf people using an interpreter to have the content communicated via the interpreter, and blind people to access content too.

It is easy to forget how much is communicated by gesture, facial expression or body language, visual communication that can be useful – or not. The more explicit and direct communication is, the less likely such communication is to exclude.

⁵ <http://www.sasli.co.uk/>

What help can I get?

Where there is a general atmosphere of mutual concern and shared interest, you are likely to learn from individuals themselves whether you are ‘getting it right’ and if not, how things can be improved. Most disabled people are very familiar with what works best, whether this is equipment, support from others or some combination of arrangements.

Effective communication is not just about methods and equipment, but also the content of communications. While email might be generally accessible, a particular email communication can fail if the message is over-complex or unclearly expressed in some other way. Most of us have some experience of sending or receiving an email which has inadvertently caused others or ourselves needless distress, perhaps through unfortunate use of language, or by conveying unrealistic expectations. For some people, perhaps including disabled people whose impairments impact on mental health, these communications can be additionally distressing.

Is there any financial help for reasonable adjustments?

If an adjustment is ‘reasonable’ then employers have to pay for it.⁶ However, the Government Access to Work Scheme⁷ also provides advice and support to disabled people, and can help with extra costs that would not be reasonable for employers or prospective employers to pay. For example, Access to Work might pay towards the cost of getting to work if the disabled person cannot use public transport, or for assistance with communication at job interviews.

⁶ See Inclusion Scotland’s Employing Disabled Interns: Making Reasonable Adjustments

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

A person may get advice and support from Access to Work if they are:

- in a paid job, or
- unemployed and about to start a job, or
- unemployed and about to start a Work Trial, or
- self-employed,

and:

- their disability or health condition stops them from being able to do parts of their job.

Further Resources & Information

Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters

<http://www.sasli.co.uk/>

Further information on contacting Deaf people by telephone can be obtained at <http://ngts.org.uk/textrelay.php>

Information on Dyslexia, for Employers is available at

<http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/employer>

For further details about the Access to Work Scheme

<https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

For Information, support, guidance or advice, please contact:

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