

# Good Practice in Communicating with Disabled People

The following information is a guide to issues which affect different groups of people with impairments in terms of communication. It is important to remember each individual has their own needs and strategies – ask them what their particular needs or issues are where possible.

## Who have visual impairments

- Prior to a meeting the organiser should clarify with the individual their access requirements are and ascertain whether they will be escorted to the meeting or be accompanied by a guide dog.
- Letters and information to support a meeting should be available in an appropriate form, depending upon the individual's preferred communication mode (i.e. Braille, large print, audio tape, etc.).
- People with little or no vision are likely to require information in non-visual formats – remember, do not assume, ask – this could range from audio tape, Braille or computer disk (e.g. people using screen readers).
- Decreasing numbers of people are using Braille these days, however, there are still some visually impaired people who prefer this format and find it easier to use.
- At reception the individual should be met and escorted to the meeting room as required.
- Be hazard aware. If asked to guide a blind person to a destination, take the person's arm above the elbow, describe the route to be taken and detail any potential hazards, e.g., steps, corners and doorways. They may need to be guided to a suitable chair.
- Lighting levels need to be discussed with the individual and seating should be arranged with daylight behind the individual.
- Contrasting colours are helpful for those with low vision.
- Introductions should be made in a way that ensures that the individual is able to put a voice to a name.
- Verbal indications are necessary if any of the participants leaves or re-enters the room, or if joined by a third-party.
- A guide dog is highly disciplined and should not be distracted or petted when working. Only approach a guide dog with the owner's permission.

## Face-to-face Communication:

- ensure the person is aware of your presence, when you are talking directly to them, handing them over to another person, or you are leaving them.
  - when reading to a person who is visually impaired, make sure they know when you have stopped reading and have begun talking to them. Similarly, denote any difference between formal and informal conversations.
  - The environment can be as disabling to some people with visual impairments as it is for deaf people. Light, reasonably quiet settings could assist communication.
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## Who have physical impairments

Ascertain the degree of personal independence of the individual in advance, for example, will they:

- need special parking arrangements
- walk unaided
- manage steps or stairs
- require specialist seating
- use and require access for a wheelchair
- benefit from a meeting room on the ground floor with proximity to an accessible toilet.

Some individuals with physical impairments may have communication aids, or use speech that may be difficult to follow, or attend the meeting in a wheelchair and/or come with a personal assistant. Be prepared for these eventualities.

- Enquire about the best format for organising the face-to-face aspects of the meeting, taking into account the role of the communication aid, the position of the wheelchair and the presence of the personal assistant.
  - Speak clearly and naturally to avoid exaggerated, slow or loud speech.
  - If a disabled person has a communication aid it is important to let them use this as a matter of course and not interrupt. Avoid making the piece of equipment the centre of attention or treating it as if it was a novelty. Address the person with the speech impairment directly.
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## Who have communication related impairments

What implications are there for face to face communication?

Having a speech impairment can be very tiring especially when in a new environment. Also consider that some speech impairments are affected by a person's emotional state. Patience and respect for what they have to say is very important. When talking with someone with a speech impairment:

- Make eye contact and be especially attentive and patient with a person who has difficulty speaking or who uses a communicator. Wait quietly and listen whilst the person talks.

- Do not rush the person as this is likely to cause additional stress and impact negatively on a person's speech.
- Resist the temptation to speak for the person, or to finish their sentences.
- Some people may prefer to be asked questions which require either a short answer, or a nod or shake of the head.
- Be sure you understand fully what the person is meaning before making any assumptions. It may help to say what you have understood and ask the person to repeat the rest.
- Ask simpler/shorter questions rather than ones which rely on a long answer if meeting a person for the first time (if this is appropriate).
- If you don't understand what is being said, don't be afraid or too embarrassed to ask the person to repeat it, and this may need to be done several times. People are usually used to repeating themselves.
- Don't make assumptions about the person's hearing or intellect just because he or she has difficulty speaking.
- If noisy, take account of this and, if possible, move to a quieter area.
- Be aware that the person's first language might not be English.

There may be other communication barriers to consider:

- People with speech impairments are likely to find telephone calls difficult. Email may be a more useful method of communication.
- The length of time it takes to communicate with someone with a speech impairment or non-verbal communication is likely to be longer than usually expected. Allow more time and include frequent breaks if a long meeting is anticipated.
- Allow the individual to take a little longer to contribute to the meeting.

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## Who have a history of mental ill health

"Mental ill health" is an all encompassing term used to cover people who experience a range of conditions that are grouped together. These conditions may include: mood related disorders (depression), anxiety-related disorders (phobias, panic, post-traumatic stress, compulsive behaviour), psychosis (schizophrenia), eating disorders (bulimia, anorexia nervosa) and personality disorders.

For some people with a history of mental ill health the following issues may need additional thought when organising a meeting:

- providing in advance a very clear resume of the purpose of the meeting, the names of all those attending and their roles
- previous experience of stigma and discrimination in their life
- the anxiety of self disclosure may be especially acute
- past medical history and the frequency of mental health episodes may indicate the possibility of cancellation
- fluctuations in concentration or mood, confusion or disorientated thinking
- self-perception may not be the same as that of others

- the day-to-day effects of medication may be detrimental
  - additional fatigue is likely to be caused by the meeting process
  - offering to be flexible and making alternative meeting times may be required
  - providing quality written information at the meeting
  - post-meeting notes could prove useful where follow up action is required
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## Who have dyslexia or some types of neurodiversity

People with dyslexia are not a homogenous group. They are all individuals and the impact of their dyslexia will vary according to their degree of difficulty, the timing of their diagnosis, their particular strengths, and their coping strategies.

When planning and undertaking a meeting it is vital to:

- provide clear directions and instructions on the place and time of the meeting. People with dyslexia will often forget dates and times of appointments and therefore need a written and/or verbal reminder.
  - use a quiet space to help maintain concentration for the individual
  - keep the carrier language simple so that additional energy is not wasted on unnecessary decoding
  - invite questions to monitor full comprehension
  - write down important information for the individual to take away
  - allow additional time for the processing of information
  - encourage the use of a tape recorder if the individual would like to use one.
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## Communication with a deaf person

### with a sign language interpreter

- the interpreter: the role of the interpreter is to facilitate communication only and not to participate.
- off task conversations: never engage an interpreter in a conversation when they are communicating for the individual.
- speed of speech: use a normal rate of speaking, with natural breaks for pauses. A 10-15 minute break is necessary when giving large amounts of information.
- allow time: the process of translating requires time - the deaf person must be able to receive the information and to respond.
- advance information: provide information in advance of the meeting to the interpreter and if possible to the deaf person. Prior access to names and specific terminology will save time during the meeting.

### Who is a lip reader

The individual may require technical support in the form of a radio hearing aid or a portable loop system in the room, to facilitate the use of the hearing aid.

Lip reading requires a high level of concentration and can be extremely exhausting, as much as three-quarters of lip reading is intelligent guesswork and intuition, relying to some extent on contextual clues.

- speak clearly at a reasonable pace without shouting or over enunciating as this distorts sound and lip patterns
  - rephrase if necessary rather than simply repeating words
  - check position and room lighting as lips cannot be read at a distance or in a dim light
  - avoid nodding too much, turning of the head or moving about the room
  - use facial expression and try to maintain eye-contact if you know the person is a lip reader
  - gain the individual's attention before speaking
  - give a clear view of lips: avoid covering the mouth with hands
  - make time adjustments to allow the individual to adjust to unfamiliar lip patterns
  - remember that many sounds and words look alike on the lips - e.g., t,d,n have the same configuration of the lips as do p,b,m.
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## Who is hard of hearing.

The individual may require technical support in the form of a radio hearing aid or a portable loop system in the room, to facilitate the use of the hearing aid.

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## Who have limited dexterity

People with limited dexterity might find intercom systems, door bells and security buttons difficult to operate if gripping, holding, pressing, or turning, is required. Providing alternative methods of entry or offering additional support might reduce barriers.

Leaflets may present problems where they have more than one fold – ideally, having no fold at all would be most people's preference.

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