

Guidance on Accessible information formats

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1. Providing accessible formats

To reach all your audience, you need to make effective use of accessible communication formats (also known as alternative formats).

Involve disabled people from your audience in developing and reviewing a strategy for producing information in accessible formats. They will know their needs and could help you find the most effective ways of meeting them. You can also approach disability organisations for advice.

Your strategy should outline:

- how you will anticipate the needs of disabled people
- what minimum standards are in place
- who is responsible and who will pay for the accessible formats
- what type of information you will prioritise
- how you will enforce and monitor the strategy

1.1 Supplying accessible formats: best practice

- involve relevant experts, such as marketing and communications, from the earliest planning stages
- consider the needs of your audience in advance – assess which, if any, accessible format versions are likely to be required
- plan ahead – make sure any accessible formats you produce are available at the same time as the standard print
- if you intend to supply accessible formats on demand, procedures should be in place to produce these within a few days of the request
- make sure you are in contact with a range of suppliers who can produce good quality materials in accessible formats
- make sure any consultation period is not reduced for disabled people due to accessible formats not being available at the launch, or running out during the consultation period

1.2 Deciding which accessible format to use

Is your communication or campaign specifically targeted at people with particular impairments or do you know there will be a high proportion of people with a particular impairment in your audience? Some formats suit one type of impairment more than another:

- visual impairments – audio, audio description, Braille, Moon, telephone
- learning disabilities and literacy difficulties – audio, audio description, easy read, easy access, Makaton, subtitles
- hearing – British Sign Language, Makaton, subtitling, textphone, SMS
- co-ordination difficulties – large print, audio, audio description, telephone

You should also consider any preferences your target audience may have for receiving information, for example younger deaf people may respond better to an SMS message than sub-titled advert – researching your audience will help you best meet their needs

1.3 Reducing the need for accessible format versions

Keep it simple – if your initial document is designed using the following principles it will already be accessible to a greater number of people and may reduce demand for special accessible versions:

- write in plain language
- make it as concise as possible
- design to be as legible as possible, for example using a minimum 14 point text size

This is a cost and time-efficient way of making your information instantly accessible to a larger number of your audience.

Making your original document more accessible will reduce the need for producing accessible formats. However, people with some types of visual impairments, learning disabilities, dexterity or literacy difficulties (such as dyslexia) are likely to have difficulty accessing information in written text – even in the largest font size. You therefore still need to consider accessible formats that meet their needs in addition to making your initial document more accessible.

1.4 Alternative channels

The different communication channels you choose can be just as important and effective as the accessible formats you provide or offer.

For example, you may have produced a print recruitment advert for teachers. Translating this into Braille is unlikely to be the best method of reaching all people with visual impairments. As an accessible alternative you could produce an audio advert for radio, either commercial or a specialist channel such as Insight Radio. You could also deliver your message by engaging with disability organisations directly.

1.5 Summary versions

It can be more time-consuming and tiring to absorb the same amount of information listening to an audiotape or CD, or watching sign language than scanning through a document by eye.

Consider providing a summary of important points in accessible formats. The most important thing is that the information or messages are received.

For example, a long medical brochure could be summarised before being put into easy read format or onto audiotape. Give the key points and a contact telephone number for further information.

1.6 Cost/benefit analysis

It is not cost effective to produce every communication product in every suggested format and language. Producing bulk copies of accessible formats often results in warehouses full of unused stock. Audiotapes, CD-ROMs and DVDs in particular are expensive to produce and store, and go out of date quickly.

A more cost-effective approach is to:

- research your target audience at the commissioning stage
- segment (categorise) your audience into groups
- consider how to reach audience members using a mix channels and formats, factoring in their costs

1.7 Do you need Welsh or community language versions as well?

Legal requirements apply to Welsh language communications. When considering what accessible formats to produce, you need to consider what is reasonable under both the Welsh Language Act and the Equality Act 2010.

If you are translating disability-related material into Welsh or community languages, it is very important to have them quality assured by someone who understands disability. For example, terms relating to mental health have sometimes been translated in ways that are offensive to some.

1.8 Web publishing

Publishing information on a website gives users some control over their access to the information, as they can alter the font size, colour and contrast.

1.9 UK Association for Accessible Formats

The UK Association for Accessible Formats is an industry association that sets standards and promotes best practice for quality accessible information based on user needs. Their website includes a directory of accessible format producers.

2. Audio

Providing audio options will make your communications more accessible to people with visual impairments and people with literacy problems.

2.1 Audio formats

The main audio formats are:

- audiotape
- digital audio files, for example MP3 format
- CD-ROM
- CD

Audio versions of documents are generally provided on CD-ROM or as MP3 files.

2.2 Audio channels

Audio channels include:

- radio
- internet
- talking newspapers
- audio magazines
- DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) books

Contact the Royal National Institute of Blind People for more information about talking newspapers, audio magazines and DAISY.

Producing audio material:

- arrange information in a logical order
- avoid background noise and music
- use voices that are appropriate to the subject matter and audience
- give people time to understand calls to action

2.3 Audio description

Audio description is an additional commentary that describes on-screen or on-stage action, body language and facial expressions. For example, a character looking shocked at something another character is doing. Audio description is available in:

- television
- video and DVD
- cinemas
- museums and galleries
- theatres
- sports venues

Read [Ofcom guidelines on producing audio description](#) including technical specifications.

3. Braille and Moon

Providing braille and Moon formats will make your communications more accessible to people with visual impairments.

3.1 Braille

Braille is a system of raised dots that people read with their fingers.

Facts and figures about braille users:

- braille is the preferred reading medium of approximately 18,000 blind and partially sighted adults in the UK (source: RNIB 2009)
- many more people use braille for labelling objects around their home and workplace
- it's accessible to over 20% of working age people who are registered blind
- around 4% of the blind and partially sighted population of 5 to 16 year olds in Britain are braille users – this is around 850 children (source: RNIB 2009)
- braille readers are often influential and active members of the blind community and may pass information on to other blind people

Providing braille

You should provide braille to those who request it. However, it is important to make an assessment, based on the target audience for a product and how much active marketing is planned, about the likelihood of it being requested as it's expensive to produce.

Producing braille

The Sensory Trust and RNIB provide guidance on writing and producing braille.

Read the [Sensory Trust information sheet on braille](#).

Read RNIB guidance on [writing and producing braille](#).

3.2 Moon

Moon is a system of reading and writing which uses tactile symbols based on lines and curves to represent letters, numbers and punctuation marks.

It is easier to learn than braille, as the letters are easier to distinguish by touch. However, Moon cannot be written by hand, is even bulkier than braille and currently there is very little literature available in Moon.

Moon is used by a very small number of people, most of whom are elderly.

Producing Moon

As it is unlikely that you will receive requests for Moon you do not need to produce materials in Moon as a matter of course. If you receive a request for Moon, ask whether another format, such as audiotope, would be a usable alternative. If Moon is required, contact the [RNIB](#) for guidance.

4. British Sign Language

Providing sign language alternatives will make your communications more accessible to people who use British Sign Language (BSL) to communicate.

BSL is a gestural language used in the UK's deaf community. It is not related to English or any other spoken languages.

BSL was officially recognised by the government as being a full, independent language in March 2003. This recognition raised the status of BSL and led to money being invested in training more deaf BSL tutors and BSL interpreters.

Many people who are born deaf, or become deaf in early life, use sign language to communicate. The number of deaf signers who use BSL as their first language is estimated at 22,000 (source: Census 2011).

Many hearing people also use BSL because they have family members, friends or colleagues who are deaf. Figures from the British Deaf Association suggest that on any day up to 250,000 people use BSL.

BSL is used across the UK, although there are considerable differences in regional dialects. The BSL used in Belfast, for example, is very different from that used in the Channel Islands.

5. Easy read and Makaton

Easy read can be used by people with learning disabilities. Makaton can be useful for people with profound learning disabilities. Easy access can be a useful format for people who have had strokes.

5.1 Easy read

The easy read format was created to help people with learning disabilities understand information easily. People with learning disabilities need access to all information, not just disability-specific information but also about their health, voting, work and gaining skills.

Easy read uses pictures to support the meaning of text. It can be used by a carer to talk through a communication with someone with learning difficulties so that they can understand it, for example a letter from the council about council tax charges.

Easy read is often also preferred by readers without learning disabilities, as it gives the essential information on a topic without a lot of background information. It can be especially helpful for people who are not fluent in English.

Consider commissioning easy read versions of your publications from an expert organisation.

Easy read:

- has different variations across government according to departmental style preferences
- should be developed in consultation with your audience
- can be time-consuming to produce
- can be helpful for other audiences, for example people who are not fluent in English

5.2 Easy read compared to plain English

Easy read is different from plain English.

Plain English example:

Thank you for your letter asking for permission to put up posters in the library. Before we can give you an answer we will need to see a copy of the posters to make sure they won't offend anyone.

Easy read example:

Thank you for your letter about your poster. We need to see the poster before we put it up. This is because it must not offend anyone. Offend means upset people.

How to produce easy read materials:

- keep the number of pages to 24 or less. If there are more, break the text up into more than one publication
- keep sentences short – they should be no more than ten to 15 words
- each sentence should have just one idea and one verb
- use 14 point font size
- make sentences are active not passive: “we are following up your complaint” (active tense) not “your complaint is being followed up” (passive tense).
- take out words that are not needed, for example, say ‘for 14 days’ not ‘for a period of 14 days’
- include a glossary explaining abbreviations and jargon, and an index, at the end of the document

- use full words not acronyms
- if you need to use difficult words or ideas, say what they mean – do this in the next sentence, not as part of the same sentence.
- use a different colour or bold type but keep a good contrast with the paper
- use pictures to support the meaning of your text

The Office for Disability Issues, in association with the Department of Health, has produced guidance to improve the standard of information for people with learning disabilities across government.

Read [Easy read guidance: making written information easier to understand for people with learning disabilities](#)

5.3 Easy read pictures

Some government departments use image banks of line drawing pictures showing common words. Photographs are another option. Choose which to use according to the easy read style preferences of your department.

Guidelines for using images:

- it's important to choose pictures carefully to support the text
- the image can go above or below the words
- the photographs or pictures need to be easy to understand
- the images should each show one idea
- jokes and humour can be good

5.4 Tapes and CD-ROMs

An accompanying tape or CD-ROM can make written information more accessible for people with learning difficulties. It should:

- speak the words of the publication slowly
- say when you need to turn the page so people can follow with the text

Consider including music to give time to turn pages.

5.5 Makaton

Makaton symbols support the written word, in the same way that sign language supports speech.

Makaton is a language programme using signs and symbols to help people to communicate. It is used in more than 40 countries.

Makaton users

Makaton was developed for those who struggle to understand the spoken word, such as people with profound learning disabilities. Most Makaton users use it as their main means of communication.

Other users include families, carers, friends and professionals, like teachers and social workers, who communicate with people with profound learning disabilities.

Producing Makaton materials

You can find out more about producing Makaton from [The Makaton Charity](#). Their site includes free resources, such as a signs wordlist and a symbols wordlist.

6. Accessible print publications

6.1 Clear print

Clear print standards help to maximise the legibility of print publications and should therefore be used for all printed materials.

It can be particularly helpful for people who have visual impairments or dyslexia.

Clear print isn't the same as [large print](#). As well as font size, the relationship between the visual height of characters and the surrounding white space is important.

Read the [Sensory Trust information sheet on clear and large print](#)

6.2 Other best practice for print publications

Fonts

The clear print standard requires a minimum font size of 12 point. However, you may wish to use a larger font depending on your audience. Using a point size of 16 means that there is no need to have a separate stock of large print documents. You should also be able to supply large print in various sizes above 16 point, on request.

Density and complexity of font type can reduce space – look for a simple font that spaces letters out.

Avoid italics, underlining, simulated handwriting, unusual shaped letters and decorative typefaces.

Consider the length of letters b, d, f, h, k, l, t, g, j, p, q, y in relation to the x height of the typeface. Short ascenders and descenders make a typeface less legible.

Fonts with uneven stroke widths tend to be less legible than fonts with even strokes.

Consider individual characteristics of letter shapes. For example a closed 'a' is more likely to be confused with a 'c' or an 'o' than an open 'a', and a '3' can be confused with an '8' in some fonts.

Research your audience's preferences – consider user-testing your font with a range of impairment and age groups.

Type weight

Lighter type weights can affect legibility, as readability requires good contrast. Bold or semi-bold weights are recommended for material specifically for people with visual impairments – but check the font is still easy to read.

Avoid using blocks of capital letters in titles or body text.

Design and layout

The best design is simple and uncluttered.

Set text horizontally, not on a slant.

Align text left for maximum legibility. Avoid right aligning or justifying text.

Keep line lengths to between 60 and 70 characters, roughly 12 to 18 words, per line. Avoid using hyphens to split words between lines.

Allow plenty of space on forms. If details that have to be hand-written, make the boxes, including tick boxes, as large as possible.

Make sure that sections and chapters are clearly defined with headings.

Keep headings and page numbers in the same place on each page.

Keep paragraphs short and use line spacing between paragraphs. Use wide margins and headings. Boxes can help emphasise or highlight important text.

Include a contents page and consider including an index.

Tints can be helpful to break up a document and make it easier on the eye, particularly for statistical material, graphs and charts. Make sure there is a strong contrast between text and tint.

When setting text in columns, make sure the space between the columns clearly separates them.

Numbers

Make sure numbers are distinct when printed. The numbers 3, 5 and 8 can be misread, as can 0 and 6 in some fonts. For financial information use a large point size.

Images

Images can help communicate your messages. They also provide relief to the eye.

All online images need alternative text (alt text). If you use an image to convey information that is essential to understanding the page content – for example, a diagram that explains something – include alt text that gives screen reader users the same information. If an image is purely decorative or is explained in the text on the page, use empty alt text – indicated by "" (a pair of double quotes with no space).

Make illustrations and photographs as large as possible without being grainy.

Avoid:

- using photos that contain a lot of detail or in which the foreground and background are not well contrasted
- putting text over images
- fitting text around images if this means lines of text start in a different place

Graphs and diagrams

Explain graphs and diagrams in words.

Posters, boards and leaflets

On posters, boards and leaflets:

- keep the design simple
- avoid background graphics that make text difficult to read
- keep essential information, for example event details, grouped together
- use lower case rather than capitals

Contrast and colour

Contrast dark type against a light background as a general rule. Black type on off-white or yellow paper gives a good contrast. Avoid using colour alone to convey information because some people may be unable to distinguish between the colours. Some people have difficulty distinguishing between red and green in particular. Others find light text on a dark background difficult to read.

Reversing type (white out)

Some people prefer white text on a black background as it reduces glare from the page. If using white type, make sure that the background colour is dark enough to provide a good contrast.

Note that:

- when printing it can sometimes be very difficult to provide dense ink coverage on coloured surfaces
- white text on a coloured background appears smaller – you may need to increase the font size and use a bold typeface
- switching between black on white and white on black can be confusing and tiring to the eye

Paper

Use cream or off-white non-glossy paper to reduce glare.

Use uncoated paper weighing over 90gsm (photocopy paper usually weighs 80gsm). If the text is showing through from the reverse side, the paper may be too thin.

Very large or very small documents can be difficult to handle. A4 size is generally the most user-friendly.

When folding paper, avoid creases that obscure the text. People who use scanners or screen magnifiers need to place the document flat under the magnifier, so take care about the number of pages in your document and the binding methods you choose.

The binding method needs to be appropriate to the layout and the number of pages. For large documents, particularly large print formats, a ring-bound binding can help readability.

6.3 Large print

Large print publications are documents with a point size of 16 and above.

Large print versions of publications are essential for some disabled people, for example people with visual impairments, learning disabilities, dyslexia and problems with coordination or manual dexterity.

You can:

- produce simple large print documents in-house from a Word document
- send more complex jobs to a commercial printer so that picture and print quality are consistent at larger sizes

Proofread all large print versions to make sure the headings and paragraph text match the page breaks. Don't attempt to create large print versions by enlarging a standard print document using a photocopier.

Read the [Sensory Trust information sheet on clear and large print](#)

Point size

A minimum size of 16 point is recommended for people with a visual impairment. Some fonts appear larger than others at the same point size.

No single point size is suitable for everyone. If you are producing information in large print for an individual, ask which size best suits their needs.

Consider requests for type sizes above 28 point carefully. Very large type sizes can be counter-productive because they cause publications to become bulky and difficult to navigate.

Offering alternative formats may avoid these problems – for example, providing an audio version of the information or emailing someone a text document so that they can access the information using a screen reader on their computer.

Line length

Allow 50 to 65 characters, including spaces, per line. Less than 65 is preferable. Text in columns may well need less than 50 characters per line.

Too much text

If you have a limited amount of space, consider reducing the amount of text before reducing the point size.

7. Subtitling

For many deaf people and people with hearing impairments, subtitles are likely to be an important format for receiving information.

Subtitling is text on screen representing speech and sound effects that may not be audible to people with hearing impairments. It is synchronised as closely as possible to the sound.

People using subtitling range from those who have been profoundly deaf since birth to those who have become hard of hearing in later life. Viewers with a mild to moderate hearing loss are likely to rely on subtitles to aid their hearing rather than as a substitute.

Subtitle users reflect the full range of proficiency in English. Some profoundly deaf people regard British Sign Language as their first language and are less fluent in written English.

All of the groups mentioned above are likely, to a greater or lesser extent, to lip-read.

Many people with good hearing also use subtitles so that they can watch television with the sound muted, for example so that they can simultaneously talk on the telephone or to learn English.

8. Telephone

Disabled people generally have less access to the internet than non-disabled people.

The telephone is an important channel for making information accessible to your audience. Crucial information, for example about pensions, benefits, health, council and income tax needs to be found easily by everyone who needs it.

Many disabled people, and especially older people, will not have access to the internet or may have difficulties using it. The telephone can be a very important method of communication for these groups.

Some deafblind people, who have both sight and hearing loss, have enough hearing to use the telephone if:

- background noise is kept to a minimum
- the caller speaks clearly and at a pace which suits the individual

8.1 Making information available by telephone

Consider providing a helpline or hotline to support your communications campaign. Telephone operators should have training in communicating with disabled people.

Information provided only in a digital format does not fulfil Public Sector Equality Duty requirements. It will exclude sections of your audience. For example, using website frequently asked questions to answer common questions without providing a telephone number for a service will prevent some people from using your service or accessing the information.

Similarly, telephone communications are not accessible for all disabled people, so make sure you use a mix of communications channels in your integrated communications planning.

9. Textphone

Textphones provides accessible telephone communication for deaf people and people with hearing impairments.

Textphones enable someone who is typing to have a conversation with someone who is speaking. Text Relay is a free national relay service using operators to connect someone with a textphone to someone using a phone.

Textphones are used by those with hearing impairments. Some deafblind people have enough sight to use a textphone.

9.1 Making information available by textphone

Consider providing a textphone helpline to support your communications campaign. Textphone users contact your textphone operator, who rings the hearing helpline operator and relays messages to and from them, by typing or talking.

Textphone operators should have training in communicating with disabled people.

SMS messaging has become a popular alternative to textphones.