

ELECTRONIC GUIDE 2

Making activities accessible



Access

Access is about ensuring people have equal opportunities to participate fully. Service users have different needs and these can vary at different times. Different people with the same impairment/condition may have different access needs. Service users have an enormous range of experiences and these impact on them in different ways. They know best – especially with support – about their own individual access needs, so ask them. Never assume you know what someone else's access needs are based on your own experience or having worked previously with 'someone like' them.

Here we can only offer a general guide. It cannot ever be definitive. Service users are clear that for participation to be truly inclusive and effective, then a commitment to ensuring access must be built into all policy, practice and procedures as a matter of course. Access is not an 'add-on' for any particular individual. It has to be built into user involvement. A key reason why some groups of service users are excluded is because their access needs are not met.

Access issues apply to every aspect of involvement activities. It's good practice to take account of them when planning activities and events. This includes ensuring access in:

- How you let people know about the event/activity
- Travel and accommodation
- The venue

It was a nice place and I could get around, but the people at the door were so unfriendly and unhelpful. Really put you off. Someone else made a complaint.

- Timing
- Communication

e For more about these **access issues** see our **electronic resources 3**.

How you let people know about the event/activity

People need to know that the event is taking place and they need adequate accessible information about it to be able to contribute fully and on as equal terms as possible.

It is essential that service users are provided with the right information, in plenty of time and in the appropriate accessible format, prior to any meeting, event or consultation. Some service users and disabled people have had a poor education, and may need information simplified. Do not, however, assume that physically impaired people also have a learning difficulty. Try to use plain English - and explain all jargon. Some people will need the opportunity to absorb information in their own time, having it in advance of any meeting. This is important because some service users may need support to access the information and this can take time, not only to do but also to arrange. There are likely to be cost implications here, so make it clear that you will meet all access costs. If someone has a visual impairment, they may need any written information available in large print, Braille, electronically or on tape. Strong coloured backgrounds and 'watermark' type designs can cause problems for many. If someone has learning difficulties, do not give them lots of written information without ensuring that if they need assistance with it they have someone who can help. The self-advocacy organisation of people with learning difficulties, People First, has produced guidelines about making information accessible to people with learning difficulties.

Travel and accommodation

Some service users find travelling tiring, stressful or even traumatic. Being concerned with the practicalities of getting there can be so stressful that some service users either give up or find that they don't have any energy left for the actual event.

Most service users, but not all, prefer not to travel during rush hour. It is worth asking people if they require overnight accommodation. If they do, then you will need to discuss their access requirements before booking the hotel. Train and taxi bookings can be made in advance and any tickets sent to the participants. It is good practice to offer to pay for accommodation and buy tickets at the time of booking. Reimbursement

of expenses is fine for people with a good income, but for many service users the initial outlay can be a barrier to involvement. Travel assistance can be booked for disabled train passengers at the time of purchasing the tickets, but 48 hours notice must be given. If service users are arriving the night before the event or activity, you will need to consider what they will do for an evening meal. Does the hotel have a restaurant? If not where would they have to go to? How will this be paid for? Other issues to consider include how the service user will get from where they are staying to the venue, if it is not being held at the same location. This can be particularly difficult, for example, for people with mobility impairments, visual impairments, and for some mental health service users/survivors.

For many service users, for many different reasons, going to a new and unfamiliar venue is a source of great anxiety and stress. Here are some comments, made by service users and disabled people about going to new and unfamiliar places:

- How do I get there?
- How long will it take me to get there?
- Will a taxi take me?
- How will I find it?
- Will I be able to cross the road to get there?
- Will the front entrance be accessible to me?
- Where will I park?
- Where can I take my assistance dog to relieve itself?
- Will I be able to get a taxi afterwards?
- Is local public transport accessible?
- Are the reception staff friendly?
- How will I find the right room?

Many disabled people use public transport. Ensure that staff who take any enquiries know about local public transport so that they can advise people on travel arrangements.

- Are there low-floor buses on the route?
- Do they take wheelchairs?
- Is the train station accessible?
- If the bus stop or train station is across a busy road, is there a crossing nearby?

Disabled people who drive, need reserved, well-signposted car parking nearby. Some may not be able to walk far from their cars. Those with wheelchairs will often need extra wide parking spaces. If the venue does not have car parking that can be reserved for disabled people, ensure that staff know about local parking arrangements, including yellow lines. Except in some London boroughs, 'blue badge' holders can park on single or double yellow lines provided that waiting is allowed and they are not causing an obstruction. In general, this scheme only permits three hours parking. In some areas it can be less. Not all service users with limited mobility will be eligible for the blue badge scheme so it is important not to make assumptions.

The venue

Generally the venue needs to be somewhere that it is easy for participants to get to by public and other transport. The choice of venue will be shaped to some extent by the kind of activity or event you have in mind. For example, for a small informal discussion, a quiet café might suit everybody's access requirements and provide a place that helps create an informal and relaxed atmosphere.

Getting in

The entrance to the venue should be level or ramped, and if there are steps as well these need to have a handrail. Portable ramps can be acceptable for a few steps, but ensuring they are out when needed and not dangerous makes them less than ideal. Some people with mobility impairments prefer steps to a ramp. Steps should have a clear line denoting the step edge and a hand rail. Revolving doors are not suitable for wheelchair users and many with mobility impairments and/or assistance dogs. The position of the entry door needs to be clear for people with a visual impairment with glass doors well identified.

Entrances should be well signposted to avoid confusion or exhaustion, as should any alternative entrance for wheelchair users. Any bell for people to summon assistance must be accessible to wheelchair users and people of restricted height.

- How does someone with a hearing impairment use an entry-phone system?
- Would a visually impaired person know it is there?

- Can someone of restricted height or seated in a wheel chair see over the counter?

For some events or consultations it is a good idea if there are 'meeters and greeters' stationed at or near the entrance to offer assistance. They should be clearly identifiable with tabards or T shirts bearing the logo or name of the event organiser or host. In addition these 'stewards' should be given guidance on approaching people who might not see that they are there.

Moving around inside a building

Gangways and corridors should be clutter-free, both for wheelchair users, and for people with visual impairments. Avoid hanging or projecting objects. Thick pile carpets can make it difficult for wheelchair users to manoeuvre. Changes in level on a single floor, whether ramp or steps, should be indicated by lighting or colour contrast. Furniture can be more easily seen if there is a colour contrast with the surroundings.

If the venue is not on the ground floor, it is essential that the lift is accessible.

- Are the operating buttons at a suitable height?
- Is the lift large enough?
- Does it have an automated voice?
- Are the accessible lavatories on the same level as the main venue and are they clearly indicated?
- What happens if there is a genuine fire alarm – what are the procedures for evacuation? In many venues the lifts close down in the case of fire. In some cases wheelchair users are expected to either wait in a refuge spot or to use an evacuation chair – both of which are not acceptable to many service users.

If service users are to move around within the venue during the course of your event (to break out rooms, specific workshops etc.) it is worth considering these questions:

- Has time been built into the agenda to allow service users to move from one room to another?
- Will there be plenty of staff on hand to offer assistance?
- How will the rooms be located and identified?
- How will people know which group they are in and where they need to go?

Facilities

You should have an adapted toilet (preferably unisex because many people rely on someone of the opposite sex for assistance) for people who need more space - wheelchair users, people wanting to keep their Assistance Dog with them, those needing space to administer medication etc. Sign it well.

Some disabled people will bring personal assistants or communicators, and you need to ensure there is seating and refreshments available for them. These people are human aids. Some disabled people will introduce their assistant, but many will just want them to fade into the background, being there when they are needed. This should not be considered an affront to their rights or dignity. It is part of their role. (see section 5, protocol for P.A.'s).

It is always a good idea to provide a room that is not in use for any activity during the day. This is a quiet room or a room for people who need 'time out'. This room can also be used as a prayer room for those who need this facility. This should be signposted during the 'housekeeping' stage of the event along with information about the whereabouts of the accessible toilets, fire procedures etc.

Food and drink

Providing good quality refreshments is an important part of good quality involvement. If you do, a supply of plastic drinking straws can be useful. Some people may need to take medication, drink frequently, or be liable to choke and having water available can be useful.

All food should be clearly labelled and meat, fish, vegetarian and vegan food served on separate plates, or if possible served on separate tables. For those who identify any dietary needs that are not covered by this, then their food should be clearly marked. During lunch time and breaks, assistance should be available to help identify and serve food. Tables and chairs should always be available for people to eat sitting down if they so wish.

Timing

Timing is an important access issue. Many disabled people have to put an array of complicated arrangements in place for accessible and safe travel. For example, their personal assistant may need to arrive an hour earlier than usual to aid with personal care; an accessible taxi booked to get to the station (in some rural areas in particular, there is only one accessible taxi serving a large area). The company will need to be ready with a ramp to get on and off the train (some trains only have space for one wheelchair) and so on. And this, of course has to be repeated again for the return journey. Additionally the service user might well be in a support role themselves for someone else and so more arrangements need to be put in place. This all means that sticking to agreed timings is very important. The meeting cannot agree to 'stay on for an extra hour'.

It's also a bad mistake to think that service users to think that service users have nothing else to do with their lives than get involved. Because of this it is important to allow enough time for them to be able to include such events and activities in their diaries.

Timings during the day equally should be adhered to, because they are an access issue. For a variety of impairment specific reasons some people need to know when a break is expected, when food will be available or when they can go unobserved to the 'quiet room'. For some service users prayer time will be important (When setting the date for the meeting or event take into account the specific religious holidays of different faith groups) and for others, being able to follow the agenda is crucial to avoid becoming confused and anxious.

Communication

There are a wide range of communication access issues to address. Good, preferably natural, lighting is required, both for people with visual impairments and hearing impaired people who are using sign language interpreters or are lip-reading.

Background noise, including air conditioning systems, can make it difficult for people with hearing impairments and can hinder communication for someone with a speech impairment.

An induction loop should be available for people with hearing impairments. If a loop is required, ensure that, if the system requires it, the microphone is always used. It's not helpful for people to think they speak loudly. A sign language interpreter or lip-speaker may be needed – check this out in advance. Deaf people, or others for whom English is not their first language, may have their own interpreter, but you also need to know where you can contact one. Note that interpreters require paying for their services. Always talk to and look at the service user at all times not the interpreter.

Depending on the length of the activity or meeting, frequent breaks may be needed by some service users. This is likely to include hearing impaired people who are lip reading, or following a sign language interpreter, people with pain who need to move frequently, and others who need ready access to the toilets. If the person you are talking to has a hearing impairment, speak clearly and not too fast, with your face towards them – never speak to your notebook, turn your back, or obscure a clear view of your face. Do not overdo mouth movements and do not shout!

Communicating with somebody who has speech impairment

This can be awkward and difficult for both parties. A few simple steps can be taken to avoid embarrassment and aid communication:

- Actively listen to what the person is saying. All too often we don't pay close attention to people we are talking to. We might be thinking of what we are going to say next, what we saw on television last night or, a common experience for people with a speech impairment, panic that we won't understand what is being said. We are so busy thinking this that we don't listen carefully.
- Sometimes it can take a few minutes to become accustomed to another person's speech patterns. It might be helpful to ask a few questions that you might already know or can guess the answers to in order to familiarise yourself with the way they talk.
- Do not pretend you have understood them if you haven't. You are likely to be caught out more and more as the conversation continues.
- Rather than saying 'I don't understand what you are saying', try repeating back them what you did understand to check it out. So, for example, if the only word you understood from a sentence was 'dog' then say 'you are telling me something about a dog? I'm sorry I didn't catch it all'. The difference between the two responses is enormous. In

the first communication shuts down. In the second you are showing that you have understood something and you are willing to continue the communication. Importantly the second response does not place the blame for communication difficulties on the person with a speech impairment, but rather sees communication as a joint enterprise. It can also help to have paper and pens available to help clarify and for people to write down any questions they have.

- Move to a quiet environment. Background noise can seriously impede hearing what another person is saying.
- Check that you have understood what is being said. If you are unsure repeat it back to them, with a line like: 'So you are saying etc etc'.
- If you still don't understand and there are other people present, ask the person with the speech impairment if they mind if you ask someone to join you as you are having difficulty. Again this shows the problem is with you rather than blaming the other person. It shows that you are committed to making the communication happen.
- Do not assume that the service user has other impairments such as deafness or a learning difficulty. Many people make such erroneous assumptions.
- Be aware that asking a person with speech impairment to write down what they are saying is not always appropriate.