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## **Equality of Opportunity Committee**

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**Paper submitted by DeafBlind UK on Published Documents for Visually Impaired People  
Equality of Opportunity Committee**

### **Purpose**

This paper outlines a set of guidance on improving the publication and access to published documents, whether in hard format or electronic, for blind, visually impaired and deafblind people. The paper also includes recommendations regarding other support that should be made available for blind, visually impaired and deafblind people in accessing information.

### **Background**

RNIB state there are two million people in the UK with a sight problem. These sight problems range from total blindness to not being able to pass the sight test element of a driving test. In addition to this there are 24,000 deafblind people in the UK

The Department of Health (DOH) estimate there are circa 2.7 million people over 60 years of age with a combined sight and hearing loss (DOH, National Service Framework, 2001). The majority of Deafblind people are over the age of sixty and have acquired a dual sensory impairment. This is also reflected in the demographic profile of Deafblind UK's (DBUK) membership with 75% of our membership being over the age of 60 years.

Department of Health (DOH) statistics for Wales show the number of people registered as blind and partially sighted as 20,000.

These figures demonstrate the number of people who may have difficulty in accessing information in what would be considered standard formats is sizeable and inaccessible information is a fact of life.

Considering the needs of disabled people in providing accessible information should not be seen as something that is an add-on. It should be an intrinsic part of what we do and how we plan for the future.

There are many different ways people can access information, and ongoing technological progress continues to ease access for people with sight problems. However, much thought still needs to be given regarding raising accessibility standards to a level that all can access the information they should expect as a norm.

Sight loss is a very individual thing ranging from those who have no light perception at all (total blindness), to those who have a sight loss which is un-correctable by aids such as glasses and who have difficulty reading small print as well as text at a distance. Eye conditions affect people in different ways and it is important not to assume that you know what someone can see simply because you know which eye condition they have.

Deafblind people have additional obstacles to overcome in accessing information. Research carried out by DBUK as part of its Cause and Cure report (Deafblind people's experience of the NHS 2006) established that almost 58% of deafblind patients did not receive letters or appointment cards from any NHS organisation in a format they could read themselves.

Despite the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and its subsequent amendments and other guidance on best practice much work has still to be done in raising standards of accessibility to equal levels for all. For example the DOH has issued guidance to local authorities on how they should provide services for deafblind people. This guidance is aimed at providing deafblind people with greater rights to health and social care services as well as access to staff within those services who understand deafblindness.

The guidance issued to local authorities is issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Services Act 1970. As part of the guidance it asks local authorities to provide information about services in formats and methods that are accessible to deafblind people. However, shortcomings in the application of other aspects of the guidance such as identification of deafblind people within a local authority area and access to specialist assessment has limited the positive steps the guidance should be making.

This paper will now outline simple steps that can be taken in making information more accessible to a wider audience.

## **Formats and ways of communicating**

People with sight problems use a variety of methods for accessing information and communication. Because people lose their sight at different times of their lives and because eye conditions result in a different level and type of damage to vision, there is no one solution that can be provided.

The following provides an outline to the formats that can be used for reading and writing as well as communicating. More detailed information on these formats and their application is available from the RNIB See it Right Guidelines.

### **Print**

It is important that printed documentation is made available in a wide range of standards as well as understanding the needs of blind and partially sighted people. Many people with low vision can read standard print if it is well designed. This may be enhanced by the use of magnification or certain lighting to improve readability. However, reading a long document may be slow and tiring and reading print that is too small impossible. People with no vision will not be able to read print.

Clear print brings together basic design elements such as font, type size, contrast and page navigation. By following guidelines, cutting edge design can also be inclusive design. Documents that use clear print will find a wider audience because they are easier to read.

Clear print differs from large print in the size of the type used (referred to as point size). Clear print documents use a minimum type size of 12 point (although we recommend 14 point to reach more customers with sight problems).

Larger print is essential for many blind and partially sighted people. No single size is suitable for everyone. Large print is usually in the range of 16 to 22 point. Giant print uses fonts that are 24 point plus.

Again the font type and design of a document will make a big difference to the readability of the information. Publications using large text but with poor colour contrast, italic fonts or text placed on top of an image will still be difficult to read.

Organisations producing information in large print should ask a customer for their font size preference to ensure they are meeting their needs.

People who have some vision or have lost their sight in later life will still write by hand. Signing documents and filling in forms can be very difficult for some people. Small print size and light coloured boxes make it hard to identify which sections must be completed. Writing aids such as signature guides, writing frames and thick pens can help.

There are around 20,000 people in the UK who state that Braille is their preferred reading medium, but many more use Braille for labelling or read Braille signs. Braille is expensive to produce but should be available as a format when requested.

Moon is a system of reading and writing in which tactile symbols based on lines and curves are used to represent letters, numbers and punctuation marks. Moon is used by a very small number of people, most of whom are elderly. Moon 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 there is very little literature available.

Organisations should identify how documents can be produced in Braille and Moon formats quickly and when requested.

## **Access technology**

Technology can provide a simple solution to meeting the access to information needs for blind partially sighted and deafblind people. The requirements of people for technological support identified through more effective assessment of need and appropriate funding would overcome many barriers. Also the provision of such technology being made more readily available in public buildings, GP practices, hospitals etc. as well as the home would provide a solution at the point of need.

Blind and partially sighted people use a wide range of equipment to help them access print and electronic information. This includes hand-held magnifiers; Closed Circuit Televisions (CCTVs) which magnify print up to 48 times the original size; speech software which

converts text on a computer screen to speech Braille translation software which translates information on a computer screen into Braille which is read on a keyboard; screen enlargement software that enables the user to magnify the text on their screen to a suitable size.

Some types of equipment are simple to use, others require some training. New technology is constantly changing and improving the independence of blind and partially sighted people. For example people can use speech software to read text messages on their mobile phone and use accessible GPS devices to navigate their environments.

## **Internet Access**

The internet is one of the most significant communication developments since the invention of Braille. For the first time ever, many blind, partially sighted and deafblind people have access to the same information as sighted people and on the same terms. A blind person can now shop, bank or read the news from their computer using access technology.

However, barriers still exist. Websites must be correctly designed and built so that people with disabilities can use them. Websites are covered by the DDA yet still a significant number of sites do not work for blind people.

Whilst technical advice for accessibility is extensive and beyond the scope of this paper general considerations are outlined. Accessing technical support is detailed at the end of the section.

There are a number of ways an individual can access the information available through a computer without being able to see the screen. Screen reading and screen magnification software both provide simple solutions and a standard computer can be easily adapted. This type of software should be made available readily. Website design needs to take into account how these applications work in relation to how information is presented.

By nature websites contain complex information which may not be directly accessible to everyone, for example images are not directly accessible to someone who cannot see and audio files are not directly accessible to someone who cannot hear. So it is important to provide the same information in alternative formats. If the actual content of the image is what is important, then that is what should be conveyed.

Text is the most universally accessible and flexible medium and where non-text elements are used, the same information should be provided in a textual, to enable all users to access it. A simple example would be a functional image such as a hyperlink or selection button. The text alternative should indicate the destination, such as "Home" or "About Us" or the purpose such as "Search now".

Other important considerations include the ability to change contrast between text colour and background and the ability to define font size and style. Whilst these may be options through the user's browser web designers need to take these into consideration.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is an agency committed to lead the web to its full potential including promoting a high degree of accessibility for people with disabilities. W3C provide guidelines on its website ([www.w3.org](http://www.w3.org)) regarding accessibility.

DBUK has recently upgraded its own website to meet W3C recommendations on accessibility and would advise all organisations to assess their own sites against the W3C accessibility guidelines.

Other initiatives include BSI British Standards. BSI has established a new technical committee with responsibility for the development of a British Standard on web accessibility. The standard will enable all types of organisations and individuals to commission and maintain websites which are accessible to all their potential audiences.

The new Standard will build on PAS 78 Guide to good practice in commissioning accessible websites, which has been an enormous success, demonstrating the demand for a full consensus standard in this area. BSI has brought together a wide range of expertise in the field of web accessibility to develop a robust standard which will yield great benefits for disabled web users and industry.

The benefits of using the new standard, which is expected to be published in spring 2009, include improved interoperability of web content ensuring compatibility with different devices, such as mobile phones.

## **Audio**

Audio information has the benefit of being usable by anyone with a cassette or CD player.

An emerging format which improves navigation on CD is the structured digital audio format called Daisy. Daisy CDs can be played on a stand-alone Daisy player or by using a software player on a computer. The user can navigate through the structure of the recording, and when using a computer can view synchronised text and see any picture (if include) on screen. Screen colours, fonts and font size can be adjusted to suit the reader's preference.

The expansion of audio production can be widely used for reading as well as personal note taking and labelling.

Letters, bills, marketing information, magazines and newspapers can be quickly converted into audio but this can have an impact on quality. A clear, well structured recording with good navigation is much easier to use than one where no thought has been given to how the information will be used and digested.

Information can be converted into audio through transcription agencies.

Audio files should be made generally available on CD or as Daisy or MP3 files. As tape technology is now becoming obsolete, many tape

audio libraries are and need to convert to digital format.

## **Personal Support**

DBUK through feedback from its members understands the value and need for personal support for deafblind people as well as people who are blind or have a visual impairment. DBUK's Communicator/Guide service provides one to one support for people to access their communities and receive information.

For example many people with sight problems have information read to them by other people. This is either from personal preference or because the information has not been given to them in a format they can read themselves. Having personal information read such as bank statements or medical documents may not be ideal but is the most appropriate solution.

Most deafblind people develop their combined sight and hearing loss as they get older (acquired deafblindness), some are born deafblind (congenital deafblindness). As with sight loss, being deafblind does not always mean total loss of senses. A person will often have some useful vision or hearing. People with useful hearing may be able to understand clear speech, in person or over the telephone, if background noise is kept to a minimum and the person speaks clearly. Others will have enough sight to use text phones or Type talk, be able to lip read or use British Sign Language. Good lighting can help a deafblind person see the other person's face and hands more clearly.

Deafblind people with more significant hearing and sight loss will use alternative methods. Some people use the Block Alphabet where words are spelt out by tracing capital letters on the palm of the deafblind person's hand. Others use the Deafblind Manual Alphabet where the British Sign Language Alphabet is traced onto the palm of the deafblind person's hand. Deafblind people may also use Braille to read, write or use computers.

Much of this communication requires one to one support through a communicator/guide or an interpreter. Investment in this kind of human support is required to supplement the provision of printed, audio and electronic information. In particular investment in the training of qualified interpreters needs to be made to overcome the existing national shortage of trained people.

Personal and peer support for accessing information can also be provided through in group settings.

DBUK are investing resource to increase opportunities for people with combined sight and hearing loss to: meet people outside of their home environment; access information and; make independent choices.

DBUK will do this by establishing Peer Support Clubs across the country. Having developed some clubs, we know that regular meetings link members to volunteers, carers, staff and outside visitors, forming vital support networks in and outside the club. In our experience, group situations identify needs and aspirations not always highlighted by individuals, because people share and pick up information from each other.

The Welsh Connections project will deliver the development of Peer Support Clubs across Wales. Funded through the Big Lottery for three years commencing June 2008, the project will develop 12 Clubs in its first two years and use the third year to develop a sustainable service for Deafblind people in Wales.

The outcomes of the project will include breaking the isolation faced by deafblind people and the development of skills, confidence, friendships and community involvement, supported by external volunteers. It will also act as a forum for people to access information and inform public bodies regarding accessibility issues.

## **Diversity**

Many blind and partially sighted people have additional disabilities which may affect the way that they communicate. People with diabetes for example are less likely to be Braille users if they have lost the tactile sensitivity in their fingertips. People with arthritis may find some technology too difficult to operate. Appropriate understanding of other conditions needs to be taken into account in assessing the individual needs of people's communication requirement.

People with sight problems from ethnic minorities may face additional communication difficulties. There is very little material available in large print or Braille in different languages.

Diversity issues other than visual impairment only need to be taken into account when accessible information is being prepared.

## **Summary Recommendations**

Access to information in any format requires thought about meeting individual need. DBUK provides information to its members in 14 different formats. This understanding of individual requirements is the key to DBUK's approach to communication and accessible information. This approach is also supported by the delivery of information through personal support on a one to one basis

as well as group support through clubs. The key feature to this approach is understanding and meeting the individual needs of people.

DBUK would recommend that all organisations should set out its commitment to meeting the information needs of its customers and staff through its accessible information policy.

An accessible information policy should clearly set out the organisations responsibility and should enable them to react quickly and

effectively when information is requested in a format other than print.

The policy should also cover the organisations website (if applicable) and should use W3C guidelines in the sites design and accessibility.

The policy should enable compliance through best practice guidelines. This would include details containing covering things like print legibility (e.g. what text size people should use and the use of email (e.g. using plain text format rather than HTML or RTF), as well as information on how to complete certain tasks such as producing Braille and audio versions of printed information.

It should be clear in an accessible policy that the quality of alternative formats to print should be the same as the printed version. This is particularly important in terms of content.

People who cannot read print should not be made to wait for information in a format they can read. An accessible information policy should make it clear that the required formats should be planned from the outset and that production schedules take into account the need to produce materials in a range of formats.

An information policy should also take into account the DDA requirements (section 21) in making information accessible.

Section 7 guidance provides a framework for Local Authorities to implement best practice in how it both delivers its services and provides information for deafblind people.

DBUK recommends that Section 7 guidance becomes a statutory requirement for Authorities thus ensuring a legal right for deafblind people as defined by the guidance.

### **Information about Deafblind UK**

Deafblind UK is an organisation governed by Deafblind people. We are committed to the inclusion of people with a dual sensory impairment into main stream society. We support this aim through the delivery of: An Education Programme, Training, A 24 hour Helpline, Welfare Advice & Advocacy and the direct delivery of services and support across England and Wales.

There are 24,000 Deafblind people in the UK and circa 2.7 million people over 60 years of age with a combined sight and hearing loss (DOH, National Service Framework, 2001). The majority of Deafblind people are over the age of sixty and have acquired a dual sensory impairment. This is also reflected in the demographic profile of Deafblind UK's membership with 75% of our membership being over the age of 60 years.

Historically Deafblind UK has developed and delivered supported housing and communicator guide services in many local authority areas & these services enable people with a dual sensory impairment to access and participate in there local communities and manage their own affairs through the provision of communication and mobility support. However, having undertaken research into the needs of people with a dual sensory impairment in England & Wales based upon the above numbers and identifying the types of provision people either have or require in the future, we are expanding our services into Independent Living Teams. The services these teams will offer include the following: Communicator Guide Services, Housing Support, Homecare and Rehabilitation Services.