

CHAPTER 2: COMMUNICATION AND STAYING CONNECTED

“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them”

Ralph G. Nichols

Ralph G Nichols, author of Are You Listening.

WE ASKED AND YOU SAID

People with learning disabilities and/or autistic people often face barriers to being included in both the real and digital world. For many the pandemic had made this worse, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and mental health challenges. When we asked people what was important to them about communication and connection, these were some of the responses we received.

People with learning disabilities, their families and supports want relevant information that makes sense to them at the same time as everyone else

Ensuring access to digital communication. It has made a huge difference for lots of people who can now be in touch with others or work remotely

There is a lot of opportunities to learn from others, locally, nationally and internationally

People often don't know or understand their rights on inclusive communication support including things like Speech and Language Therapy (SALT)

Some people's communication needs are not supported or invested in consistently across services and areas

Accessible information is necessary for people to keep themselves healthy, safe and well - particularly during the pandemic

HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

The right freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD) provides a more detailed account of the rights of disabled people.

ARTICLE 21 – FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND OPINION, AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice, as defined in article 2 of the present Convention, including by:

- a Providing information intended for the general public to persons with disabilities in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities in a timely manner and without additional cost;
- b Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions;
- c Urging private entities that provide services to the general public, including through the Internet, to provide information and services in accessible and usable formats for persons with disabilities;
- d Encouraging the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities;
- e Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.

British Institute of Human Rights made an easy read guide with self advocates to rights to accessible information

You can find more information about these rights [HERE](#)

HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

IDEAS WE CAN WORK ON TOGETHER?

We have gathered ideas for things we can work on together to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities in the areas they said are important to them and their families. Some of the initial ideas are:

- A government-wide communications plan for making sure information is available quickly, meets accessible standards, is co-produced with people from diverse groups and is easy to find in one place.

- Respect of the various ways people with learning disabilities might communicate and investment in supporting different approaches like Intensive Interaction, Makaton, picture systems, different languages and more.

- Dissemination that is supported by a national co-production group with resources available for local learning disability, autism and family carers organisations to use and share.

- Production of accessible information to be understood as an essential part of mainstream government communications strategies, not a separate or add-on task.

- The development of a longer-term strategy for developing accessibility with large institutions such as the BBC.

- People with learning disabilities and their families knowing their rights to accessible information and communication support or adaption – (provided as part of any Care Act related contact).

- Concerted effort to promote and develop accessible technology that respects diversity and works for people.

- Belief that people with learning disabilities have the right to access both technology, and support to enable them to access that technology.

WHAT GOOD MIGHT LOOK LIKE (HOW WILL WE KNOW WE ARE ON THE RIGHT TRACK)

GOOD EXAMPLE 1

Every two weeks since the start of lockdown Learning Disability England has held an online zoom session for self-advocacy, family and community organisations.

“I have enjoyed being able to connect with different groups across the country. We were also able to connect with self-advocates in Ghana, which the group found interesting as they were able to learn about how they do things”

Kim from KeyRing

GOOD EXAMPLE 2

The accessible information campaign group worked with BIHR to produce an accessible and easy to use resource on information and rights. They also created an Easy Read Guide to the Human Rights Act.

GOOD EXAMPLE 3

Good Things Foundation worked in partnership with AbilityNet and Digital Unite and was supported by Learning Disability England, the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group and other disability and digital inclusion organisations.

Digital Lifeline has seen more than 150 grassroots community partners and others distribute over 5,500 devices with data and offer both face-to-face and remote support to help recipients learn how to use their device safely and confidently.

Studies have shown that technology can help people with learning disabilities reduce feelings of loneliness and support their mental health and wellbeing.

WHO DO WE NEED TO ENROL/ENGAGE?

There are some actions, such as recognising accessible information as an essential component of mainstream communication strategies, that need to happen at a government level. This is unlikely to happen without strong cross sectoral campaigning led by people and their families and supported by allies.

Commissioners, providers and advocacy organisations can increase awareness of the need for accessible information. They can also commit to improving the accessibility of the information they disseminate.

Individuals, self advocacy groups and families can keep the pressure up by knowing and understanding their rights to accessible information and requesting these rights are respected, protected and upheld.

NEXT STEPS/FIRST STEP

FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Establishing collaborative partnerships between those who provide in-house support (e.g. care homes, supported living; family members) and those who have the experience and expertise to provide remote support (e.g. self-advocacy groups, day services).

Collect, curate and share innovative examples of how technology has been used by people with learning disabilities during the pandemic to help others understand the evolving potential of technology to enhance lives.

Implement the Accessible Information Standard in health and social care service provision.

FOR GOVERNMENT

The Government should ensure that people with learning disabilities are included in digital inclusion projects including access to equipment, WiFi and levelling up equipment schemes.

FOR COMMISSIONERS

Education, health and social care commissioners and providers need to understand the 'digital divide' faced by people with learning disabilities and develop a clear plan to address:

- **Access to technology (the kit)**
- **Access to support to know and understand how to use technology**
- **Ensuring affordability of technology – internet access, data charges etc.**

Commissioners should include digital inclusion, facilitation and support skills and access to WiFi or data in service specifications.

Commissioners should understand the existing local resources that support communication for people with the most complex needs and ensure there is access to Speech and Language specialist support as well as a range of communication tools and skills to enable people to use them.

FOR PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES

A cultural shift is required that supports the idea of access to communication and connect as a human right. This should be supported by capacity building programmes for both people with learning disabilities and their supporters (including family members) so that they can confidently use technology as well as specialists systems when needed.