Delivering inclusive communications
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What has disability got to do with me?

As a government communicator, you’re probably involved in communicating information, ideas or policies to the public.

Over 10 million people in the UK are disabled. The definition of disability is broader than you think. It includes invisible impairments such as people with cancer, learning disabilities or epilepsy.

Why is this important? It means that when you communicate your policy or service to a target audience, that audience will include disabled people.

It may mean that they respond to your message differently, because they face barriers trying to access services or find and access information in a different way.

This short guide will help you understand how you can create more inclusive communications and direct you to detailed resources. Find out more on our website www.odi.gov.uk/communications
Did you know...?

In the UK:
• around 1 in 20 children are disabled
• around 1 in 7 people of working age are disabled
• almost 1 in 2 people over state pension age are disabled

Which means if you don’t consider disability, your message could miss around 18% of your audience.
Your legal duty

As well as the compelling business reasons for considering disability in your work, there are legal considerations.

The Disability Discrimination Act requires service providers to make reasonable changes to the way services are delivered. This includes the way government provides information.

Public bodies also have to consider the Disability Equality Duty which says we must proactively ensure that disabled people are treated fairly.

The Duty encourages public bodies to think about disabled people’s requirements at the beginning of all their activities – developing policy, delivering services, communicating public information. This will ensure disability is fully integrated into public bodies’ activities and not just tacked on at the end.
Updating the law

The Equality Act 2010 has brought existing equality legislation together, to simplify the law and make it easier to understand. From October 2010 this will replace the Disability Discrimination Act but the requirements described opposite will remain the same.

As part of these changes a new Single Equality Duty will replace the Disability Equality Duty, which is likely to be implemented from April 2011.

Find out more about the law

www.odi.gov.uk/law
Rethink your view on disability

The Office for Disability Issues (ODI) encourages government departments to use the social model of disability, which says that disability is created by barriers in society.

These barriers generally fall into three categories:

- the environment – including inaccessible buildings and services
- people’s attitudes – stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice
- organisations – inflexible policies, practices and procedures.

Many people think that disability is caused by an individual’s health condition or impairment. This approach is called the medical model of disability.
The medical model says that by fixing their body, disabled people will be able to participate in society like everyone else. This is an outdated model that is not supported by disabled people and using it will lead to ineffective communications.

If you use the social model, you will be able to identify and remove the barriers to accessing your information.

As a communicator this may mean you have to think of creative and innovative ways of sharing information – which is the most exciting part of our job!
Customer insight

Basing your campaign on sound knowledge of what your audience thinks and does is a well-founded principle for government communications. Involving your audience in developing communications is also increasingly common. For example, focus groups are a valuable way of testing your approach. ODI recommends extending this principle and involving your audience even further.

Involving disabled people in planning communications, developing messages, choosing channels, creating materials and possibly even delivering elements of your campaign, will make your communications more successful.
How? Because your message is more likely to ring true and reach your audience. If you’re working with partners to deliver the message, you will gain credibility from their endorsement. It will also help you think about accessibility when you start planning your campaign. This could save you extra costs at a later stage, for example, redesigning a website or publication.

You can find out more about the theory and practicalities of involving disabled people in the resources listed below. You can also apply these suggestions to other audiences.

Involving disabled people
www.odi.gov.uk/involve

Government Communication Network (GCN) guides for engaging with stakeholders and audiences (login required)
www.wiki.comms.gov.uk/index.php/Stakeholders_and_audiences
Case study – Disabled People’s Forum

Developing research and creative campaign

In 2009, ODI commissioned qualitative research to learn more about the attitudes of front-line practitioners, who could impact on a disabled person’s desire to live independently. This included GPs, social workers, Disability Employment Advisers and professionals working in residential care.

To help develop the research, ODI worked with a disabled communications expert to convene a group of disabled people to offer advice. Because of their in-depth understanding of the research, the forum was also able to advise on the communications campaign that is being created as a result.
The forum gave the creative agency a different perspective on the messages they were crafting and the imagery of disabled people that they could use.

A member of the group said: “I’m impressed by the way the agency has understood our point of view. I feel like my views have been heard and my voice is reflected in the messages they’ve developed. These are the things that I want my social worker to think about.”
Representation: imagery and language

A central part of effective communications is visual imagery, the way a person or a service is portrayed. If you want disabled people to respond to your message, it is important to represent their lives accurately.

Positive representation will also help the government’s broader aspiration of changing public attitudes and raising expectations of what disabled people can achieve.

A positive image is a fair, creative and stimulating portrayal of one or more disabled people. Positive images should also show disabled and non-disabled people interacting on equal terms.
Remember, around 1 in 5 of the general population is disabled, so you can use images of disabled people effectively when conducting campaigns aimed at the public. Only a small proportion of disabled people use wheelchairs, so try to think about how you can portray invisible impairments.

By including disabled people in your creative output, government communications can help to shift the idea that disability is a tragedy affecting a small minority. Instead we can show that it is a normal part of life and that disabled people can be successful in a range of roles.
Use positive, representative images

Our resources for communicators include a free image library for government organisations. The library has over 1,000 positive images of disabled people in a range of situations, including at home, at work, living independently and socialising.

ODI Image Library
www.odi.gov.uk/communications

If you are commissioning new photography or video of disabled people, you must use disabled models or actors. It is not acceptable to use non-disabled people to represent disabled people. Tips to help you recruit disabled models and actors are available on the ODI website.

You should also consider including disabled people in all new photography or video that you commission, to represent the diversity of our society.

Actors and models
www.odi.gov.uk/models
Make sure your message doesn’t alienate

If your information includes outdated or possibly offensive language, your main message won’t be heard. In addition, negative words can reinforce myths or stereotypes that exist about disabled people. Using the right language will help non-disabled people understand the reality of disability.

A brief guide to language
www.odi.gov.uk/language
Accessibility

Providing information in a variety of ways will help remove one of the barriers disabled people experience. This section signposts you to a wealth of information about how to make different communication channels more accessible.

Print publishing and alternative formats

You should always consider how best to make your communications accessible to disabled people. Anticipating their needs is part of your obligations as a service provider, under the Disability Discrimination Act. In most cases, it should be considered reasonable to provide alternative formats.
There is a common misconception that alternative formats are expensive to produce, but Braille and audio are generally inexpensive. Some alternative formats can meet the needs of your wider audience. For instance, Easy Read is a format that features simple sentences and illustrations, developed primarily for people with learning disabilities. This format is popular with most readers, including other hard to reach audiences, as it provides a succinct summary of complex information.

Think about alternative formats at the start of your project and ensure potential costs are included in your budget.

It’s also important to promote the availability of alternative formats and monitor demand. This will help you plan the accessibility requirements that you need to include in future communications.

Information about alternative formats is available on ODI’s website www.odi.gov.uk/formats
Online publishing

The government publishes a significant amount of documents online. PDFs can be made accessible for most disabled people, but only if they are produced correctly. To advise your design agency on exactly how they should deliver accessible PDFs, download ODI’s brief guide.

Delivering technically accessible publications www.odi.gov.uk/publishing

You can deliver the same level of accessibility in your PDFs when producing them yourself. You will need to prepare your Word document correctly, before creating a PDF. ODI has published a short guide explaining how to do this.

Preparing accessible Microsoft Word documents www.odi.gov.uk/publishing

Bear in mind that if a disabled person requests a Word version of your publication, in most cases, it should be considered reasonable to provide one.
Film or online video

Information delivered through film is particularly effective for some groups of disabled people, such as people with learning disabilities. But to ensure that your film is accessible to all disabled people you may decide to include additional access options. The most common access options to add are subtitles, British Sign Language interpretation or audio description.
ODI has produced a short guide about commissioning new video. The most important piece of advice is to think about accessibility at the beginning. By briefing your producer correctly at the start of your project, you will save time and money later. Even if you’re not sure which access options you want to include, the producer can create your product bearing certain principles in mind.

Commissioning accessible video
www.odi.gov.uk/film

ODI has also developed an accessible media player. This allows disabled users to switch access options on and off. Government departments can use this player on their website, email ODI to find out more
odi.communications@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Watch a film about the accessible media player on the ODI website
www.odi.gov.uk/player
Websites

To maintain the accessibility and quality of government websites, detailed guidance has been published by COI. All public sector websites must meet a minimum standard of accessibility, which is Level Double-A of the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

Delivering inclusive websites

Events

To ensure you can include everyone in your event, think about accessibility at the beginning. It’s also important to bear in mind that it may not just be delegates you need to think about – you may have disabled speakers or exhibitors too.

ODI’s accessible events guide includes information about making the physical environment more inclusive, as well as tips for developing the programme and chairing the event.

Delivering accessible events
www.odi.gov.uk/events
ODI hosts a cross-government group on disability communications, addressing both communications aimed at disabled people and about disability issues.

Any government communicators can join, you can find out more about the next meeting on the My Networks section on the GCN website https://comms.civilservice.gov.uk

The group meets quarterly and includes a surgery – bring your communication problems and the group will help solve them.
Training

ODI offers a free Images of Disability workshop through GCN and government departments. The workshop gives you an opportunity to learn more about how to deliver inclusive communications, involving disabled people and representation.

If you’d like to find out more about forthcoming events email odi.communications@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
Advice and support

Government communicators can request specialist advice or support from ODI’s Communications team.

Email odi.communications@dwp.gsi.gov.uk with your contact details and a brief description of your query.

You can also use this email address to sign up for ODInsight, our monthly email newsletter and to request photographs from our image library (details on page 14).
The Office for Disability Issues leads the government’s vision of achieving equality for disabled people. One of the ways we do this is by supporting civil servants to include and represent disabled people in your work. We provide strategic advice, share tools and help you develop new skills.

This guide gives communicators helpful tips to improve the inclusivity and accessibility of your communications. It will also signpost you to a range of practical resources.

This publication is also available in audio and Braille. If you would like a copy in either format, please contact us.

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