

A handy guide to: Making meetings accessible

If you are organising a meeting it is highly likely that you will have people attending who have some hearing or sight impairment. This guide will help you ensure they can take part in a meeting effectively.

The essentials – timing, place, and a warm welcome

Accessibility starts before you get to the door. Think about the time of day you want to meet to ensure people can get there. If your attendees are using public transport think about any restrictions on use of concessionary fares. If the local bus services reduce the price of tickets, or accept bus passes after 9.30 this will affect the time people will be able to arrive.

At the end of the meeting, people are likely to want to get away before it is dark in winter, and to avoid school closing times so they are not competing with lots of school children for a place on the bus.

Some people may need lifts to be able to attend, and others may need help throughout the day. Ask your attendees if they will be bringing someone with them, and find out whether the helper needs to be part of the meeting, or is only helping someone get around. And if someone brings a guide dog, make sure there's room for it to sit near its owner. Ideally, find someone to take it for a walk at lunch time!

If you have people attending your meetings for the first time, think about assigning them a 'buddy' to explain how the day works, make sure they know their way around the building, and generally to help answer any practical questions that come up on the day. Ideally, ask the buddy to contact the new member in advance to go through any questions they have in advance, and provide background to the meeting.

Getting heard – loop systems

A loop works by reducing or cutting out background noise whilst amplifying sound from a source, i.e. a speaker. A hearing-aid user is able to use the loop by switching their hearing aid to the 'T' position (telecoil) and therefore hear only the sound from the source without interference from background noise (Note: not all hearing- aids have a 'T' position).

Room loops can be fixed permanently into a room, or can be portable and set up within a room when and where required. With the Disability Discrimination Act and Equalities Act, more and more venues have loop systems. Ask when you book the venue if a loop is available.

If there is only one microphone attached to a loop this can cause problems if a number of different people are contributing to a discussion. Ideally a number of 'roving' microphones should be available for people to pass round.

Using a Loop System within a Meeting situation

There are a number of factors to be considered when loop systems are being used within a meeting situation:

- Loop systems should be switched on and tested to be working before meetings begin.
- If a number of different people contribute to the meeting; it will be necessary to pass the microphone(s) round to each speaker in turn.
- Make sure equipment such as mobile phones have been turned **off** as they can cause interference to hearing-aid users. (Mobile phones on 'silent' are not off. Phones need to be turned off completely).
- Make sure that only one person speaks into the microphone.
- Different microphones work in different ways. Make sure when you book your venue to ask for the sound engineer to explain how they work, and the best way to speak into them. If you use a tie mike, get the engineer to fit it for you.

Print materials

Any agendas or papers will need to be accessible to everyone at the meeting. The most common requirement is for larger print size, which is easy to do for documents produced by word processing packages. To make documents as clear as possible:

- Choose clear typeface, such as 'Arial';
- Ensure the font is large enough to read clearly – 14 point is recommended for people with sight problems;
- Make sure that spacing between words is even and don't split words between two lines;
- Avoid italics or whole sentences written in capitals;
- Use matt paper rather than glossy paper.

If people want larger than standard print, ask them what size they prefer. Some people will need information in Braille or audio. You would have to approach a transcription agency for this.

Communication Support

You may find someone who needs communication support such as a sign language interpreter, deafblind manual interpreter or lip speaker. These are skilled roles and qualified professionals should be booked. Ask the person's

advice on this. You may need to use an agency, but if the person has a preferred interpreter that you can book direct this can be cheaper.

Using Communication Support Staff

The points below offer some general guides on how to use communication support staff within meeting situations to allow everyone access. This is not an exhaustive list – and the best thing to do, if you are not sure, is to ask.

- Make sure communication support staff are positioned in appropriate positions so everyone can access their chosen communication method.
- Always communicate directly to the person you want to communicate with. Do not communicate primarily with the person employed to give communication support.
- Communication support staff will usually try and interpret/relay information into other communication methods as the presentation is given. However there will be a time lag so interpretation may be a sentence behind the presenter.
- Communication support staff should not be included as participants in the meeting.
- People may not be able to read documents or information on a screen at the same time as using their preferred communication method e.g. some participants may not be able to read a document at the same time as watching an interpreter.
- Communication support staff; along with other participants at the meeting, will need regular breaks. It is advisable to have 5 – 10 minute breaks every 30 – 45 minutes.

Refreshments

If you provide lunch, check with delegates to see if they have any special dietary requirements. They will be able to tell you what sort of food to provide or avoid if you are organising your own catering, If you are using in-house or professional caterers, they will usually provide separate food portions, clearly labelled if asked.

More information

For most meetings, the information given above will probably be enough to ensure everyone can attend reasonably comfortably. For more detailed information see this handy checklist from the Public and Commercial Services Union: http://www.pcs.org.uk/en/equality/disability_equality_toolkit/accessible-venues-checklist.cfm