

RNID Submission of Evidence
Coronavirus, disability and access to services
Women and Equalities Committee
03 December 2020

In addition to the written and oral evidence already submitted by RNID, the below gives an update on one of the key issues discussed – accessible communications.

There has been some limited progress in this area. The appointed Senior Lead for Accessible Communication, delegated her responsibility for liaising with ourselves and other leading disability charities, to the National Resilience External Affairs team. We have been meeting with this team regularly and there has been some progress, for example, the team consulted us on the accessibility of their summer campaign. We have also been working with them on an accessibility checklist for local lockdown areas – though the final version of this is yet to be completed as far as we are aware (which is obviously some months after local lockdowns began and local information to date has had significant issues with accessibility).

There remain many significant gaps, however. With regard to the steps we asked Government to take on broadcast media, for example, this has not progressed. For ministerial press conferences and announcements, there is a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter on the BBC News channel. Having no BSL interpreter on the main channels however, is seen by the community as othering. Many also remain unaware that there is a BSL interpreter on the BBC News channel. Furthermore, where press conferences are led by non-ministerial officials, such as the Chief Medical Officer, regardless of the importance of content, there is no BSL interpreter available on any channel. Where ministerial press conferences and announcements continue beyond one hour, the BSL interpreter on the BBC News channel has also disappeared with no explanation.

With regard to other issues outlined in the ‘shopping list’ - previously mentioned and issued to the Cabinet Office in May (see Appendix 1 below) - other examples of remaining gaps include:

- We called for a BSL explainer for the Test and Trace App. This is yet to be developed and the app remains inaccessible to BSL users.
- There are no references to BSL in the new Government social media accessibility guidelines.
- The Video Relay Service, which is now available for the 119 Test and Trace line, as well as other phone lines, has not been advertised, so many are unaware that this facility exists. We did a survey on social media to ask whether people were aware that the 119 number was available via video relay, 93% said they were not. We also continue to receive queries to our information line about how to get in touch with the service.

In addition, and significantly - in light of previous very clear recommendations on this issue from ourselves and others - the round of letters issued to the extremely vulnerable group in November were sent in inaccessible formats with no reference to where people may be able to access these. See our press release issued on this here - <https://rnid.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/not-accessible-not-acceptable/>

We remain extremely concerned therefore, that after such an extended period, accessibility is still not being built into Government communications systematically or from the outset.

Appendix 1

As a group of leading disability charities, championing the rights of people with sight and hearing loss, deaf people, autistic people, people with learning disabilities and people with complex disabilities, we very much welcome your appointment as the Senior Lead on Accessible Information. We, and the communities we represent, look forward to working with you to ensure all government departments fulfil their legal obligations regarding accessible information and that accessibility is built into all government communications from the outset.

Since the coronavirus outbreak many of the people in our communities have told us about the barriers they are facing when trying to obtain accurate up to date public health information in a format they can read and understand. This list is informed by the lived experiences that people have shared with us.

Shopping List

Accessible public health information

- Regular ongoing communication with the Senior Lead on Accessible Information with the disability sector to make sure that a) accessibility is built in to communications from the outset and b) accessible materials are communicated to our specific communities, including through our own channels

Accessible Broadcasting

- BSL interpretation to be provided as standard for all live public broadcasts
- Pre-created subtitles and BSL interpreter on all pre-recorded speeches and Government TV adverts
- All graphs, charts and images to be fully described and explained audibly during briefings and speeches
- Straight forward language to be used and all technical or medical language explained clearly during briefings and speeches

Accessible Social Media

- Image Description (alt text) on all images
- All videos and animated gifs to be audio led and have pre-created subtitles or equivalent text
- Concise practical guidance and training on accessibility to be given to all digital communications teams, created in conjunction with the Cabinet Office Working Group on Accessible Communications

Accessible mailings

- Alternative formats (including BSL Video, Large Print, Audio, Braille, Digital, social or visual stories and Easy Read) of any future mass mail outs available at the same time as standard letters (E.g. Shielding Letter)
- A reliable system to be put in place to ensure blind and partially sighted people get letters in their preferred format across the country (E.g. Local Authority Registers or NHS Information Standard data)
- Alternative Formats available for the 'Home Testing Kit' Instructions and any future similar test instructions

Accessible websites

- Alternative formats (including BSL Video, Large Print, Audio, Braille, Digital, social or visual stories and Easy Read) of the most critical public health information and guidance on .gov website to be available at the same time as the website version
- All Government Websites to adhere to [The Public Sector Bodies \(Websites and Mobile Applications\) \(No. 2\) Accessibility Regulations 2018](#)

Accessible contact methods

- Contact methods for further information or services should include telephone, Video Relay and be compatible with Relay UK, as a minimum
- These alternative methods should be advertised and staff should be familiarized with their use - where systems are in place to facilitate this and the caseload warrants it then a dedicated team to deal with people with a sensory loss could be established

Accessible apps

- To be accessible to BSL users
- To be developed and tested by accessible technology professionals and users
- To comply with [The Public Sector Bodies \(Websites and Mobile Applications\) \(No. 2\) Accessibility Regulations 2018](#)

RNID, Royal National Institute of Blind People, Sense, SignHealth, National Autistic Society, Thomas Pocklington Trust, Visionary, Royal Association for Deaf People, Macular Society, SeeAbility

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