

Written evidence from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (COV0011)

Summary

1. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists is pleased to make a submission to the Joint Committee on Human Rights inquiry into the Governments response to Covid-19.
2. Through this submission we have outlined the need for information to be conveyed in accessible formats to ensure that the measures implemented by the Government in response to Covid-19 are sufficient and in line with their obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Communication is a fundamental human right

3. **Communication is a human right** underpinned by international treaty and domestic legislation.
4. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR - as incorporated into our domestic legislative framework by the Human Rights Act 1998) outlines the “right to freedom of opinion and expression” and to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media.”
5. Articles 2, 3 and 21 in particular (and others) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities highlight rights and freedom regarding “communication and “languages”, social inclusion and accessibility for all people with disabilities, as well as “freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information” through all means.
6. With respect to this right, Section 20 of the Equality Act 2010 makes provision for adjustments including accessible information.

Why is communication important?

7. As this crisis has unfolded, the Government has had to take extraordinary measures to protect the wider public.
8. While the measures as implemented are visibly within the spirit of Article 2 of the ECHR (Right to life) and the positive obligation on the state to protect life, and potential interruption Article 8 of the ECHR (Right to private and family life) may visibly fall within the exceptions as outlined within paragraph 2 of said article, that “no interference by a public authority ... except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary ... in the interests of ... public safety ... for the protection of health...”.

9. However, the steps taken to communicate these measures may have fallen short of these obligations, as a significant proportion of the United Kingdom's population have communication needs, **many of whom may also fall within the "at risk" group.**

Communication needs and the COVID-19 pandemic

10. Communication disability is one of the most common disabilities. It can often be invisible.
11. It impacts a significant proportion of the United Kingdom's population:
 - a. **1 in 5 of people** experiencing a **communication difficulty** at some point in their lives;
 - b. **over ten percent** of all **children and young people** having some form of long-term communication need.
12. These include people with a range of conditions including **cerebral palsy, learning disabilities, downs syndrome, autism, hearing impairment, stroke, brain injury, head and neck cancers, Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease and dementia** who may fall within the **"at risk group"**. This would also include people with **mental health** conditions.
13. Unless they are appropriately supported, the life chances of people with communication disabilities and difficulties are already impacted disproportionality.

Why is accessible information important?

14. Government messaging in this regard has not been consistent or presented in formats that are accessible, such as the lack of sign language interpreters and subtitles across press conferences and the format and language used across literature and wider publications.
15. Visibly, a significant proportion of the population has a communication difficulty. These affect people in different ways. Some people may find it hard to ask a question, name an object or ask for help, while others may have speech difficulties that make them difficult to understand. Others may have problems processing information and difficulties with reading and writing. Some may use communication devices and require time to create their message.
16. The inability to process information, ask questions or express fears will result in reduced physical, mental and emotional health in a group already at a greater risk of infection. This may also create additional pressure for the people supporting them.
17. This also creates the risk of misunderstanding of government guidance and non-adherence by people who simply do not understand the measures that have been implemented.

18. The anxiety and rumour surrounding Coronavirus may also lead people to seek information from alternative sources that may not be evidence based negating government efforts and measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic.
19. It is therefore vital that steps are taken to communication information in accessible formats. This would only strengthen government efforts to address this pandemic, but also ensure human rights obligations, particularly Article 2 of the ECHR for the protection of life are fully met and any interruption to Article 8 is appropriately communicated. This would also support obligations under equality legislation to also be met.

The steps that need to be taken

20. People need to know **what is happening**. Information needs to be presented in a variety of formats which are easy to understand. This should include online information being compatible with a screen reader, and written information being presented in Easy Read English and other languages, using appropriate font size (minimum 12) and colour (dark on light background). As well as public addresses to be appropriately subtitled and support sign language interpreters.
21. People need to know **why Corona is spreading so quickly**. Understanding information about why the virus is spreading is crucial to help people with disabilities recognise the importance of adhering to the guidelines. This information also helps care staff to explain and implement the various measures which are needed to reduce the spread and impact.
22. People need to know **where they can go for help**. It is not enough to say help is available. Clear information about **what** help is available and **where** it can be accessed is paramount for carers and people with disabilities. This includes not only what people should do if they think they have symptoms, but also arrangements for ongoing social and medical care cover, respite arrangements and financial support.
23. People need to know **how they can help themselves** as individuals and families. Messaging about the importance of handwashing etc. has been clearly communicated. However, the current NHS leaflet does not clearly describe the difference between social distancing (when the person or people they live with have no symptoms) and self-isolation (when the person themselves or someone with whom they have been in contact have any symptoms). This distinction is very important for people with disabilities to understand as the implications will be different but significant for both.

About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

24. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the United Kingdom. The RCSLT currently has almost 17,000 members. We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, employment, social care and justice policies.

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