

Making Meetings Accessible

Dr Katherine Deane, Access All Areas Team, University of East Anglia, 2018

If you are holding a meeting, focus group, or consultation these are some ideas to help make it more accessible to people with disabilities.

Why bother?

Obviously there are the legal and ethical issues of excluding the 20% of the population that have disabilities. Depending on the purpose of your meeting you may need to ensure the representativeness of the group of people you are consulting on an issue. If you run a meeting without considering access issues you run the risk of only consulting relatively able-bodied participants with good communication skills. And if you run your meeting in an inaccessible manner you may exclude these voices without even realising it. As a wheelchair user I always check the access of a venue a meeting is being held at. Complaining that I can't get in requires energy and confidence – and on a bad day I don't have those, so you'd never know that you'd excluded my voice.

Finally if your organisation or project has any sort of mission statement that states that you wish to serve the whole community with equality, I can assure you that these statements ring very hollow if you organise a meeting that is inaccessible to people with disabilities. And this has the potential to be a PR disaster.

Key Impairments to Consider

The five key types of disabilities you need to ensure your meeting caters for are as follows;

1. Visual impairment
2. Hearing impairment
3. Mobility impairment
4. Cognitive, neurodiversity and mental health issues (e.g. dementia, autism, anxiety)
5. Communication impairment

Consultation with people with expertise by experience of these issues will help ensure your meeting is as accessible as possible. It is accepted that not all accommodations will be possible, but advice from experts will allow the compromises to be the best possible. UEA's Access All Areas team is willing to help facilitate this; k.deane@uea.ac.uk

Staff Training

Obviously you may have participants at your meeting that have impairments not covered by these five groups, but good staff training and attitudes will likely be able to deal with anything unexpected. Disability confidence training for your staff and volunteers is strongly recommended. Tom Fadden can provide tailored training for your team;

tom@purplereach.co.uk

Advertising your meeting

- Make sure your web pages are accessible – can people change the font, its size and contrast?
- Are your web pages compatible with text to speech software?
- Do any videos have subtitles and/or transcripts?
- Is there clear information about accessibility for your event? It doesn't need to be all on the front page of the website – but if you can click on an obvious Access Point on the front page and access more detailed info behind that. People with disabilities need huge amounts of info and pictures of venue, toilets, descriptions of events and what to expect, transport options and parking, food, etc. etc.
- Is your meeting being held at a venue reviewed on Euan's Guide or Changing Places websites? (<https://www.euansguide.com/> and <http://www.changing-places.org/>)

Facilitating communication at your meeting

Have you set clear ground rules to ensure that everyone's voice is respected and heard?

This is particularly important if any of your participants have an impairment that impacts on their ability to communicate.

Have you considered providing participants with the agenda, plan for the meeting, a list of questions, meeting documents etc. in advance of the meeting? Have you considered what the best format of this information is for your participants, e.g. electronic or hard copy, large print, audio or video recording of the documents?

Have you considered having a smaller – even one-to-one meeting – to gain the views of a participant with more severe communication challenges.

Are you able to be flexible regarding behaviour at the meeting? For example, people needing to walk about (e.g. because of back pain), or rock back and forth (stimming). Are you able to accommodate differing speeds of response, levels of understanding? Are you able to support and educate other participants who may struggle to accept “non-standard” behaviours from some other participants.

Lighting

Lighting levels – consider your VIPs and Deaf audience in particular – can they see the other participants to read lips/ see the BSL translator clearly enough.

Sound

British Sign Language (BSL) translators should be provided where relevant for your meeting. We can recommend Ensign Interpreting, a BSL interpreting service run by deaf professionals; <http://www.ensigninterpreting.co.uk>. info@ensigninterpreting.co.uk

All live videos should have sub-titles.

Does your meeting room have a hearing loop or can you use a portable hearing loop?

Consider the level of ambient noise in your meeting room. Hums and buzzes from air conditioners and other electronic equipment can prevent those with hearing impairment easily listening to conversations. They can also be intensely distracting to people with sensory sensitivities e.g. autism.

If your meeting is large have you considered the use of microphones.

Stage access

If your meeting will have people speaking from a raised stage have you checked whether any of your speakers are wheelchair users? If so they will need a ramp. Podiums can be

problematic – they block sight of the wheelchair user to the audience, and may have microphones on them i.e. out of reach. Consider providing portable microphones and remote controls for slides or providing a person to click the slides forward.

Quiet Rooms

A quiet room for people to lie down, have a chill out break can be essential, particularly if your meeting is long in duration and/or has a lot of people invited to it. Cushions, chairs, sofas, and suitable security in the room (e.g. CCTV) are helpful.

Alternative Access Options

Have you considered electronic means of accessing the meeting e.g. Skype? Helps ensure access to those for whom travel/crowds/fatigue are problematic.

Getting Around your Venue

Signage

Have you considered signage? – symbols and words are best. Braille can be helpful but not essential (very few visually impaired people (VIPs) read braille).

Maps which highlight ramps, powered doors, accessible toilets etc are essential.

Mobility access

Have you had a wheelchair user roll around your venue to show you where access needs to be improved?

Have you considered providing temporary ramps over short sets of steps?

Are your lifts in working order? Is it clear how to work the alarm system? Do you have a mirror in the lift to aid reversing out?

Space and furniture

Give a lot of space between tables/chairs/etc for wheelchair users – if you get a lot of us in a room we take up a lot of space – and too much furniture can make you stuck in one place.

If the meeting is going to use multiple rooms for break-out sub-groups etc. consider having benches/chairs in areas where people can rest between meeting rooms.

Consider the design of the chairs in your meeting room. Are they light enough to move easily? Do some have arm rests?

Key Facilities

Parking

What sort of proof do participants need so they can use accessible parking bays?

How much accessible parking do you have, do you know of nearby?

Can you temporarily create more spaces for the meeting?

Toilets

Toilets can make or break an event for someone with disabilities. Without suitable provision visitors with certain impairments will just not come, or only for short meetings.

Make sure any accessible toilets you have are;

- Well sign posted. (Consider using signs that highlight that people with invisible disabilities may need to use accessible toilets).
- Tell people if the transfer is to the right or left hand side
- Are clean, and inspected regularly
- Have no clutter in them e.g. cleaning materials, spare chairs, baby changing tables
- Have bins suitable to accommodate incontinence pads
- Have red alarm cords that reach the floor and work. (Euan's guide can provide free cards to hang on the cord that tell people they need to hang freely which reduces the chance of them being tied up <https://www.euansguide.com/news/red-cord-card/>)

Have you considered holding your meeting in a venue with a Changing Place – an accessible toilet with a hoist and bench. If you don't have access to one, and you are running a large meeting, can you consider hiring a mobile one? This makes the meeting hugely more accessible to those with more severe disabilities. And if you do have one, have you put it on the Changing Places web site? <http://www.changing-places.org/>

Food

Have a care to dietary needs with catering – cross contamination is a pest and can be very harmful – do your caterers know how to manage keeping food nut/dairy/gluten free etc?
Is the signage clear enough about food content and common allergens? If you are providing food at your meeting do you have information on all of the content of this food?

Can you provide facilities to warm baby food, or pureed food?

Can you provide water bowls for assistance dogs?

Can tables and chairs accommodate wheelchair users? Can they be moved around? Is there enough space between them?

Assistance Dogs

What rules are you going to have for assistance dogs – how do they prove their status?

Have you considered providing water bowls for assistance dogs – and an area close by where they can relieve themselves and suitable bins for doggie bags?

Safety and Fire

Have you had a conversation with fire safety about the maximum number of wheelchair users in a given space? And whether there might be some solutions for this – evacuation chairs (and trained staff), extra exits etc etc.

Also have you considered how to let someone with hearing loss know a fire alarm is going off?

Are any lifts, platforms etc suitable for the weight of wheelchairs?

Will any constructions withstand being accidentally hit by a wheelchair or mobility scooter?

Do your staff know how to respond to first aid issues when associated with disability? E.g. responding appropriately to an epileptic fit.