

# Meeting Disabled People



Use **Guide 2** for advice on face-to-face interaction with disabled people as service users, customers, colleagues and volunteers.

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The Portfolio is published as a result of collaboration with a working party, which includes specialist consultants, and aims to support the elimination of discrimination in service provision. The views expressed in these guides are not necessarily those of Resource.

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*Front cover:*

**Building on the skills of disabled employees:  
Gillian Harrison welcoming Deaf visitors to  
Gateshead Library.**

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# Introduction

You may feel nervous when you first speak to disabled people and wonder if you have to behave in a special way, but disabled people are like anyone else – they prefer to be treated with respect and in a friendly way.

Unintentional details of behaviour and language can offend disabled people. They may reinforce a sense of being discriminated against and express inaccurate assumptions. Thinking about your actions and language helps avoid such behaviour. Don't be embarrassed about asking what people's needs are – they are the experts.

Disability is as diverse as people are, and disabled people could be amongst museum, library and archive visitors, users and staff at any time.

Disabled people can be of all ages and from all backgrounds. They have rights under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), which protect them against poor service based on discrimination.

You can't always tell if someone is disabled. In fact, this is true for the majority of disabled museum, archive and library users, many of whom have a hidden disability or one that is difficult to recognise. Few disabled people carry a white stick, use a wheelchair or communicate with sign language.

To remove barriers for all disabled people means more than making alterations to buildings. It is above all a matter of attitude. Access needs to extend to the services available in the buildings, to the information and communication related to the services and to the staff providing them. Good customer care starts at the reception desk and is always an essential part of a good visitor experience.



Good customer care starts at the reception desk: a member of staff explains how to use an audio guide, Hastings. Photo: Tom Miles/RNIB

Subsequent Guides will explain in more detail how:

- disability equality or awareness training will strengthen the confidence of staff to provide and develop services for disabled people (Guide 3);
- to produce and publicise information about your services to disabled people and make it available in alternative formats (Guide 6);
- information technology can contribute to making your services accessible (Guide 7);
- practical architectural adaptations can be made (Guide 9).

# 1 Face to face with disabled people

The following advice and information will help you to ensure that interaction with disabled colleagues and the customer service you give disabled people in museums, archives and libraries is both respectful and useful.

## Meeting disabled people as service users

- Offer help if you think it is appropriate or if asked to provide it, but make sure it has been accepted before you give it: don't take someone by the arm and lead them unless you have been asked to.
- Disabled people are the experts on their own needs: they will tell you what you need to do to help, if you ask them and listen to what they say.
- Treat the person with the same respect you would give anyone else. Use their first name only if you are doing the same with others. Treat disabled adults as adults.
- Don't make jokes or ask questions about their impairment, wheelchair or dog; you wouldn't make personal remarks about other service users, so don't do it with disabled people.
- In summary: always ask; avoid making assumptions; and take your lead from the disabled person.

## When the disabled person is accompanied

- Disabled people visit museums, archives and libraries on their own, with companions and sometimes with an assistant. Despite society's developing awareness, it can still be the case that staff ignore the disabled person, speaking instead to someone they perceive to be a carer – although the disabled person is just as likely to have initiated the visit.
- If a disabled person and non-disabled person make a joint visit, do of course welcome and provide general information to both of them. Make sure, however, that you address information and questions relating to accessibility directly to the disabled visitor. If a disabled person is accompanied by an assistant, it is good practice to:
  - Always speak directly to the disabled person, not to their interpreter or personal assistant. If you are asked a question, answer the person who asked it, not their companion.
  - Be guided by the disabled person. Disabled people may introduce their personal assistant to you, but not all will do so.
  - Hand change or leaflets to the disabled person, if you are involved in a transaction with them.
  - Ignore assistance dogs (guide dogs, hearing dogs, canine partners for independence etc.) while they are working and always ask the owner first before you pay them any attention.
  - Try not to make comments about an interpreter's skill, a dog's cleverness or an assistant's patience or selflessness. These comments can imply that the disabled person is not in charge or is an inconvenience.

## 2 Language and communication

We speak in order to be heard and we use language to communicate. Yet we are often unaware just how much the words and expressions we use in our everyday communication reveal our knowledge and attitudes. The use of language that ignores, belittles or negatively labels disabled people can spoil an otherwise positive and accessible service, so it is important to pay attention to it and to set a good example.

### Acceptable language

The phrase 'disabled people' is used in this Guide to emphasise that a person is disabled by barriers in society rather than by their impairments. This phrase is generally agreed to be good practice by most disability organisations. It makes sense for other organisations to use it too, as it focuses on barriers rather than on individual conditions.

- Phrases such as visually impaired people, people with a hearing impairment, people with learning difficulties, people with mental health issues are all commonly used and are generally considered inoffensive.
- Phrases such as blind and partially sighted people and Deaf and hard of hearing people are also used, for example when it is important to specify different requirements of people.
- The term 'people with mental health problems' is still commonly used, though 'people with mental health issues' is being increasingly heard and Mind recommends 'people with mental health needs'.



- Some people prefer the term 'people with disabilities' to indicate that they are people first with a disability second, and you do need to check which term people prefer. In individual face to face contact, use the term with which the person is comfortable. Disability organisations tend to avoid using 'people with disabilities', because it can detract attention from their specific requirements and rights.
- There is no need to worry about using common expressions such as "I'll see you later" or "I'll be running along then" as long as you don't make a joke out of it. Disabled people use these expressions too.

## Disabling language

Language matters! Inappropriate language, whether spoken, signed or written, reinforces stereotypes in ways that often cause hurt and offence. History has left us with a long list of words to avoid:

- 'Non-disabled' is preferable to 'able-bodied'. Compare 'disabled and able-bodied people', which sets disabled people apart, with 'disabled and non-disabled people'.
- Non-disabled people are not 'normal' because this implies that disabled people are abnormal, a commonly insulting expression.
- Disabled people do not have 'differing' or 'special' needs, because this implies a burdensome difference. They may, however, have requirements, access needs or needs.
- Disabled people are not 'brave', 'afflicted', 'victims', or 'tragic', and they don't 'suffer' from anything – but they do experience negative attitudes.

- Avoid the term 'handicapped', as it gives an image of going 'cap-in-hand' for charity. Avoid using words that give the impression that disabled people are always frail and dependent on other people or are objects of pity.
- Avoid collective nouns such as 'the disabled', 'the blind', 'the deaf' – they set disabled people apart; and insulting labels such as 'cripple', 'retard', 'deaf and dumb', whether disabled people are present or not.
- Medical terms ('spastic', 'quadriplegic' for example) don't reflect people's abilities and are of no relevance to service provision. If you need to refer to a person's condition in order to get service provision right, then they are a person with dyslexia, a person with cerebral palsy, etc.
- People with mental health problems aren't 'loonies' or 'schizos'.
- People with learning difficulties are not 'retarded', 'backward', or 'mentally handicapped'. Neither are they 'mongoloid', or 'a downs person'. All these phrases reflect a preoccupation with symptoms rather than a desire to meet needs.
- The phrase 'people with special needs' is not a word for a socially inclusive society. It was first used in 'special needs education' and many adults resent it.
- Disabled people employ, manage and organise personal assistants to provide themselves with a service, and 'personal assistants' (or PAs) are not 'carers'.
- Disabled people are as varied as non-disabled people and using labels reinforces stereotypes.

## 3 Interaction with disabled people

While the information in this Guide will help increase your factual knowledge about disability and different groups of disabled people, it is important to treat people as individuals, to remember that there is a very wide range of impairments and that a person may have more than one of them. Disability relates to physical, sensory and intellectual needs, and one person's needs can vary from day to day and according to environment and circumstance. Also, how people view themselves (see Guide 1) may affect how much information they will give you about their needs. Avoid making assumptions that all people are non-disabled unless they tell you so when addressing a group and tell the whole group about access.

### Meeting people who are D/deaf

Some 8.6 million people in the UK have some degree of hearing loss. People with a hearing loss may be able to hear in a quiet place if only one person is speaking but not in a noisy environment. They may use hearing aids, induction loops, lip reading or sign language or any combination of these. The following guidance can help make communication clearer:

- Make sure that the person is looking at you before you start speaking; you can get their attention either by a slight wave or a gentle touch on the arm or shoulder.
- Check how they want you to communicate with them; they may want you to speak clearly, change position, provide an interpreter or to write things down.
- If they are using a communication support worker (e.g. interpreter, lipspeaker), address the D/deaf person not their worker and allow time for what you have said to be interpreted. Don't stare at the interpreter while you are waiting. It distracts them and insults the

D/deaf person, who is the person you are communicating with, not the interpreter.

- Keep to the point and make sure the context is clear; indicate clearly if you are changing the subject.
- If the person is lip reading, speak clearly in normal speech rhythm and a little more slowly.
- Keep the background noise as low as possible and ensure you are clearly visible, with no people, furniture, plants, artefacts etc. in between you and the D/deaf person.
- Don't stand in front of a bright light or window as it may make it difficult to be seen clearly.
- Keep any facial hair around your mouth short, and avoid obscuring your face as you speak.
- Do not shout or use exaggerated gestures.
- Remain patient, check that the person has followed you and repeat in a different way if necessary. Say, "Did you follow me?" or, "Do we agree on that?" (It is better to use the word 'follow' than 'understand', which implies you expect them to have an intellectual problem with what you have said.)
- Deaf people may regard British Sign Language (BSL), which has its own grammatical structure, as their first language, not English. If this is the case, the written word can create a barrier, so if you are asked to write things down, don't use long and complex sentences. For example, rather than write "I wondered whether you might like a cup of tea?" write "Cup of tea?".

## Meeting people who have impaired vision

Visual impairment rarely means complete loss of sight and there are many different eye conditions with different effects on vision. Visually impaired people who use guide dogs, use white canes, wear dark glasses or read braille are a minority. Remember the following when communicating with them:

- Ensure the person knows where you are as you speak to them and say if you are moving away so they are not talking to empty space, e.g. "I'm just going into the other room".
- When offering to shake hands, say "Shall we shake hands?"
- If other people are also speaking, or they join the group and start listening, tell the person who and where they are; e.g. "My supervisor has just joined us."
- If the person appears to need help, ask first and take your cue from them, offering your arm to hold rather than taking theirs if guiding is required. Ask "Would you like to take my arm?" or "How can I help?" Do ask them if they wish to be warned about steps, doors and other obstacles.
- If offering a seat, explain you are doing so and guide their hand to the back, arm or sitting area of the seat, saying "Here is the back of your chair."
- Avoid placing obstacles in areas through which people walk.
- Know what aids you have available and where they are kept so that you can respond to requests for magnifiers, task lights, taped guides etc.

- When working with a partially sighted or blind colleague, ensure their working equipment is not moved from their preferred position.
- Remember that a visually impaired person may miss out on gesture or facial expression and so appear to respond inappropriately – it may seem that they do not get a joke, for example, when in fact it is not properly communicated to them.

## Meeting D/deafblind people

A person may be regarded as D/deafblind if they have a combination of hearing and sight loss resulting in problems with communication, information and mobility. Sixty five per cent of D/deafblind people are elderly. Bear the following advice in mind:

- Most D/deafblind people do have some sight and/or hearing, so the advice in the two previous sections will also apply, but using touch methods for communication and access to information are more likely.
- Approach the person from the front and let them know you are there with a light touch on the hand or arm.
- If offering to guide, move their hand gently to your elbow; some D/deafblind people also have poor balance, take your cue on how to guide from them.
- You may be able to communicate by writing clear capital letters on their palm, using the whole palm.
- Other methods include D/deafblind manual, visual frame signing or lip reading and hands on signing, which would normally be used by a trained communicator-guide or interpreter.

- If the person asks for written information, use a thick black pen and write large letters – check the size is right for the person with one word before continuing.

## Meeting people who have speech impairments

Speech impairments have no relation to intelligence. With patience and concentration it is usually possible to follow what is being said:

- Pay close attention to the person, stay patient, don't correct them and don't get embarrassed. Resist the temptation to finish off their sentences.
- Don't pretend to follow what has been said if you have not. It is better to ask someone to repeat than to guess wrong.
- To get the information you need, ask about one point at a time and tell them what you have understood so far.
- Work equally with them to achieve communication and don't make it their problem or claim that it is yours because you are being 'thick'.

## Meeting people with learning difficulties

Many people who have been born with learning difficulties or who are in the early stages of a condition affecting the brain, or who have had a brain injury, live full and independent lives in the community, making their own choices, with varying levels of support. When you first meet the person:

- Assume that they will follow and understand what you are saying.

- Be ready to explain in different ways more than once, and stay patient.
- Break down complex information into single issues.
- Keep distractions in the environment to a minimum.
- Offer to write down or tape the conversation, with your name and phone number included so the person has a record of it to look at later.

## Meeting people with facial disfigurement

This is not necessarily indicative of any other condition or impairment and most people with facial disfigurement experience problems and discrimination because of other people's attitudes:

- If you are surprised by someone's appearance or feel uncomfortable, don't make this obvious.
- Make eye contact as you would with anyone else, but avoid staring.
- Pay close attention to what is being said and do not allow their appearance to distract you.
- Restrain your curiosity and do not ask about the disfigurement.



## Meeting people who have mental health issues

People with a past history of mental health problems often experience discrimination but most make a full recovery.

- There are many myths concerning mental health and as with other disabled people, the best option is to avoid making assumptions, ask what support, if any, is needed, and pay attention to the answer.
- Those who are experiencing emotional distress and confusion may find everyday activities very hard.
- Be patient and non-judgemental and allow the person time to make choices and decisions.
- Resist making assumptions or judgements about people whose behaviour or appearance seems odd to you and treat them courteously.

## Meeting people who are wheelchair users

- Try to get on the same level as the disabled person if need be, or come out from behind a desk to make eye contact easier.
- Take care over physical contact – leaning on someone's wheelchair is an invasion of personal space and patting someone you don't know well is demeaning. If you need to use touch to attract someone's attention, do it gently on the hand, arm or shoulder.

# Conclusion

Disabled people need non-disabled people to respect them and to co-operate with them in meeting their needs in a way which avoids patronage, pity and sentimentality. This Guide has given you practical information to help you to do this. Removing barriers for disabled people and learning how to meet individual needs in a supportive and empowering way will benefit everyone.

# Further information

## **Changing Faces**

1–2 Junction Mews  
London  
W2 1PN  
Tel: 020 7706 4232  
[www.changingfaces.co.uk](http://www.changingfaces.co.uk)

## **Deafblind UK**

National Centre for  
Deafblindness  
John and Lucile Van Geest Place  
Cygnet Road, Hampton  
Peterborough  
PE7 8FD  
Tel: 01733 358100  
Email: [info@deafblind.org.uk](mailto:info@deafblind.org.uk)  
[www.deafblind.org.uk](http://www.deafblind.org.uk)

## **Mencap**

123 Golden Lane  
London  
EC1Y 0RT  
Tel: 020 7474 0454  
[www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

## **Mind**

Granta House  
15–19 Broadway  
London  
E15 4BQ  
Tel: 020 8519 2122  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

## **National Disability Arts Forum**

Mea House  
Ellison Place  
Newcastle Upon Tyne  
NE1 8XS  
Tel: 0191 261 1628  
Email: [ndaf@ndaf.org](mailto:ndaf@ndaf.org)  
[www.ndaf.org](http://www.ndaf.org)

## **Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB)**

105 Judd Street  
London  
WC1H 9NE  
Tel: 020 7388 1266  
[www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

## **Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)**

19–23 Featherstone Street  
London  
EC1Y 8SL  
Tel: 020 7296 8000  
[www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

## **SCOPE**

Tel: 020 7619 7100  
[www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

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The **Disability Portfolio** is a collection of 12 guides on how best to meet the needs of disabled people as users and staff in museums, archives and libraries. It gives invaluable advice, information and guidance to help overcome barriers and follow good practice.

**The Portfolio is available in 12 point clear print or 15 point large print formats, braille, audio cassette and on the website. Please contact 020 7273 1458 or [info@resource.gov.uk](mailto:info@resource.gov.uk)**

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