

Seeing ourselves as others see – laying out the moral case for Inclusive Communication

How well does Scotland do in involving and including all of its citizens in decisions affecting their own lives, communities and the wider nation? In particular, how do we reach out to connect with people who communicate in different ways? People who perhaps speak or sign a different language, but more likely people with communication support needs arising from physical or sensory impairments, health issues or learning disabilities.

Imagine how this range of people, all of whom could be living somewhere in Scotland, might see our attempts to reach out and connect with them? Our neighbour who has recently had a stroke; the young child with autism living in the flat below; the Deaf teenager wanting to join our village youth group; the chairperson of our tenants' association who has become hard of hearing; the diner with visual impairment trying to read our menu; the person who is deafblind wanting information about council services; the voter with learning disabilities wanting information about candidates; our friend who tires easily because of major illness.

Scotland has already made significant progress in realising an ambition to be 'an inclusive communication nation' with support from national and local government, statutory, voluntary and private organisations and many individuals. We should feel proud of that. However, there is still some way to go. Individuals and organisations will often have the best of intentions but intentions alone are not sufficient to change practice. More action is still required.

Perhaps we are sometimes paralysed into inaction through our own self-invented worries about communicating with others ("I wouldn't know where to start"; "I feel embarrassed"; "I'll be criticised if I get it wrong"). We can remove these worries by engaging with the wealth of individuals and organisations who provide advice across a wide range of communication support needs in a supportive, encouraging way that empowers us all to make changes.

However, it is we as individuals who can start to make changes, since communication impairments exist at the meeting place between people and, after all, organisations are simply made up of people. We can foster a number of key attitudes. A good first step, for example, is always to make an attempt to communicate with another person, however complex you imagine that to be. ‘Keep on trying’ is a key principle of inclusive communication. Then we can trust that all people in communication partnerships are equal. Everyone has an equal amount to give, to share and to learn from each other. Indeed, this is where the real power of connection exists, because when we connect with another person we reveal new capacities not just in them but in ourselves. The neighbour who had the stroke still laughs and makes us laugh when we share stories. The young child with autism helps us to appreciate the world anew. The Deaf teenager encourages us to improve at sign language. The tenants association makes better decisions because the chairperson is still present. We learn to match our communication attempts with the communication support needs of the diner in the restaurant and the voter on the doorstep. The local authority earns the reputation of having excellent accessible information. Engaging with people who communicate in different ways from us allows each of us to listen to new stories, to belong to more groups, to learn new skills, to reveal our full capacities and creative gifts as individual citizens of Scotland.

Ultimately, we argue that taking individual responsibility to support any community to adopt inclusive communication approaches is in our own personal interest:

- It will benefit each of us now in our direct relationships with other people in our lives – we learn more about ourselves.
- It will benefit somebody you know (more than 1 million people in the last census in Scotland described themselves as having a disability).
- It will benefit all of us in the future because an increasing number of us may have age-related communication support needs.

So as we travel together through our lives, let us ask ourselves if we are fully and meaningfully involving people in the personal decisions that impact on their day-to-

day lives, the local decisions that affect their neighbourhoods and communities and the national decisions that shape Scotland's future. Only when we answer yes to these questions, can we call ourselves a nation that is truly inclusive.

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