



Becoming an Inclusive Communication Nation to recover, rebuild and renew

Prepared by the Inclusive Communication Alliance, August 2020

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1. The problem – Covid-19 and communication disadvantage

- 1.1. People at higher risk of contracting Covid-19 include high numbers of people who live with a communication disadvantage, including people who are socio-economically disadvantaged, older people and people with long-term conditions.
- 1.2. Evidence indicates that people with confirmed Covid-19 often present with communication impairment as a consequence of their illness and in recoveryⁱ.
- 1.3. Measures required to reduce transmission make communication and interaction harder for everyone. For instance, physical distancing; screens in shops; masks and other facial coverings.
- 1.4. These measures have an even bigger impact on those already experiencing a communication disadvantage. For instance:
 - If you rely on lip reading and facial expression, masks make this impossible.
 - If you find it hard to hear, then a face mask and/or 2-metre distance reduces volume, clarity and the effectiveness of hearing aids.
 - If you cannot hear or speak, then door intercom systems (commonly used to access important health and care services) also create difficulties.
 - If you require someone to show you what to do, communication is harder when people are far away and wear masks.
 - If you rely on tactile communication, then it is impossible to use services that are only available on the phone or online.
- 1.5. People living with communication disadvantage are being excluded from opportunities, services and support as their personal world shrinks.

2. The solution – inclusive communication

2.1. **Immediately** all organisations should implement quality inclusive communication approaches as best they can. We have produced a guide to help them do this. See “Inclusive communication actions all organisations should take to reduce communication disadvantage now”ii.

2.2. **In the medium and longer term**, Scotland should develop and implement an Inclusive Communication Strategy backed by an Inclusive Communication Law.

3. The rationale for inclusive communication

3.1. Inclusive Communication includes more people and excludes fewer. It allows the largest number of people in the population to take part in communication with services. It does this by allowing and enabling individuals to use whatever ways of understanding and expressing themselves which they find easiest

3.2. Inclusive communication is relevant to all modes of communication:

- Printed information such as leaflets, posters, letters and appointment cards
- Online materials such as information websites and online forms
- Telephone helplines and interviews
- Face to face interactions such as advice sessions, assessment interviews, “signing on” and appeal panels.

4. Examples of how an Inclusive Communication Nation might look

4.1. Organisations would find out and know what the communication strengths and preferences of the individuals and communities they serve.

4.2. Signs outside and inside buildings would include easily understood, recognisable symbols so everyone can find their way around.

- 4.3. Printed information about services such as leaflets, posters and letters would use easily understood symbols, clear language and no jargon.
- 4.4. Online sources would incorporate videos of where to go, what to expect, who to speak to.
- 4.5. Public telephone helplines would be staffed by people trained to be able to identify quickly when someone needed communication support and to know what to do to provide that support.
- 4.6. Appointments, for example with health staff, would be set up to support people to communicate to the best of their abilities as a matter of course.

5. Who would benefit from an Inclusive Communication Strategy backed by law?

- 5.1. **Inclusive communication is good for everyone.** No one ever complained a public service was too easy to understand or to get your point across to.
- 5.2. **People who are at a socioeconomic disadvantage.** Communication and literacy difficulties are experienced most in our poorest communities. The government's own Attainment agenda makes this explicit. Also 60% of young offenders and 80% of young people not in employment, education or training, experience communication disadvantage.
- 5.3. **Many of those living with disabilities and long-term conditions** including 100% of people who have an autistic spectrum disorder, 100% of people with dementia, 80% of people with a learning difficulty and at least 30% of people who have had a stroke.
- 5.4. **People who have or at higher risk of mental illness.** People with a primary communication problem are at greater risk of experiencing mental health problems than their peers. Having a mental illness may affect your capacity to focus your attention, understand and express yourself.
- 5.5. **The people at higher risk of contracting Covid.** People who experience severe Coronavirus infections often present with communication impairment during their illness and in recovery.

6. The case for strategy backed by law

6.1. Legal case

- **The principle of law on inclusive communication has been established:** The Human Rights Act indicates that communication and language rights are cross cutting and need to be in place to enjoy other rights. The importance of inclusive communication has recently been recognized in duties set out in Scotland's Social Security Act (2018), the Consumer Act (2020) and the Covid-19 Act (2020).
- **Legislative efficiency:** Instead of addressing communication disadvantage in diverse pieces of legislation repeatedly (as we have seen to date), one law would cover all public facing activities, in Scotland
- **Legislative inclusion:** Instead of addressing the needs of one communication disadvantaged group through one new law at a time (e.g. such as with the BSL Act) the Government and Parliament could address the needs of all communication disadvantaged groups with one law.

6.2. Political case

- An Inclusive Communication Law would position Scotland as a leader in Human Rights and be a major step towards our nation becoming probably the world's first Inclusive Communication Nation.
- The inclusive communication amendments to Bills to date have all enjoyed cross party and government support.

6.3. Policy case

- Empowerment to understand and express choice is a core pillar of the human rights-based approach outlined in the **Scottish National Action Plan on Human Rights**. Equally it is relevant to incorporation of the UNCRC.
- Communication is fundamental to Participation, Accountability, Non-Discrimination and Equality, Empowerment and Legality (**PANEL Principles**).

- **Person centred service provision** requires services to interact and communicate with actual and potential service users in ways that work for the service users.
- **Co-production and Community Empowerment** requires all parties to listen, to understand each other and to facilitate equal expressions of opinions and choices no matter their communication needs and abilities.
- **Self-directed support** requires individuals to make and express an informed choice, whatever an individual's communication strengths and weaknesses.

6.4. Economic case

- Communication barriers to social inclusion, education and employment are bad for health and well-being, community cohesion and the public purse. Scotland's communities will reap social and economic benefits from more people being able to engage with the full range of public services more effectively and easily.
- Scotland would not be starting from scratch. This is an opportunity to build on learning over the last 20 years

6.5. Demographic case

- Scotland does not have a population level data on communication strengths and needs. We do know however that the number of people who benefit from inclusive communication best practice is increasing. There are more children and young people with complex additional support needs and / or mental health needs, frail elderly, and people living with Alzheimer's/dementia and more recently people recovering from Coronavirus infections.

6.6. Evidence-based case

- Years of guidance, training and investment have not created communication equality – we need law to drive national and local leadership of an integrated, cost effective strategic approach underpinned by accountability.
- Guidance produces diverse responses to a common problem as well as being wasteful as many people invent different solutions to

that common problem. A national strategy – backed by law - would facilitate consistency and mainstreaming of quality inclusive communication practice across Scotland.

- Where law exist, it is welcomed by those holding duties in regard to inclusive communication. Leaders at Social Security Scotland (the first large agency to rigorously implement inclusive communication) have said that the law is acting to support and drive organisational development in the agency more effectively than guidance has ever done.

7. About the Inclusive Communication Alliance

The document is written and endorsed by people and organisations with knowledge of communication disadvantage and experience of overcoming it.

7.1. Membership

Members of the Inclusive Communication Alliance are those with knowledge of communication disadvantage and experience of overcoming it. Membership is open to those who agree and commit to the alliance goals.

7.2. Currents members:

- Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
- Disability Equality Scotland
- deafscotland
- Sense Scotland
- Ideas for Ears

7.3. Contact Us:

<https://inclusivecommunication.scot/inclusive-communication-alliance>

ⁱ See for example “COVID-19 speech and language therapy rehabilitation pathway <https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/rcslt-covid-19-slt-rehab-pathway.pdf?la=en&hash=B59AD546C6E368A34D7AA63165DC568C65428B2C>

ii See “Covid-19 – Using Inclusive Communication to help Scotland recover”
<https://inclusivecommunication.scot/inclusive-communication-alliance>