comhairle

Access to Information for All

Guidelines on removing
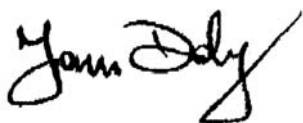barriers and improving access
to information to everyone

information for all

Foreword

Comhairle's fourth strategic priority is 'to promote accessibility to information, advice and advocacy and to heighten public awareness of social and civil services'. Since it's establishment Comhairle has taken a range of initiatives to address the differing needs of people who experience disadvantage in accessing social services. These Guidelines have been produced to assist information providers in making their information services accessible to everyone.

Dr. Jane Pillinger was commissioned to develop these Guidelines on behalf of Comhairle. They have been produced following consultation with stakeholders. Their ultimate aim is to ensure that each person who needs information can get it in a manner that suits them and use it to their advantage. All organizations that provide social services need to take steps to accommodate the varying and sometimes complex information needs of different groups. These Guidelines set out the issues that need to be considered in respect of the content and the delivery of information to such groups. They then set out the steps required to address these issues. All aspects are covered from the use of plain English, communicating with service users, the issues in respect of electronic information, publications, physical access to services, publicizing these services and ideally involving service users in the planning and monitoring of services.

The aim of this publication is to provide organizations with reference materials that will assist them in their task of making information accessible. They provide suggestions as to how this can be achieved. It is hoped they will make the task easier and improve access to information for everyone.

Tom Daly

Acknowledgements

Many organisations and individuals contributed to the drawing up of these guidelines.

Immigrant Council of Ireland
Pavee Point
Age Action Ireland
National Council on Ageing and Older People
Simon Community
Homeless Settlement Team
Homeless Agency
National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

The questionnaires and interviews helped to inform both the content of the guidelines and to identify areas of existing good practice.

Contents

Introduction

Information helps us all to make decisions and choices about our lives and enables us to live independently, to access social rights and entitlements, and take part fully in society.

'The core function of Comhairle is to support the provision of, and where appropriate, provide directly to the public, independent information, advice and advocacy services relating to social and civil services. The agency has a statutory commitment to assist and support people, particularly those with disabilities, in identifying and understanding their needs and options and in accessing their entitlements to social and civil services.' [1]

Every day, people access information formally, through information leaflets, books and magazines, and informally, through personal and local contact and two-way communication. However, many disadvantaged and socially excluded people do not have access to information. Comhairle has produced these guidelines to help improve the way in which information providers offer formal and informal information so that services are more accessible for everyone.

In producing the guidelines, Comhairle recognises that everyone should have the right to access information and use it for independence and self-advocacy. Indeed, equality legislation specifies the nine grounds under which people cannot be discriminated against when accessing information and other services. The Equal Status Acts, 2000 and 2004 require a service provider to do all that is reasonable to accommodate the needs of a person with a disability, including special treatment or facilities. However, service providers are not obliged to provide special facilities when this costs more than what is called a 'nominal cost'[2]. In the area of information provision this will cover physical, information and communications accessibility.

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[1] Comhairle Strategic Plan, 2003 – 2006, Page 17, June 2003

[2] What amounts to nominal cost will depend on the circumstances such as the size and resources of the organisation involved. If the State provides grants or aids for assisting in providing special treatment or facilities, there may be an onus on the service providers to avail of these grants.

One of Comhairle's four strategic priorities, described in the Strategic Plan 2003 to 2006 is: 'To promote accessibility to information, advice and advocacy and heighten public awareness of social and civil services'. This priority aims to improve access to services for all individuals, including people with a disability, by providing information in a range of formats and through co-ordinated channels. Comhairle has already worked to provide more accessible information through:

- its accessible publications,
- its website, www.oasis.gov.ie,
- the Citizens Information Phone Service,
- the network of Citizens Information Centres, and
- advocacy work and projects with organisations representing people with disabilities, older people and people from minority ethnic communities.

Context of these guidelines

There are many different ways in which information is provided. This can be seen as a continuum, starting with general **information**, continuing to **advice** on a particular situation and ending with **advocacy**, in which one person or a group may speak up to secure another's entitlement. However, many groups are at a significant distance from the people who provide information and services. These groups include people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups, Travellers, homeless people, those living in institutions and people who are socially isolated.

To help bridge this gap, it is possible to improve the accessibility of information in a number of ways:

- understanding the **complexity** of many people's information needs and in response providing services that take account of the continuum of information, advice and advocacy;
- presenting **written information** in a style and format, such as plain English, that people can understand and use easily;
- offering information through **alternative channels** such as the telephone and the internet;
- providing **face-to-face** information in a welcoming manner that accommodates people's needs, disabilities and backgrounds; and
- **taking information out** to groups experiencing barriers in accessing information, for example by partnering with representative organisations, advocacy groups or outreach schemes for Travellers, homeless people, refugees and asylum seekers, people with disabilities or people living in institutions.

These guidelines draw on a wide range of materials on information accessibility and have emerged from consultation with those representing disadvantaged and socially excluded groups. Comhairle has taken account of the different ways in which people access information in their localities and the various barriers that can impede information accessibility. These barriers may be social, attitudinal, physical, cultural or technological or may involve language or economic differences.

Aim of these guidelines

Making information accessible requires organisations to invest time and money. The aim of this publication is to provide reference material that can help to improve information and communications without huge resource inputs.

The guidelines provide:
- a resource for information providers;
- a tool for working with people who experience barriers in accessing information;
- examples of best practices in providing information; and
- additional resources and further information.

These guidelines provide suggestions for improving information accessibility. They are not an exhaustive list of everything that can be done. It will be up to each organisation to make sense of the guidelines for its own work and develop suitable practices within its own resources.

Structure of these guidelines

Each section of this publication offers some background information, specific pointers and, where relevant, additional resources, which may include useful websites, other publications or simply examples of good practice from other organisations.

Chapter 1 gives further context to this publication by introducing the main barriers that particular groups face in accessing information.

Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 cover the main ways in which information can be provided to the public – online, by telephone and face-to-face communication, alternative formats and inclusive publications.

Chapter 7 offers some guidelines on making your offices more accessible

Chapter 8 describes how to work with other organisations to make your information reach as many people as possible.

Chapter 9 describes how you can make sure that organisations representing people who experience barriers know about the range of information and formats on offer.

Chapter 10 discusses feedback from service users and putting together a transparent and simple complaints procedure and describes how your organisation can monitor and manage your information provision based on an accessible information policy.

Appendix 1 provides information about further resources and guidelines that have been published to help you make your service more accessible.
Appendix 2 provides information on two sets of organisations:
- groups and advocacy organisations working with people who experience barriers in accessing information; and
- groups and organisations that provide services to help make your information more accessible.

01:
Making Information
Accessible to All

Many groups face barriers in accessing information, for example, because of disability, literacy difficulties, language, culture, age, or because of living in institutions or living in rural areas. Understanding the barriers experienced by information users is an important first step in improving access to information.

Using plain English is one way to address barriers experienced by information users because it helps make information clearer not just for specific disadvantaged groups, but your whole audience. Other ways of addressing barriers include putting publications on audio cassette for a visually impaired user or ensuring that some documents are provided in a number of relevant languages for migrant workers or asylum seekers. Face-to-face information provision in a welcoming, inclusive environment is ideal for many people and allows for the elements of advice and advocacy where needed. In other cases it might mean taking information directly to people who may not use Citizens Information Centres or other local information outlets. This might be the case for older people, people living in remote rural areas, people living in institutions, homeless people or minority ethnic groups.

The following sections describe these and other ways in which you can improve the accessibility of your information, but to do this effectively, you should be aware of the needs of the following specific groups:

- **People with physical disabilities:** awareness of the range of physical disabilities; provision of information services in accessible buildings and in a physical environment that accommodates wheelchair users.

- **People with mental health difficulties:** understanding of and empathy for their experiences and overcoming negative attitudes and stereotypes of mental health service users; targeted information and advocacy concerning housing and health services.

- **Deaf people:** an awareness of deaf people's culture and language, the role of Irish Sign Language and other communication tools, such as speedtext; literacy-proofed information provided in written formats including text, email and fax; sign language interpretation for people who are profoundly deaf.

- **People with learning disabilities:** accessible information in pictorial and easy to read formats; advocacy services to enable independent access to information.

- **People with literacy difficulties:** information in plain and easy to read formats; pictorial information.

- **Homeless people:** targeted information about housing and social benefits; street workers and outreach workers with access to information sources and regular updates of relevant information.

- **Older people:** information signposting from general practitioners and public health nurses; targeted information on health and social care, pensions, widow's benefits, bereavement etc.

- **People living in institutions:** information clinics in residential institutions for people with disabilities, for people with mental health difficulties, older people, people in prison etc; targeted information about benefits; advocacy services.

- **Refugees and asylum seekers:** information in relevant languages, including summarised and targeted information concerning housing, health and other services; advocacy and interpretation services.

- **Travellers:** information in plain English focused on Traveller needs and relevant to Traveller experiences and situations; targeted information on health, accommodation, social benefits; information through advocacy schemes and Traveller support groups.

02:
Inclusive Publications

Plain English
Easy to Read

12pt

language

All publications can be made more accessible by enhancing their readability. The font size, the layout, the colour and contrast of all printed and visual materials are important. Plain English and simple, jargon-free text are also very helpful. Being aware of deaf people's language and culture will also help to make information provision more accessible.

All publications can be made more inclusive

Printed materials should be readable by a wide range of users and should be based on Clear Print design.

- A Clear Print document considers basic design such as font type and size, contrast and page navigation. Examples of clear design include using a minimum of 12 point font and one-inch margins and aligning paragraphs to the left. Sans Serif fonts such as Ariel are preferable for clear print. (See footnote page 19)

- Colour is also important, particularly contrasts between colours. A simple tip to increase visual accessibility is to lighten the light colours and darken the dark colours in the design. The best paper to use is light yellow, non-glossy paper, of a good quality. Avoid dark coloured paper as well as shades of red, orange and blue.

- The language and layout of a document can be very important for ensuring that the information you are getting across is accessible. In particular it is important that what you say and write is simple and direct. Plain English involves writing and presenting information in a style and format that are attractive to read and easy to understand. Using straightforward language, images and symbols and avoiding jargon as much as possible are some of the main plain English techniques.

Responding to diversity

Inclusive information and publications not only use clear design and language, but also recognise the diversity of society, particularly the experiences of disadvantaged people.

Groups that took part in the research carried out to develop these guidelines regularly stated that they would prefer more targeted information. Accessing mainstream

information can be difficult and identifying what is and is not relevant can prove to be a major barrier.

Recognising the diversity of your audience by providing targeted information, e.g. to older people, those with learning disabilities, Travellers or homeless people, may be one way to improve the uptake of information for specific groups. For example, people with learning disabilities most frequently require information about bus passes, medical cards and disability benefits. Refugees and asylum seekers often require other forms of targeted information e.g. on housing. Other groups have suggested that information could be summarised, for example covering employment rights or disability rights. Deaf people want information by fax and email and through mobile telephone text messages. Plain, clear and summarised information that may be developed for specific groups benefits everyone.

Promoting equality

While targeted information recognises diversity, promoting equality means avoiding potentially discriminatory statements, stereotypes or assumptions about particular sectors of your target audience in your publications.

Another element of providing inclusive publications is involving people from the groups that you are targeting. This is important to make sure that the information setting and provision is appropriate to their needs. It is not only the person who receives the information that matters; the person who does not receive it can be the biggest test of the extent to which an organisation considers the needs of everyone.

Steps to promote equality and recognise diversity

- Make sure that posters and printed materials include images that represent all groups in society, including people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups, Travellers, women and older people.

- Carry out a simple equality proofing exercise by checking that your publications do not make any discriminatory statements, descriptions, stereotypes or assumptions.

- Make a clear statement of your commitment to equality and diversity in your publications and activities. This may include an equality statement that states that your services, including publications, are provided equally for the nine groups mentioned under the equality legislation (gender, ethnicity and race, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion and membership of the Traveller community).

- Make sure that you are up to date with information about equality and the equality legislation by checking the Equality Authority's website, www.equality.ie.

Additional resources

Despite the large amount of information provided by Comhairle, information providers do not always have detailed information about the needs of specific groups at their fingertips. It will be important to ensure that you have access to information produced by voluntary and statutory organisations that could be helpful to you.

Publications

To provide targeted and accessible information, it is vital that your own information sources are relevant and up to date. Current examples of information guides and sources from statutory and voluntary agencies are:

- Handbook on *Immigrants' Rights and Entitlements in Ireland* (produced by the Immigrant Council of Ireland) 2003;
- *Directory of Alcohol, Drugs and Related Services in the Republic of Ireland* (available from the Health Promotion Unit);
- *Directory of Services for People with Intellectual Disability* (available from Namhi);
- *Directory of Services for Homeless People* (produced by the Homeless Agency);
- *One Parent Families Information Guide*, on entitlements, services, supports and legal matters for all lone parents (produced in partnership with Treoir, Cherish (now One Family), AIM, Gingerbread, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and Comhairle.
- *National Directory of Services for Women who have Experienced Violence or the Threat of Violence* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform); and
- Health board directories of services (available from individual health boards)
- In addition, many voluntary and statutory organisations have produced their own directories of services (information can be found on the Oasis and Comhairle websites).

Online information

Particular websites for information on entitlements, services and voluntary, community and statutory organisations include:

- Oasis (Online Access to Services, Information and Support) website, www.oasis.gov.ie (a Comhairle initiative), with a wide variety of information about benefits and services;
- Comhairle website, www.comhairle.ie, with the Citizens Information Database, which covers civil and social rights and entitlements in Ireland and other details for information providers and users; and
- Assist Ireland, www.assistireland.ie, a comprehensive online resource database developed by Comhairle with disability organisations, which contains relevant information, products, suppliers and resources related to daily living and disability in Ireland.

Telephone information

- Comhairle also supports a national information phone service, the Citizens Information Phone Service, LoCall number: 1890 777 121

Organisations

A number of organisations can assist you in making publications more accessible.

- The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) provides a consultancy, editing and training service on plain English and can assist organisations in producing appropriate materials.
- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has produced resources called Plain Facts, which cover written and audio materials on how to make complaints.

03:
Information in
Alternative Formats

Presenting written information in a range of alternative formats can make it accessible to a wide range of groups. However, this only happens when you publicise the different formats available. Information also needs to be targeted, relevant, straightforward, clear and summarised, where relevant.

All information - whether written, video, audio, Braille or other formats - needs to recognise and accommodate diversity. This includes reaching those people whose first language is not English, those with a learning disability or those with a literacy difficulty. While all English language written information should be presented in plain English, providing it in a range of alternative formats as well can make it accessible to a wider range of groups.

Providing different formats can help to break down social isolation for those people who have difficulties with written information.

Research by the National Council on Aging and Older People found that older people do not always access conventional information sources. Their preference is to have information provided locally through the GP or public health nurse. Taking account of these preferences may lead to different types of information strategies at local level. Providing information in accessible ways on the internet, by telephone or through audio or video can be important for people living in isolated rural areas or people who are socially isolated.

Awareness of deaf people's language and culture will also help to make information provision more accessible. This can result from an awareness of the linguistic, cultural or communication barriers experienced by deaf people.

Presenting and delivering information in different ways

Organisations can use many techniques to make information more accessible to those who have difficulty accessing standard printed information. For example, many older people state they would like information in larger print while deaf people whose main language is Irish Sign Language (ISL) appreciate information provided through interpretation in ISL or through video, text, email, fax or speedtext. Similarly, many

people from minority ethnic communities, people with literacy difficulties and people from the Travelling community state that they would prefer information in video format.

The different formats discussed here are:
- Large print
- Braille
- Audio
- Video
- Diskette and electronic formats
- Key words, pictures and symbols
- Irish Sign Language and other languages

Chapter 4 contains details about online information and Chapter 5 contains details on telephone services and text messaging.

When organisations are willing to provide printed materials in alternative formats the original publication should provide information about these alternative formats and how to get hold of them. These can be made available on demand. You may need to check demand with representative organisations, e.g. the National Council for the Blind in Ireland.

Large print
This provides access to information for people with low vision, although long documents in large print can cause eye strain.

- Use a simple Serif font such as Times New Roman. Sans serif fonts, such as Ariel, are not as easy to read. (See footnote page 19).
- Aim for a standard of Times New Roman bold 16 point to 18 point, but be aware that some people need higher magnification.
- Text should provide contrast. The best contrast is to use bold type, ideally on light yellow paper, but if not, off-white paper.
- Avoid glossy paper
- Use a line of text about 50 to 60 characters or 6" long across the page.
- Use simple formatting and avoid centred text or justified text, which may be difficult to track.
- Avoid columns and keep margins one inch wide.
- Avoid italics and capitals to emphasise words. The main body of information should use capitals and lower case appropriately.
- Use double spacing between lines.
- Use a flexible binding so that document can be laid flat for ease of reading.

Braille

Around 10 per cent of blind people read Braille, a writing system of raised dots that are read by touch. This is good for complex information and reference material, but documents can be long and bulky when converted to Braille.

- Where possible put the original material for a Braille document in disc format and avoid complex formatting such as graphs or bar charts.
- Have documents over ten pages long spiral bound so they can lie flat for ease of reading.
- Consider Braille translation software or go through a Braille transcription agency to produce Braille. For further information, contact the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (see page 45).

Audio

Information is easily stored on audio cassette. However, with long and complex documents, information can be difficult to scan or use as a reference material. It can be difficult to communicate large tables or graphics.

- Audio cassettes should be tone indexed to ease starting and stopping points for listening. Tone indexing involves beeping each page or section and double beeping to indicate the start of a chapter. These beeps or tones are audible when in fastforward or rewind.
- Aim to have professional or experienced readers,
- Try to use high quality commercial recording and good quality chrome tapes and packaging.
- If possible, cassette labels should be overprinted with Braille.

Videos

Videos can be a useful way of providing information to people with disabilities or people with literacy difficulties. However they do not work so well for conveying specific and detailed information like directories of services or lists of entitlements. This kind of information would be difficult to follow on video and needs to be updated regularly.

- Videos with Irish Sign Language are a preferred format for many deaf people, who may also experience literacy difficulties.
- Consider using narration, on-screen text and graphics.
- Aim for the highest possible sound and video quality.

Computer based formats and assistive technology

A variety of electronic formats can be used to make information accessible. Chapter 4 describes in more detail how online information can be more accessible to different audiences, so in this section we focus on general computer accessibility. There is constant innovation in this area.

Floppy disks and CDs are a fairly inexpensive way to store information and can be accessed by most users including people with a visual impairment, who use screen reading or text zooming software. Most common computer applications such as MS Office and Internet Explorer are reasonably compatible with many assistive technology devices. For example software such as Braille or speech output devices, Braille printing or screen reading software, large screen magnification or adapted keyboards can be used with most computers. See also Chapter 4.

Key words, pictures and symbols

For people with learning disabilities, clear and illustrated information is increasingly important for their independence and their ability to make choices. People with a learning disability function at different levels of reading and have the following individual reading styles:

- independent reading, where the reader can access the content on his/her own;
- supported or co-interpreted reading, where the main ideas are supported by key words, pictures or symbols and the reader may need help in understanding and acting upon the content; and
- shared reading, where an advocate may explain some content and use pictures to support this.

Pictures and symbols can help people to understand the content of a document, although it should not be assumed that the picture will enable the message to be fully understood. Pictures, photographs, illustrations and symbols can all be used to make a document more accessible. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that these are used appropriately. There is a growing use of symbols for people with learning or literacy difficulties and various sets of symbols have been developed for information use (see Appendix 1 for a list of resources).

Irish Sign Language and other languages

Irish Sign Language is the first language of many profoundly deaf people. You should consider how to provide resources to deaf people to enable them to provide information for their own community, face to face or through Irish Sign Language videos.

It is also important to consider providing written information in the principal languages spoken by minority ethnic groups. This would significantly help to overcome some of the exclusion experienced by refugees, asylum seekers and other immigrants. In some cases, it will be important to know how to contact interpreters or the interpreters' telephone services to translate information.

Text messaging
As mentioned in Chapter 5, deaf and hard of hearing people are using text messaging as a quick and easy form of communication. This could be developed and used by information providers through advertising a mobile number or by introducing telephone landlines that accept and send text messages.

Making sure people are aware of alternative formats
One of the problems experienced by organisations using alternative formats is that service users do not always know that they are available. Many of the individuals and groups that experience the biggest barriers in accessing information have low expectations of information provision and are unlikely to be proactive in asking for it. This should not be seen as a lack of demand. It actually highlights the need to develop new ways of promoting and distributing different formats. For example, when printed materials are provided in alternative formats they should be advertised in the original publication.

Additional resources
Various organisations, publications and online resources can help you deliver information in alternative or more accessible formats.

- The web page http://www.webaim.org/techniques/word/ gives guidance about how to correctly structure MS Word documents, provide alternative text for images and save files as HTML.

- Irish SignLink in Dublin is an agency that provides Irish Sign Language interpreters. Contact (01) 608 0437 or signlink@indigo.ie.

- The Kerry Deaf Resource Centre has recently produced a booklet, *Providing Information for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People*, on deaf culture and language and different methods of communication such as text, technical aids and equipment, email and fax.

- The Refugee Information Service has been established to provide specific information to asylum seekers and refugees and can offer advice on making accessible information available to these groups.

04:
Online Information

Information technology and online resources have great potential for providing accessible information. Making websites accessible to people with disabilities benefits all information users.

As more people have access to the internet, it is becoming a powerful resource to bring information to people who are isolated or who have mobility or sight difficulties. But though websites have great potential, some people have difficulties in using them because of the way they are designed and written.

Not surprisingly, the groups that experience the greatest barriers in accessing written information are also those that are likely to experience barriers in accessing electronic information. These include people with disabilities, and those who do not have easy access to information technology because of the 'digital divide' (the gap between those who have computers with internet access and those who do not, as well as the gap between those who are computer literate and those who are not)[3].

According to the National Disability Authority (NDA)[4] , online information may be inaccessible to older people and those who are blind, have low vision, are colour blind or have poor English language skills or literacy difficulties, dyslexia, a learning disability or a hearing impairment. It is important to ensure that alternatives to, and means of accessing electronic information are provided to facilitate these groups.

To address these issues, when providing information online, make sure that a non-electronic version is also available and that means of accessing the internet are signposted. For those who do not have access to information technology at home, all public library services now have computers that the public can use to access the internet. In most cases, a person must be a member of the library to go online. In some cases t hey may also need to pay a small charge and book a session in advance. However, many libraries now offer introductory sessions for new users and will research and evaluate websites.

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[3] A recent study by the Dublin Employment Pact (Trutz Haase, 2004) has established the nature of the digital divide in the Dublin region. A targeted community based approach is recommended to overcome the digital divide in disadvantaged communities.

[4] National Disability Authority, IT Accessibility Guidelines, available on http://accessit.nda.ie/

Making electronic information useable and accessible to all

Clear writing and layout, ease of use and good design are key considerations when using the web to deliver information. Good design means that websites are flexible and users can adjust text and colour settings to suit their own needs. Keeping these principles in mind benefits all information users, not just people with disabilities, who may have particular needs when accessing information.

When developing web pages, make sure you:
- use clear and concise language. Writing for the web is not the same as writing for traditional publications and pages should be shorter, with links to other information as required.
- offer an alternative text-only version if the site has many graphics;
- have a clear and uniform text. Some fonts, such as Ariel or Verdana[5] , are easier than others to read onscreen;
- use a simple and consistent page layout throughout the website;
- design a website that is easy to navigate with easily recognised menu selections and navigation links;
- avoid moving images or icons, which can be distracting;
- keep backgrounds simple, with no distracting patterns or images that may make readability difficult for people with sight impairment;
- choose the right colours for people with low vision or colour blindness;
- use text captions to describe the purpose of each graphic; and
- offer alternative language versions if the target audience includes many people whose first language is not English.

Accommodating the needs of visually impaired website users

For visually impaired people, technology can be a significant tool for accessing information. However, web design needs to be flexible to take account of their needs. Some people require facilities for small text, large text, magnified text as well as for software which will read out the contents of the screen. Braille software can be used to translate pages into Braille and then be read by touch on a Braille terminal. While these technologies are enormously helpful, they can only work if web pages are designed correctly.

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[5] There are two schools of thought in relation to font types. NCBI recommend Sans Serif fonts like Ariel (or Tiresias which has been specifically designed for people with visual impairment). NALA recommends Serif fonts, with short strokes projecting from the end of the letter to lead the reader from one character to the next. It appears that Sans Serif is recommended for legibility and Serif for readability. The studies performed by Wichita State researchers in the US in 2004, (one of the definitive studies so far), referenced as well by Usability.gov, (the US Department of Health and Human Services Usability Guidelines web site) show that more important than the choice of font are the attributes applied to it, namely: size, line-length and sufficient contrast.

A number of guidelines exist to help organisations develop websites that visually impaired people and those with motor difficulties can navigate. One set is the National Disability Authority's *IT Accessibility Guidelines*[6]. These offer easy-to-use tips for making sure that websites, public access terminals and application software are available to, and usable by, as many people as possible. They also offer priorities for action, guidance on design techniques and ideas for involving users when designing sites.

According to the NDA guidelines: 'It makes good business sense to consider the needs of all customers from the outset avoiding expensive and difficult retrofits [modifying a website after it has been developed]. Following these Guidelines will help ensure that as many people as possible – young and old, IT-literate and less familiar, including people with disabilities – will be able to use your services simply and easily.'

They show that accessibility barriers are experienced by older people, people who are blind and who have low vision, people who are colour blind, people with poor language skills, people who are dyslexic or who have a learning disability and people who have a hearing impairment. It is important to note that making websites accessible to people with disabilities will benefit **all** information users.

Additional resources
Besides the NDA guidelines, a number of other resources exist to help you consider the needs of visually impaired website users and those with limited dexterity and check if your website is accessible.

Guidelines
- Specific guidelines and a video, *Websites that Work*, from the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) on accessible design for visually impaired people, available on www.rnib.org.uk/digital/wtw.htm
- Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) Guidelines, which explain how to make web content accessible to people with disabilities, available on www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT
- Technology aids available to assist vision-impaired people in everyday tasks are discussed in the National Council for the Blind of Ireland publication; *NCBI makes Every Day Easy with Technology* available on www.ncbi.ie.

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[6] These are available on http://accessIT.nda.ie.

Accessibility testing

There are web-sites which provide automated accessibility testing. While these sites are useful, as automated tests they are not enough on their own to identify whether a site is usable or accessible. A website can pass either of these tests, but still not be fully accessible.

- Bobby, available on www.cast.org/bobby/
- The Wave, available on www.wave.webaim.org/index.jsp
- The NCBI Centre for Inclusive Technology (CFIT) provides consultancy in inclusive design and independent verification of accessibility through auditing and user testing. See www.technology@ncbi.ie

Online information sources

- Assist Ireland, www.assistireland.ie, is a comprehensive online resource database containing relevant information, products, suppliers and resources related to daily living and disability in Ireland. This online information source was initiated and is being developed by Comhairle in partnership with disability organisations, support services and service providers throughout Ireland.
- Deaftech is a national resource centre, run by the National Association for Deaf People (NAD). It provides information on non - medical technical appliances and equipment for the hearing impaired and those concerned with the practical needs of deaf and hearing impaired people. www.iol.ie/~nad/deaftech.html
- The Irish Deaf Society also has links to technology for deaf and hearing impaired people. www.irishdeafsociety.ie

Search engines

Search engines, such as www.google.ie, can be invaluable tools for locating information on the internet. Using keywords selected by the user, they return a list of Internet sites which contain those keywords.

05:
Telephone Service
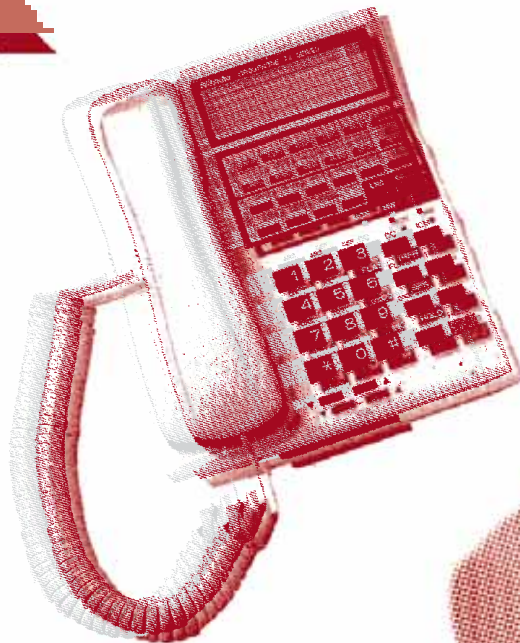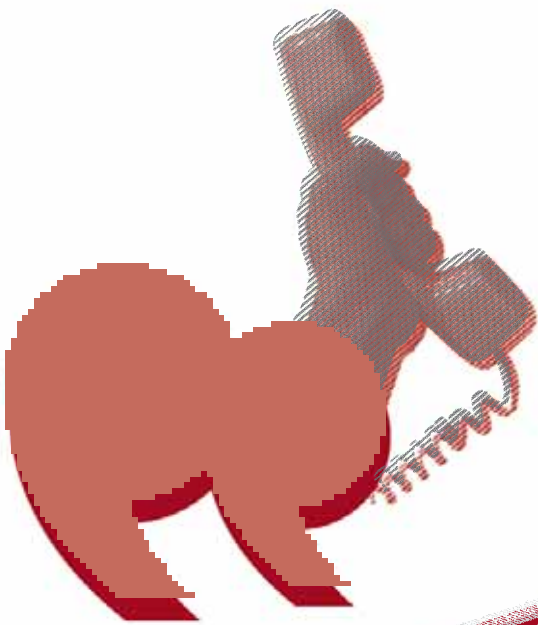
Telephone services are important for providing information to a large cross section of people. However, information by telephone is particularly important for people living in isolated areas and those who are blind or visually impaired or have mobility problems.

With the large increase in mobile phone use, text messaging and helplines, the telephone has become an accessible and inexpensive means of obtaining information and is of particular importance to people who are blind or visually impaired[7].

Helplines and telephone services

Telephone services can be part of an overall information service or can be standalone. If you are interested in developing a helpline for your organisation, it is worth contacting the Telephone Helplines Association in the UK (www.helplines.org.uk). This is the main source of specialist information relating to setting up and running non-profit helplines in the UK and Ireland. Its Quality Standard is a specialised resource for helplines to assess, improve and maintain the quality of their service and includes the following statements of standards:

1. **Finding out about the helpline**
   There is an effective process that makes existing and potential callers aware of the helpline and what it offers.
2. **Getting through to the helpline**
   The helpline is staffed and open as advertised and provision is made for out-of-hours callers and busy times.
3. **The call - establishing and maintaining interaction**
   Helpline workers respond to callers with courtesy, establish the nature and content of the call and interact with the caller so that the whole matter can be dealt with in the most effective and appropriate way.

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[7] During 2004 there were 72,795 queries to the Citizens Information Phone Service. This was a 76 per cent increase on the 2003 figure. 59 per cent of queries to Citizens Information Centres were from personal callers to centres, 30 per cent by telephone and 11 per cent through other means (outreach, letter, e-mail). From; Queries to Citizens Information Centres, Including Citizens Information Phone Service and OASIS Website 2004, Comhairle, March 2005.

4. **The call - offering information, advice, signposting and referral**
   Information and advice that is offered to callers is up-to-date, accurate and appropriate to their enquiry, and signposting and referral is made to an appropriate agency.
5. **Complaints about the service**
   The help-line has a clear procedure for callers who wish to make a complaint about the service.

The association works with member and non-member helplines, promoting best practice and enabling them to work towards the *Guidelines for Good Practice*, which it has developed. For more details on the association's work, go to www.helplines.org.uk.

Text messaging
Text messaging is important for deaf and hard of hearing people as a quick and easy form of communication. You can advertise a mobile number or introduce telephone landlines that accept and send text messages.

Video-phones
Video-phones are important for sign language users as they enable direct phone communication.

Additional resources
A number of organisations in Ireland already offer Lo-call or Freephone helplines to provide information, while some of these also offer text messaging facilities.

Helplines
The Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS), supported by Comhairle, offers easy access to information and advice on entitlements to State and other social services. Once a week it provides a dedicated service for deaf users.

For more details, contact the CIPS on LoCall 1890 777 121, by fax on (021) 452 1604 or email information@comhairle.ie.

Other organisations offer specific information relating to a particular group of people or to a particular issue. We have included a sample of these here.

Alzheimer Society of Ireland Helpline, information and emotional support for people with dementia, their carers and friends: 1800 341 341
Aware Helpline, for people affected by depression: 1890 303 302
Bodywhys Helpline, for information and support on eating disorders: 1890 200 444

Cancer Helpline, advice, information and support to those concerned with or affected by cancer: 1800 200 700

MS Ireland Helpline, for advice and support on living with multiple sclerosis: 1850 233 233

Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline, for confidential advice and support to women being physically, sexually or mentally abused in their own homes: 1800 341 900

Senior Helpline, for isolated or lonely older people: 1850 440 444

National Helpline for One Parent Families: 1890 66 22 12

Text messaging facilities

The Citizens Information Phone Service helpline, LoCall 1890 777 121, has also developed a query system accessible by mobile phone. It works by sending a message to the phone service number, which converts the text message to email and sends it to an information officer. This person replies as soon as possible by email and this is then returned as a text message to the person requesting information.

Below are two organisations that have introduced text-messaging services on particular topics

The Equality Authority: Text phone: (01) 4173385

Driver Theory Testing Service: Text phone 1890 616 216

06:
Face-to-Face
Information

How we communicate with people who experience the greatest barriers in using information services can affect whether and how services are used. Negative attitudes to Travellers, homeless people, people with mental health difficulties, ex-offenders or drug users can all impact on social isolation and stigma. Always treat people with dignity and respect.

Some people find it difficult to access lengthy written information and instead would prefer to receive it through face-to-face contact, especially when the information is complex.

To make sure your information is accessible, your contact with service users should be welcoming and open to everyone. You can help bring this about by being aware of the barriers people face in accessing information and the potential discriminatory situations that may occur. You can also better meet people's information needs by focusing on the principles of equality and respect in your customer service and improving listening and other skills.

Customer service includes several levels of information giving: basic information, signposting and explanation; detailed interviews or casework; and assistance through support or advocacy.

In carrying out these various functions, it is important that you:
• listen to the service user;
• identify his/her information needs;
• advise on options available and take action or make referrals where appropriate; and
• enable or empower the service user to make informed choices and take action.

These particular guidelines apply to **all** service users, not just those who may currently be marginalised or require targeted information. However, how we communicate with people who experience the greatest barriers in using information services can impact on the utilisation of services. A particular understanding of the customer's

background, national origin or language preference can also help to improve the quality of the information you provide, particularly if this results in providing interpretation services or offering alternative formats for information.

Communicating with and about your service users

You can use straightforward techniques to communicate with people in a friendly, non-judgmental way. Dealing face to face with service users from specific backgrounds involves adopting the same courtesies and respect you usually use, as well as taking note of some additional communications rules.

- Listen to the customer.
- Maintain eye contact without staring.
- Make the customer feel comfortable.
- Treat the customer with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Ask the customer to tell you the best way to help. If unsure, always ask.
- If offering assistance, wait until the person has accepted your offer or has given instructions before you help.
- Deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm, professional manner.
- Allow for extra time if necessary.
- Be relaxed.
- Speak directly to the person rather than through a companion or personal assistant who might be present.

How you communicate **about** people is as important as **how** you communicate with them. As a result, you need to be aware of the words or phrases that express gender, ethnicity, racial or disability stereotypes. It is important to use language that fosters positive attitudes. Always use 'people first' language which emphasises the person rather than the disability, age or situation that someone is in e.g. by saying people with disabilities rather than 'the disabled'; or older people rather than 'the elderly', or homeless person rather than 'the homeless'. Many deaf people communicate with sign language and are members of a cultural and linguistic community.

Examples of 'people first' language:
- people with disabilities
- my son has autism
- she has a physical disability
- he uses a wheelchair
- he is short of stature or he is short
- she has Down Syndrome
- he has a learning disability
- she has a mental difficulty

Use of the term non-disabled is preferable to 'normal' or 'able-bodied'. This helps to avoid stigmatising people with disabilities as abnormal. In this sense it is important that the language used emphasises abilities rather than limitations

Communicating with people with disabilities

While all your service users deserve the same levels of respect, courtesy and listening skills, you may need to take some further steps to communicate with people with disabilities. Here we outline some of the main approaches to take with:

- deaf or hearing-impaired people;
- blind or visually impaired people;
- people with speech difficulties;
- people with learning disabilities;
- wheelchair users or other people with impaired mobility.

Deaf or hearing-impaired people

Deaf or hearing-impaired people communicate in a variety of ways. Profoundly deaf people tend to use Irish Sign Language (see page 16) and may need professional interpreters to link between you and them. Others may rely on lip reading or have hearing aids, while others may rely on speed text writing as the main form of communication.

- To attract a deaf person's attention, wave your hand or tap them on the shoulder while in their line of vision.
- Speak clearly, slowly and in a normal tone of voice, as exaggerated speech can distort lip movements.
- Face the light source and reduce any background noise if possible.
- Use written notes if needed.

Blind or visually impaired people

There are many different types and degrees of visual impairment. Some people have total vision loss while others may have limited vision.

- Always identify yourself and others by name when greeting a blind person.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice and identify your movements if you move from one place to another.
- When offering assistance to someone with a visual impairment, allow them to take your arm rather than taking theirs.
- When offering seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat.
- Describe anything you point to.

People with speech disabilities
- People with speech difficulties may be hard to understand, so allow extra time for communicating and be patient.
- Be encouraging rather than correcting and don't speak for the person.
- Use notes where necessary and never pretend to understand something when you do not understand it.

People with learning disabilities
- Be patient and allow time to ensure that you understand each other.
- Use clear and simple words.
- Verify their responses by repeating questions in a different way.
- Give exact instructions.

People with reduced mobility and wheelchair users
- For a wheelchair user, try to be at eye level.
- If you must stand, step back slightly so the person does not have to strain their neck to see you.
- Make sure you have carried out an audit of your office, including dedicated car parking, ramps, space to navigate a wheelchair, physical obstacles and the height of leaflet stands or posters. (Chapter 7 has details on how to make your offices more physically accessible.)

Training and awareness

Lack of awareness and sensitivity to the needs of vulnerable groups should be addressed through specific training. This should be carried out in partnership with organisations representing vulnerable groups.

There are already practices being developed through resources and support for in-service training on anti-discrimination. Related to this is the need to improve customer services training, particularly around communications with people from a diversity of backgrounds, user-friendly procedures and services provided with courtesy, listening, dignity and respect.

(The end of this chapter features a short list of some organisations to contact for specific training.)

Introducing a customer service plan

Besides using the specific techniques outlined above and availing of relevant training, you may wish to adopt the following steps to improve your customer service.
- Draw up an equality or equal status policy and consider reviewing your services from the perspective of equality and diversity in customer service.
- Draw up a customer service action plan highlighting the way in which your customer service activities include everyone and accommodate equality and diversity.

- Talk to staff and service users about what they think are the principles underpinning good quality customer service and see how you can apply these principles to all groups that experience disadvantage, particularly those groups that you currently do not cater for.

To get you started, your principles of good quality customer service might include the following statements.

- Treat people with dignity and respect.
- Put the client's best interests first.
- Be non-judgemental.
- Do not patronise.
- Act in a professional, timely and competent way.
- Act in a non-discriminatory way.
- Observe confidentiality.

Additional resources
A wide range of in-service training and training guidelines are already available on various groups and topics, including:

- *Towards Best Practice in the Provision of Further Education, Employment and Training Services for People with Disabilities in Ireland*, published by the National Disability Authority, January 2004;
- A two-day training programme for information providers, *Introductory Training Programme on Immigrants' Rights and Entitlements*, from The Immigrant Council of Ireland;
- Literacy awareness training (LAT) from the National Adult Literacy Agency;
- Anti-racist training from the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Inter-Culturalism (NCCRI), already delivered to a number of government departments;
- Traveller culture and awareness training programmes run through Traveller Health Units in the health boards;
- *Managing Equality and Diversity* training programmes for managers in health boards; and
- Comhairle provides a training programme annually, which contains a range of training events relevant to those involved in the provision of information, advice and advocacy services to the public. Courses include; *Effective Communication with Non-Native Speakers of English, Disability Legislation, Equality Legislation in Practice, Immigrants' Rights and Entitlements, Advanced Communication Skills and the Information Providers Training Programme* is accredited at level 6 by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

07:
Making Offices
Physically Accessible

Providing physical access in information centres is an essential part of accessible information provision. Indeed, finding practical ways to reasonably accommodate people with disabilities is now a legal requirement. If you have made your building more accessible, let people know by displaying the appropriate signage in an obvious place.

Offering face-to-face information in your office is far more effective if you make your information centre accessible. This requires you to look at physical layout and planning and to be proactive in reviewing accessibility through access audits and finding practical ways to reasonably accommodate people with disabilities

The Equal Status Acts and reasonable accommodation
Under the Equal Status Acts, 2000 and 2004, providers of goods and services cannot discriminate against people with disabilities. The Acts in particular, require service providers to make changes, at a reasonable cost, to enable people with disabilities to use the services. The Acts also allow for positive action to make sure that people with disabilities can take up services.

How to make services physically accessible
You can take a variety of simple steps to make your information centres accessible to people with disabilities, such as having an accessible front desk, good lighting, ease of access for wheelchair users and leaflets placed at eye level. Physical accessibility might also mean that you find new ways to make all customers feel valued and welcomed.

The NDA publication, *Building for Everyone* (2002), has detailed information about universal design (the design of goods, services and buildings so they can be used by everybody without the need to adapt them for particular groups). The publication has text, checklists, drawings and illustrations.

Checklist of what to consider
- Make sure there is dedicated accessible parking near the entrance.
- Provide ramps at the front entrance, steps with marked edges, doors that are easy to open or automatic and clear signs that do not reflect light.
- Aim to use contrasts in colour and texture for floor coverings to define different areas of a building.

- Provide space for independent access by wheelchair users inside the building, as well as tables at a height for a wheelchair to fit under, non-slip floors, seating, stairs with handrails and with edges marked, lighting and ventilation.
- Allow enough space around information desks to allow access by wheelchair users.
- Provide an accessible toilet on each floor with clear signage, an easy-to-open door (preferably opening out or automatic), enough room for a person with a wheelchair to access and grab rails at appropriate heights both beside and behind the toilet.
- Install audible and visible fire alarms
- Install hearing loops in meeting room(s) and reception areas.
- Place a 'Guide Dogs Welcome' sign in a prominent place
- Encourage people with disabilities to take part in disability proofing your information activities (reviewing activities to make sure they accommodate their needs) and in helping with a disability access audit.
- Train staff to respond to the needs of people with disabilities and to communicate effectively with people with disabilities.
- Draw up a disability access action plan to identify how you can improve the accessibility of your services.
- Draw up an access policy highlighting how you provide services that are accessible and accommodate diversity.

Additional resources
- Raising the Standard: *A Code of Practice for the Provision of Information Services to People with Disabilities,* produced by the Irish Wheelchair Association (1999), covers premises, internal access, how the service will be managed, information sources and service delivery, amongst other topics.

- *Access for All, A Guide to Creating a Barrier Free Environment for People with Physical and Sensory Disabilities*, produced by the Irish Wheelchair Association and available on their website, www.iwa.ie, October 2004

- *Building for Everyone*, produced by the NDA, is a guide for everyone concerned with accessibility in Ireland, including architects, designers, building developers, local authorities and environmental activists. You can buy the publication or borrow an associated video from the NDA.

- *Reasonable Accommodation of People with Disabilities in the Provision of Goods and Services* (booklet) and *Be Reasonable: It Pays* (website), both produced by the Equality Authority, offer guidelines on reasonable accommodation.

- The National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) has also produced guidelines for service providers on how to interact with blind or visually-impaired customers.

08:
Working in Partnership to get Information to the People Who Need it.

Many of the most disadvantaged people do not visit information services. Working with advocacy organisations and those representing marginalised people can help you to deliver targeted information where it is needed. The partner organisation can be a reliable source of referral, can help develop specific information content for the target group and can build links with people who are harder to reach, like people living in institutions and residential centres.

Linking with advocacy and representative organisations

To improve access to information for those who are marginalised, you may need to develop links with the people that have already built up trusted relationships with them. These can include outreach workers or local groups or those who work in institutions and residential settings.

Groups who provide outreach services to homeless people or prostitutes, or organisations that provide support for people with mental health difficulties or refugees and asylum seekers may be well placed to help distribute your information. Comhairle has funded advocacy workers in a number of organisations to help with this role.

Establishing link workers trusted by disadvantaged groups and having a named contact person in an information centre and in voluntary organisations can help to ensure that there are good communications channels. Having specialist information and advocacy officers in voluntary and community organisations can also be a link with those who are hardest to reach.

Working with local area partnerships or other locally based community organisations

Building partnerships with local organisations can be another way in which to distribute information. This may mean making sure that links exist with local area partnerships, community centres, local day centres for older people or those with disabilities, shelters and hostels for homeless people and community-based projects. The Refugee

Information Service's weekly clinics (see page 34) and the partnership between Clondalkin CIC and the Clondalkin Travellers project are good examples of this practice.

Sharing information and co-ordinating activities

The best ways to ensure that partnerships are beneficial are to pool your expertise about information for disadvantaged people and those who are hard to reach and to co-ordinate your activities with those of other groups.

Co-ordinating training, advice and other activities can help promote learning between organisations and avoid duplication of work. Newsletters and e-newsletters from community and representative organisations can be a useful way of co-ordinating and publicising information about services. This approach can help where complex and specialised information is provided. One example of co-ordinated activity is that of the Immigrant Council of Ireland and homeless organisations who have worked with Comhairle to develop targeted information and training and regard closer co-ordination with Comhairle in relation to information provision to be of benefit to everyone.

Working in partnership with people living in institutions and residential centres

Working with organisations that provide services to people living in institutions and residential centres and running outreach information sessions in these settings can help to overcome the serious deficits of information experienced by people living in institutions.

Helping potential information users to help themselves

This means empowering people to use information and training people to seek out and provide information themselves. You could develop this by working closely with local and peer support groups and providing training and information back-up to local people, particularly those who experience barriers in accessing information.

Additional resources

- The National Council for the Blind (NCBI) has completed research (funded by the Comhairle Information Grants Scheme), into suitable formats for registered blind and vision-impaired people. The project, titled VIPER (Vision Impaired Persons Electronic Register), has provided up-to-date figures and requirements on alternative formats for this target group.

- Spiritan Asylum Services Initiative (SPIRASI) has established the Health Information Programme (HIP). This began with a partnership between SPIRASI, the Northern

Area Health Board and the Reception and Integration Agency and trains groups of asylum seekers and refugees in health issues and resources, using visual, multi-lingual and audio communication aids. This organisation also employs twenty-four different nationalities amongst its staff, reducing the need for hiring expensive translators and increasing the range of knowledge available to the organisation, as externally hired translators do not necessarily have any knowledge of the issues faced by non-nationals

- The National Association for People with Intellectual Disability in Ireland (Namhi) has employed an advocacy officer to run its national advocacy project. Funded by Comhairle, the project is closely connected to providing accessible information and empowering people with an intellectual disability to self-advocate (speak up for their rights).

- Pavee Point Travellers' Centre produced a video for Traveller groups around the country to encourage them to take part in the 2002 census. The video, which featured Traveller presenters speaking directly to their peers, was used by a Pavee Point staff member as a discussion tool to generate questions and debate amongst groups of Travellers. A particularly successful initiative by Pavee Point has been the Traveller Community Health Workers, a peer educator project that trained a number of women Travellers on health matters. These women became peer educators in their own community.

- The Kerry Deaf Resource Centre developed an information booklet for information providers, with funding from Comhairle, on how to make information accessible to deaf people. The booklet includes background information on deaf culture, Irish Sign Language and the deaf community, communication tips, details of assistive technology and computer-based communication and a very useful checklist for making services and buildings accessible.

- Merchants Quay Ireland has received Comhairle funding to produce an information guide for drug users on services.

- The Refugee Information Service, a partnership between Comhairle and the Refugee Council, emphasises taking information and support services directly to their client base. To do this they utilise the facilities of a number of Citizens Information Centres and community organisations in Dublin and Galway. Currently they run nine weekly clinics in: Rialto Parish Centre, City Centre North West Information Service, Inner City Renewal Group, Tallaght Citizens Information Centre, Blanchardstown CIC, Rathmines Information Centre, Chrysalis, Galway People's Resource Centre and Galway CIC.

09:
Getting Information Out There

Publicise your information service and make sure that organisations representing people who experience barriers know about the range of information and formats on offer.

Publicising your information service

Local networks and media are often the most important and trusted ways of sharing information. Having a regular slot on local radio might be the best way of reaching people living in social isolation or in rural areas. Citizens Information Centres currently run a number of information programmes and question-and-answer sessions on local radio and 'Know your Rights' columns in local newspapers. These radio sessions can also inform people about the different formats available and how these can be accessed.

You can also run open days, coffee mornings and informal clinics to publicise information sources and formats in partnership with local organisations.

Letting people know about the alternative formats available

Make sure that organisations representing people who experience barriers know about the range of formats on offer and are provided with copies. These local organisations could be very helpful in giving feedback about the numbers required, the uptake of the different formats and in giving feedback on the quality of the formats.

Letting people know about the formats on offer is a significant step in improving access to information for all. Try to make publications and details of other formats available, through local area partnerships, local community groups, day and residential centres, women's centres, GP surgeries and health centres and tenants' and residents' groups.

Running specific information campaigns

You may decide to have a themed week or day that you can combine with specific and targeted information activities. In September 2003, Comhairle held a Disability Information Awareness Week, an initiative to promote access to information for people with disabilities. You could try out information campaigns that target other specific groups such as homeless people, older people or minority ethnic groups.

10:

Involving Service Users When Monitoring and Managing Your Service

Encouraging feedback from service users and putting together a transparent and simple complaints procedure make it clear that you are serious about providing the best information service possible. However, only by acting on the findings from these consultations can you improve the quality of your service. An accessibility plan that is regularly monitored is a useful way to improve access to information for all.

These Guidelines represent the first step in developing standards for providing information and an accessible information policy for all. In Ireland there is a growth of interest in quality standards. In particular, the civil and public services are moving towards developing quality standards that are measurable through performance indicators. The NDA is working on standards for disability services.

To help your organisation make sure that it is reaching the standards that you have set, you need to:

- review and record how many different formats of information have been requested and used;
- establish feedback systems so that information users can comment on the accessibility of your information service; and
- involve information users in evaluating the effectiveness of different formats and strategies to improve information accessibility.

Consulting information users

Meaningful and appropriate consultation with service users and local communities is important in identifying how to provide information in the most accessible ways. As the National Disability Authority's *Ask Me: Guidelines for Effective Consultation with People with Disabilities* (2002) (page 9) states: 'Getting the consultation process right for people with disabilities means getting it right for everybody.'

You can consult and include service users in the following ways:
- individual level – where individuals are directly involved in how information is provided;
- operational level – where service users are involved in planning day-to-day activities;
- strategic level – where service users are involved in planning the future direction of the service; and
- governance – where service users and people from disadvantaged groups are involved in managing the service.

Placing the service user at the centre can help you provide appropriate and accessible services. So, it is important not only to form links with local groups, but also directly with disadvantaged individuals.

Consult with service users by:
- asking information users to give you feedback on your materials through comment cards or website reply options;
- consulting people who may not use information services, through a focus group, a public meeting or open day;
- setting up a quality circle or consumer or user panel that represents different groups; or
- involving representative organisations and people from disadvantaged groups in managing your organisation.

Other ways of consulting users of your service include:
- interviews;
- customer surveys, as used by the Department of Social and Family Affairs each year;
- consultative committees, such as the Disability Consultative Committees and Traveller Health Projects established in health boards; and
- detailed consultation, for example if you are developing new policies, as carried out during the preparation of the health strategy document, *Quality and Fairness: A Health System for You*, Department of Health and Children 2001.

Developing a policy on an accessible information service
Managing an accessible information service is as important as developing it. This means that there needs to be a clear statement of policy about how the service is accessible and works within a framework of equality. Management priorities include making sure that you take account of the needs and participation of the groups that are most marginalised when planning, monitoring and reviewing the service. The following are some steps to take when developing an information and service policy for your organisation.

- Draw up an equality policy showing how your organisation provides information services to the groups that fall under the remit of the equality legislation (gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, ethnicity and race, membership of the Traveller community).

- When drafting the equality policy include other groups that experience barriers in accessing information, for example, homeless people, people living in institutions, drug users and former drug users, offenders and ex-offenders and other groups that are marginalised.

- Review your service, including your current policies and procedures, and look at the perceptions of staff and potential service users from disadvantaged groups.

- Carry out a disability access audit and see how far your services adequately address physical, information and communications accessibility. Comhairle has drawn up access audit guidelines that you can use for your access audit. Always involve people with disabilities and seek their feedback when carrying out your audit.

Improving information accessibility is a gradual process and needs to take place in consultation with information users. Once you have carried out an audit or review, make sure you draw up an action plan, with timescales, responsibilities and performance indicators so that the actions you have identified can be seen through.

Remember that improving information accessibility is a gradual and continuous process.

Additional resources
- The National Disability Authority's voluntary standards for disability health provision, *National Standards for Disability* Services, (due to be published in 2005), include standards relevant to developing accessible information. In all, there are 14 standards and 60 performance indicators, which include accessible information, customer service and the built environment.

Appendix 1: Resources and Further Information

a) Plain English, simple English

Mencap (2002), UK, *Am I Making Myself Clear?*
Mencap's guidelines for accessible writing. Available on www.mencap.org.uk

National Adult Literacy Agency, *Plain English Service (leaflet)*.
Available on www.nala.ie

National Adult Literacy Agency (2002), *Health Literacy: Policy and Strategy Report*.
Available on www.nala.ie

National Adult Literacy Agency, *Adult Literacy: Are You Aware?* (Leaflet)
Available on www.nala.ie

National Adult Literacy Agency (2002), *Guidelines for the Inclusion of Adults with Learning Disabilities into Literacy Schemes*. Available on www.nala.ie

National Adult Literacy Agency (2001), *Writing and Design Tips*.
Available on www.nala.ie

National Adult Literacy Agency (2003), *A Plain English Guide to Legal Terms*.
(See Appendix 2 for contact details)

National Adult Literacy Agency (2004), *A Plain English Guide to Financial Terms*.
Available on www.nala.ie

Plain English Campaign (2001) UK, *The Plain English Guide to Design and Layout*.
Available on www.plainenglish.co.uk/design

Plain English Campaign (2001) UK, *How to Write in Plain English*.
Available on www.plainenglish.co.uk/plainenglishguide

Plain English Campaign (2001) UK, *The Plain English Tips for Clear Websites*
Available on www.plainenglish.co.uk/websites

b) Using symbols and pictures

Picture Bank by Change.
CD Rom and book of high resolution images. Available on www.changepeople.co.uk

Writing with Symbols 2000 by Widgit Software Ltd.
Software solutions for different needs. Available on www.widgit.com

c) Guidelines for people with visual impairments

National Council for the Blind of Ireland, *People with a Visual Impairment: Ways to Make Written Documents Accessible to All.*
Available on www.ncbi.ie

National Council for the Blind of Ireland, *People with a Visual Impairment: General Guidelines.*
Available on www.ncbi.ie

Lighthouse International (USA), *Guidelines on Colour and Effective Colour for People with Visual Impairments.*
Available on www.lighthouse.org

Royal National Institute for the Blind (UK), *See it Right*.
(Pack with information on a variety of different formats)
Available on www.rnib.org.uk

Royal National Institute for the Blind (UK), *Information Matters* (booklet)
Available on www.rnib.org.uk

d) Guidelines for deaf and hard of hearing people

Kerry Deaf Resource Centre (2004), *Providing Information for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People.*
(Not available electronically. See Appendix 2 for contact details)

Gallaudet University Press (USA), *Communication Therapy*.
Available on www.gupress.gallaudet.edu

e) Web-based accessibility

National Disability Authority, *AccessIt*.
(A website including accessibility guidelines)
Available on www.accessit.nda.ie

Nielsen, J. & Markes. J. *Writing for the Web*.
Available on www.useit.com/papers/webwriting

Plain English Campaign (UK), *Plain English Tips for Clear Websites*.
Available on www.plainenglish.co.uk/websites

Royal National Institute for the Blind (UK), *Websites that Work*.
(Guidelines and video on accessible design of websites for visually impaired people)
Available on www.rnib.org.uk

Scottish Accessible Information Forum, *Making Websites Accessible*.
Available on www.saifscotland.org.uk/publications/webguide

Web Accessibility Initiative (USA), *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines*.
Available on www.w3.org

f) Standards for accessible information

Irish Wheelchair Association (1999), *Raising the Standard: A Code of Practice for the Provision of Information Services to People with Disabilities*.
(Not available electronically. See Appendix 2 for contact details).

Scottish Accessible Information Forum (2004), *Standards for Disability Information and Advice Provision in Scotland*.
Available on www.saifscotland.org.uk

g) Access and reasonable accommodation

Equality Authority (2004), *Reasonable Accommodation of People with Disabilities in the Provision of Goods and Services*.
Available on www.equality.ie

Equality Authority (2004), *Guidelines on Equality and Diversity Training in Enterprise*.
Available on www.equality.ie

Equality Authority (2000 & 2004), *The Equal Status Acts, 2000 & 2004*
Available on www.equality.ie

Irish Wheelchair Association (2004), *Access for All, A Guide to Creating a Barrier-Free Built Environment for People with Physical or Sensory Disabilities*.
Available on www.iwa.ie

National Disability Authority (2002), *Building For Everyone*.
(Publication and video on designing, building and developing accessibility in buildings)
Available on www.nda.ie

National Disability Authority (2004), *Draft Guidelines for Improving Accessibility of Public Services for People with Disabilities*.
(A discussion document seeking views of service providers and service users on improving access to public services and developing an award system through an accessibility symbol to compliant public offices)
Available on www.nda.ie

Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind. *Fáilte Isteach, (Leaflet), Thank You for Making 'Guide Dogs Welcome'*.
(Not available electronically. See Appendix 2 for contact details).

h) Customer service and face-to-face information provision

National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (2003), *Guidelines for Developing a Whole Organisation Approach to Address Racism and Support Interculturalism*.
Available on www.nccri.com/training

National Disability Authority (2005), *Guidelines for Purchasers of Equality, Disability Training*.
Available on www.nda.ie

i) Consulting service users

Offaly Citizens Information Service Ltd (2004), *Code of Ethics for Consulting with People with Disabilities* (based on "Ask Me" Guidelines for Effective Consultation – National Disability Authority 2002)
(Not available electronically. See appendix 2 for contact details).

j) Other specific guidelines and sources of information

Immigrant Council of Ireland (2003), *Handbook of Immigrants' Rights and Entitlements in Ireland*. Available from www.immigrantcouncil.ie

National Council on Ageing and Older People (2002), *Meeting the Health, Social Care and Welfare Services Information Needs of Older People in Ireland*. (Report 69).
Available on www.ncaop.ie

Appendix 2:
Key Agencies and representative groups

Centre for Deaf Studies
Trinity College Dublin
1st Floor
40 Lower Drumcondra Rd
Dublin 9
Tel 01-8301252
Fax 01- 8301211
Email: cdsinfo@tcd.ie
Website: www.tcd.ie//deaf_Studies

Change
Unity Business Centre
Units 19 & 20
26 Roundhay Road
Leeds LS7 1AB
England
Tel: +44 11 32430202
Fax: +44 11 32430101
Minicom: +44 11 2432225
Email: changepeople@btconnect.com
Website: www.changepeople.co.uk

Comhairle
7th Floor
Hume House
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4
Tel: (01) 605 9000
Fax: (01) 605 9099
Email: Comhairle@comhairle.ie
Website: www.comhairle.ie

Equality Authority
Clonmel Street
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 417 3333
Fax: (01) 417 3366
Email: info@equality.ie
Website: www.equality.ie

Gallaudet University Press
800 Florida Ave
NE / Washington DC 20002
USA
Tel: +00 1 202 651 5488
Fax: +00 1 202 651 5489
Email: valencia.simmons@gallaudet.edu
Website:www.gupress.gallaudet.edu/

Homeless Agency
Parkgate Hall
6-9 Conyngham Road
Dublin 8
Tel: (01) 703 6100
Fax: (01) 703 6170
Email: info@homeless.ie
Website: www.homelessagency.ie

Immigrant Council of Ireland
2 St. Andrew Street
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 674 0202
Fax: (01) 645 8031
Email: info@immigrantcouncil.ie
Website: www.immigrantcouncil.ie

Integrating Ireland
c/o Comhlámh
10 Upper Camden Street
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 478 3490
Fax: (01) 478 3738
Email: info@integratingireland.ie
Website: www.integratingireland.ie

Irish Deaf Society
30 Blessington Street
Dublin 1
Tel: (01) 860 1878
Fax: (01) 860 1960
Minicom: (01) 8601910
Email: info@irishdeafsociety.ie
Website: www.irishdeafsociety.ie

Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind
National Headquarters and
Training Centre
Model Farm Road
Cork.
Lo-Call 1850 506300
Tel: (021) 487 8200
Fax: (021) 487 4152
Email: info@guidedogs.ie
Website: www.guidedogs.ie

Irish Traveller Movement
4/5 Eustace Street
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 679 65 77
Fax: (01) 679 65 78
Email: itmtrav@indigo.ie
Website: www.itmtrav.com

Irish Wheelchair Association
Blackheath Drive
Clontarf
Dublin 3
Tel: (01) 818 6455
Fax: (01) 833 3873
Email: info@iwa.ie
Website: www.iwa.ie

Kerry Deaf Resource Centre
4 Gas Terrace
Tralee
Co Kerry
Tel/fax: (066) 712 0399
Videophone: (066) 712 0386
Email:kdrc@eircom.net
Website: www.kerrydeaf.com

Lighthouse International
111 East 59th
New York
N.Y. 10022-1202
USA
Tel: +00 1 212 821 9200
Fax: +00 1 800 829 0500
Email: info@lighthouse.org
Website: www.lighthouse.org

Mencap
123 Golden Lane
London EC1Y ORT
England
Tel: +00 44 20 7454 0454
Fax:: +00 44 20 7696 5540
Email: information@mencap.org.uk
Website: www.mencap.org.uk

Mental Health Ireland
Mensana House
6 Adelaide Street
Dun Laoghaire
Co Dublin
Tel: (01) 284 1166
Fax: (01) 284 1736
Email:
information@mentalhealthireland.ie
Website: www.mentalhealthireland.ie

National Association for People with
Intellectual Disabilities
(Namhi)
5 Fitzwilliam Place
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 676 6035
Fax: (01) 676 0517
Email: info@namhi.ie
Website: www.namhi.ie

National Adult Literacy Agency
76 Lower Gardiner Street
Dublin 1
Tel: (01) 855 4332
Fax: (01) 855 5475
Email: literacy@nala.ie
Website: www.nala.ie

National Association for Deaf People
35 North Frederick Street
Dublin 1
Tel: (01) 872 3800
Fax/text: (01) 878 3629
Minicom: (01) 817 5777
Videophone: (01) 817 1400
Email: nad@iol.ie
Website: www.nadi.ie

National Consultative Committee on
Racism and Interculturalism
20 Harcourt Street
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 478 5777
Fax: (01) 478 5778
Email: nccri@eircom.net
Website: www.nccri.com

National Council on Ageing and
Older People
22 Clanwilliam Square
Grand Canal Quay
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 676 6484/5
Fax: (01) 676 5754
Email: info@ncaop.ie
Website: www.ncaop.ie

National Council for the Blind of Ireland
Whitworth Road
Drumcondra
Dublin 9
Tel: (01) 830 7033
Fax: (01) 830 7787
Email: info@ncbi.ie
Website: www.ncbi.ie

National Disability Authority
25 Clyde Road
Dublin 4
Tel: (01) 608 0400
Fax: (01) 660 9935
Email: nda@nda.ie
Website: www.nda.ie

Offaly Citizens Information Service Ltd
Bridge Centre
Tullamore
Co Offaly
Tel: (0506) 52204
Fax: (0506) 26742
Email: tullamore.cic@comhairle.ie
Website: www.comhairle.ie

Pavee Point
46 North Great Charles Street
Dublin 1
Tel: (01) 878 0255
Fax: (01) 874 2626
Email: pavee@iol.ie
Website: www.paveepoint.ie

Plain English Campaign
PO Box 3
New Mills
High Peak
Derbyshire SK22 4QP
England
Tel: +00 44 16 63 744409
Fax: +00 44 16 63 747038
Email: info@plainenglish.co.uk
Website: www.plainenglish.co.uk

Refugee Council
88 Capel Street
Dublin 1
Tel: (01) 873 0042
Fax: (01) 873 0088
Email: refugee@iol.ie
Website: www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie

Royal National Institute of the Blind
105 Judd Street
London WC1H 9NE
England
Tel: +00 44 20 7388 1266
Fax: +00 44 20 7388 2034
Email: helpline@rnib.org.uk
Website: http://www.rnib.org.uk

Scottish Accessible Information Forum
(SAIF)
Royal Exchange House
100 Queen St
Glasgow G1 3DN
Scotland
Tel: (141) (226) 5261
Text: (141) 226 8459
Fax: (141) 221 0731
Email: info@saifscotland.org.uk
Website: www.waifscotland.org.uk

Organisations providing services for accessible information or alternative formats

Braille
National Council for the Blind of Ireland
Whitworth Road
Drumcondra
Dublin 9

National technical support no:
1850 33 43 53
Tel: (01) 830 7033
Fax: (01) 830 7787
Website: www.ncbi.ie

Irish Sign Language
Irish Signlink Interpreting Agency
25 Clyde Road
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4
Tel: (01) 608 0437
Fax: (01) 668 5029
Email: signlink@indigo.ie
Website: www.irishsignlink.com

On line directory of sign language
interpreters
www.irishdeaf.com

Plain English
National Adult Literacy Agency
76 Lower Gardiner Street
Dublin 1
Tel: (01) 855 4332
Fax: (01) 855 5475
Email: literacy@nala.ie
Website: www.nala.ie

Speedtext operators
National Association for Deaf People
35 North Frederick Street
Dublin 4
Tel: (01) 872 3800
Fax: (01) 872 3816
Email: nad@iol.ie
Website: www.nad.ie

Useful links on web accessibility
www.accessit.nda.ie - National Disability
Authority Accessibility Guidelines.

www.accessiblenet.org - AccessibleNet is
an independent, online directory of links
and resources about web accessibility.

www.section508.gov - U.S. Centre for IT
Accommodation offers information and
guidelines on making electronic and
information technology accessible to
people with disabilities.