

# Information is power

## How local government can empower blind and partially sighted people

“ Every time I requested information in alternative formats, I never got anywhere. Councils seem to be able to get away with this all the time. I felt very disappointed, as I thought I was asking for something I was entitled to. I think something should be done about encouraging them to provide information in alternative formats, as they don't seem to be very agreeable to offer any alternative help when required. For example, I had to fill in a form to terminate my council tenancy in London. When I received it, the form consisted of four carbon pages, which meant four copies of the form would need to go to four different departments. I phoned the council to find out whether they could fill in the form for me and I could then sign it. The administrator refused to do this, saying they had no time. The result was they could not read my handwriting and they took ages to refund my deposit and sort out other things. ”

Inaccessible information is a major barrier facing blind and partially sighted people, massively restricting life chances and quality of life. Approximately two million people in the UK have a sight problem, of whom approaching 400,000 are registered as either blind or partially sighted. This number is set to rise as the population ages, emphasising the need to include people with sight problems in the planning and provision of services at the national, regional and community level.

Elena, 30, Glasgow



**RNIB** Helping you live with sight loss



## Accessing information from local government services

Although the UK Government has been pushing for more equal treatment of blind and partially sighted people, local government is often failing to provide service users and employees with important information in alternative formats, making staff aware of disability issues or ensuring that its buildings are fully accessible to everyone.

News about council taxes, recycling and refuse collection, leisure activities, voting and other issues remains out of reach, despite the implementation of the Disability Equalities Duty, which requires local government authorities to make information available to their service users in formats they can access.

A report by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which surveyed central and local government, health and education authorities, government agencies and the emergency services, found many public bodies are not making it clear whether documents are readily available in alternative formats.

The report shows only a quarter of organisations offer information to service users in larger print sizes, just eight per cent offered information on disk or CD and only four per cent promoted the availability of braille or audio materials. The same organisations are even less likely to promote the availability of alternative



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formats other than larger print sizes to their employees – just one per cent promoted the availability of braille and audio materials and only nine per cent promoted disks or CDs.

If service users or employees make a request, just over half of organisations will provide information in a range of formats, including audio and braille, but clearly more needs to be done to promote this option.

For example, local authorities should put mechanisms in place for recording and acting on preferred reading formats. The DWP research suggests that if a disabled person requests information in an alternative format once, only one-fifth of public service organisations would be “very likely” to send letters and other information in the requested format in the future. The remaining 80 per cent of organisations still need to ensure that end-users do not have to make repeated requests of the same department or organisation to register their format preference.

In addition, local authorities should raise the profile of the availability of alternative formats to blind and partially sighted service users and employees. The burden should not be on the end-user having to request it. Instead, it should be on offer from the beginning, with proactive marketing to target user groups through appropriate channels.

Finally, although some organisations do make their materials available when it is requested, approximately 40 per cent don’t provide information in accessible formats at all. This is unacceptable and should be improved.

More needs to be done to ensure local councils meet their responsibilities to their blind and partially sighted service users and employees. Despite a raft of government regulations, many organisations are still failing to provide and promote information in different formats. Many other businesses and organisations expect government agencies to lead by example, but in the case of adequate information provision, it is clear many are still falling short of the mark.



## 5 ways to make things better

- Make information available in a range of formats for service users, employees and the wider public, and ensure that this is promoted widely in the local community.
- Record the format service users and employees require and ensure that future information distribution is provided in this form.
- Ensure there is full recognition of accessible information provisions as outlined within the Disability Equality Duty.
- Working with blind and partially sighted people, provide training for all staff on disability awareness issues.
- Public and voluntary sector organisations should work in partnership with other organisations to promote and share good practice, especially through their Local Strategic Partnerships.



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