

# Facilitator's Guide to Making Meetings Accessible

short guide



**Facilitation is about helping a group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting, and that includes helping participants overcome barriers they may face as a result of disability.**

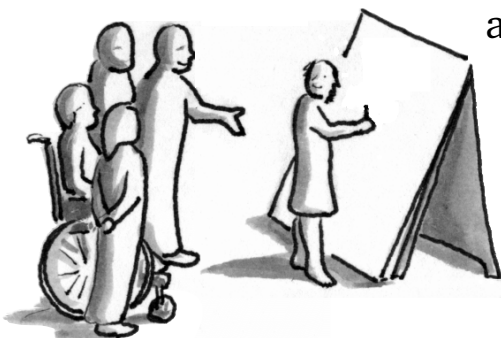
Good facilitation practices can really help to create an inclusive and supportive atmosphere for everyone. Small changes in styles of facilitation and careful choice of exercises can help those with disabilities to take a full and active part in meetings and workshops. Our guide on *Access Issues* discusses the accessibility of venues, and other practical issues.

## First steps

**The most important step is to talk to the person facing the accessibility difficulties**, ideally in advance. They're in the best position to advise on how the facilitator can include them. Everyone faces different barriers, and a clear understanding of these can help both the facilitator and the group.

Make a point of asking at the beginning of each session whether group members have any access needs. It can help to understand a person's

attitude – one person may wish to take a full part in the group's meetings, whereas another person may not be at all bothered that they don't take their turn to write up the ideastorms. Being aware of this will help you prepare your exercises and timings.



### A note about this guide

This guide focusses on adjustments you can make for people with physical and sensory impairments. Unfortunately we don't have much experience of facilitating groups with members who experience mental distress or those with learning difficulties so can't provide detailed advice. Supporting someone with mental health problems can be challenging, so if you or your group finds yourself in this position then do seek advice, whether from mental health service user groups, or someone with relevant experience.

Knowing about their attitude will also help you to gauge whether and how to offer support – one person may appreciate frequent check-ins from the facilitator, but another may find them embarrassing or annoying!

Here are some more general tips which are always worthwhile considering as not all disabilities and access issues are obvious.

- ✓ Frequent breaks can be helpful – some people may need to really concentrate to follow discussions (e.g. if they can't hear everything that is being said), or may not be able to sit for long periods. Time to recover may be appreciated!
- ✓ Consider participants' ability to actively take part in quick moving discussions – e.g. it may not always be clear who is saying what; fast or excited speech may be more difficult to understand.
- ✓ Use suitable language and exercises so everyone can participate.
- ✓ Some exercises may not be suitable for everyone – consider what role hearing, sight and mobility might play in activities.
- ✓ Be aware of any impatience in the group caused by lack of understanding of each other's abilities and needs.

## Summarising the discussion

Good facilitation should include frequent summaries of the discussion as it develops. This includes both content and people's positions, whether it's been said or communicated in other ways (e.g. through non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions or with an agreed set of hand signals).

Summaries are a good way for the group to be more aware of what stage the discussion has reached, and it can also help people who are visually or hearing impaired, or simply forgetful.

### Summarising

A facilitator uses summaries to succinctly but clearly restate the main points.



## Visual impairment

Potential challenges for those with visual impairments include light levels, handouts, flipcharts and whiteboards, and keeping track of the discussion – particularly if handsignals are used. Preprinted materials should be made available in a variety of formats including large print. Although handouts can be adapted or recorded, it's obviously impossible to prepare all content, for example things written up as part of an ideastorm.

In some situations personal support may be useful and the facilitator can help out by providing more detailed summaries. These could include interpretation of handsignals (and other body language) that people are using, e.g. “I see that most people are waving agreement to that point, but some of you aren't..”; “some of you seem really enthusiastic about that proposal, but I see that others aren't looking too excited” and then finding out whether there is agreement.

Announcing your name before speaking, and using names rather than pointing is helpful: “Jo, Ann and Saff – you all have your hands up to speak”. These help give a visually impaired or blind person an early clue as to who is about to speak.

## Hearing impairment

Deaf and hard of hearing people often struggle with large or echoing spaces and background noise at venues (such as traffic, buzzing strip lighting or other groups talking in the same room). The person concerned will usually know how they can best participate in a spoken discussion – the following are all possibilities that are worth asking about:

- ✓ The facilitator should summarise regularly, providing another chance for the flow of the discussion to be understood.
- ✓ Make sure everyone can see each other clearly (to allow lipreading; to make sure sound isn't impeded by others' bodies).
- ✓ Write up all points on a flipchart or whiteboard (these can be used as clues to provide context, allowing educated guesses at whatever hasn't been heard).
- ✓ Make sure people (especially the facilitator) speak clearly, not too fast, and look towards the deaf or hard of hearing person.
- ✓ People should take great care not to talk over each other – only one person should speak at a time. *The facilitator should be strict about this.*

- ✓ Have enough spaces available so small groups can work in different rooms to avoid background noise from other groups.
- ✓ Human support (e.g. notetakers; speech to text operators) can sit with hearing impaired people to write, type or speak summaries.
- ✓ If the hearing impaired person requires a Language Service Provider (e.g. a lipspeaker or British Sign Language signer) contact the RNID Local Communications Services Office or local Disability Rights Information Centre well in advance.
- ✓ Finally, technical solutions may be relevant – induction loops at venues are common, but don't always work too well, so do check them before the meeting.

## Motor and mobility impairment

Some mobility impairment issues will require practical adjustment or support at the venue – these are covered in our guide to *Access Issues*, available from our website. A good start is to familiarise yourself with the venue – what's the access like (steps, handrails, ramp etc); is there an adapted toilet? Summarise and publicise access information in advance of your event – this sends a clear signal that you are prepared to make adjustments and provide assistance, and helps disabled people assess whether they feel they can take part.

As a facilitator you may also need to consider difficulties in speaking, or using handsignals. Plan the group's movements and physical activities (e.g. icebreakers, energisers, role plays and hassle lines as well as breaking into small groups) in such a way that they are inclusive. Things to watch out for here are: enough time and space to move and providing alternative suitable activities and where people are going to be positioned during exercises: sitting on the floor can create barriers for people with mobility impairments and blind people – those unable to sit on the floor will be at higher levels and may feel isolated.

*For more briefings and training workshops see:*  
[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)

