Inclusion in communications

We all need information from the government that we can understand and use. For example, information about public transport routes and timetables, information about government health services, information about consumer complaints, and so on.

We also need easy ways to do everyday things like buy a train ticket or apply for a driver's licence or identity card.

People with intellectual disability need these things like everyone else. So, the NSW Government needs to provide accessible information and services that people with intellectual disability can use.

What needs to happen

By 2025, the NSW Government should:

1. Make all government documents relevant to the everyday lives of people with intellectual disability available in Easy Read. Make them easy to find on government websites.

2. Develop its own Easy Read Style Guide. People with intellectual disability should be involved in making it.

3. Make sure that people with intellectual disability can get government services in a way that works for them, whether that is an easy-to-use website, talking to someone on the phone, or seeing them face to face.

4. Make a toll free phone line available for people who need spoken information.

Where things stand

People with intellectual disability face major barriers to accessible communication with NSW Government agencies.

- The government provides very little information in Easy Read which is the form of written communication most likely to work for people with intellectual disability.
- Government websites and apps are too complex to navigate and require devices that many people with intellectual disability do not have.
- With increased use of technology, government agencies also provide less and less personal services, either face to face or direct phone lines. Many people with intellectual disability need these personal services.

People with intellectual disability are robbed of their independence. Too often, they have to rely on other people to obtain and interpret government information and processes for them. Many people do not have family or support workers to help in this way.

The NSW Government Disability Inclusion Plan says that the Department of Customer Services will work with government agencies to implement international standards in disability accessibility. These standards are the international Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). However, WCAG is focused on access for people with physical and sensory disabilities. WCAG says very little on cognitive access – access for people with intellectual and other cognitive disabilities.[1]

The right to inclusion

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, the Disability Inclusion Act NSW says, "People with disability have the right to access information in a way that is appropriate for their disability and cultural background and enables them to make informed choices".

Under discrimination law, government agencies must make reasonable adjustments to their services so that people with disability can use them. This includes adjustments to the way agencies provide information and communicate with people with disability.

Drivers for change

NSW has signed up to the Australian Disability Strategy. This strategy has a priority of "information and communication systems that are accessible, reliable and responsive", including "Easy Read".

The NSW Department of Customer Services (DCS) has a Disability Inclusion Action Plan. The plan commits DCS websites to include essential information in Easy English by October 2024. Easy English is similar to Easy Read. For examples of Easy Read, see https://cid.org.au/resource-tag/easy-read

WCAG is being updated at present. One of the goals is to cover more needs of people with cognitive disabilities and a working group has made recommendations on this.[ii]

The Australian Government Style Manual includes a section on Easy Read which it describes as "a way to present information for people who are not familiar with English, or who have low literacy or learning disability"[iii]. This emphasises that, by responding to the accessibility needs of people with intellectual disability, governments will also be making information accessible to many other members of the community. 14% of Australians aged 15 or over have literacy skills below year 7 level.[iv]

In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, the Department of Health and Aged Care (DOHA) and the NSW Ministry for Health have produced a lot of Easy Read and other accessible information for people with intellectual disability. The DOHA resources are at https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-easy-read-resources

The National Roadmap for Improving the Health of People with Intellectual Disability includes a short-term action for "All government health authorities to routinely use formats such as plain language and Easy Read resources … to support better communication with people with intellectual disability about health issues and health care".

[i] https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/wcag3-intro/
[ii] https://w3c.github.io/silver/guidelines/
[ii] https://www.w3.org/TR/coga-usable/
[iii] https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/content-types/easy-read
[iv] https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/accessible-and-inclusive-content/literacy-and-access

cid Council for Intellectual Disability