

# CENTRE FOR DISABILITY RESEARCH AND POLICY

## ACCESSIBLE EVENTS PRACTICE POINTS

### Introduction

The Centre for Disability Research and Policy brings together expertise from a range of disciplines and research areas to strengthen and support research on disability, and to promote evidence informed policy and practice development. The Centre is part of the University of Sydney's Faculty of Health Sciences, which is located at Lidcombe, New South Wales.

The Centre's goal is to improve the social and economic participation of people with disabilities, thereby enhancing their health and wellbeing. The Centre endorses and fosters the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the purpose of which is to 'promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity'.

In order to achieve its goal, the Centre must share knowledge, collaborate and form partnerships with people with disabilities. The Centre adheres to the principle, 'Nothing about us, without us.' To this end, the Centre aims to meet the access needs of all people with disabilities who attend its events, including presenters, participants and sponsors.

These Practice Points give information and guidance for Centre staff, and are designed to facilitate the planning and running of all Centre events, including conferences, seminars, workshops and webinars.

Accessibility should be regarded and treated as core business for all Centre staff involved in events management.\*

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\* The Centre for Disability Research and Policy is indebted to Meetings and Events Australia, from whose publication *Accessible Events – A Guide for Meeting and Event Organisers* 2012 the Centre has drawn extensively in the development of these Practice Points.

## **A. PLANNING AN EVENT**

Access for people with disabilities is a core planning requirement for all Centre events. Some events have a long lead time and involve a large number of people. Others are delivered more spontaneously and are targeted to a smaller group of interested parties. Both require that consideration be given to accessibility at the earliest stages of the planning process. We have a legal and ethical responsibility to ensure that people with disabilities are not treated less favourably than people without a disability.

If you do not know the answer to any of the questions below, or you are unsure about the importance of one or more of the following requirements, you should raise the issue with your manager or supervisor. You should not book or pay a deposit on a venue until you are satisfied that all accessibility issues have been appropriately addressed.

### **1: CHOOSING A VENUE**

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- If you are booking a venue at the University, you should consider:
  - Is there level access to the venue with no steps or barriers from the arrival point, through the main entrance, to all areas being used by participants?
  - Are the surfaces on the paths, inside and out, even and slip resistant?
  - If participants have to use a lift:
    - Is it large enough for people using wheelchairs to use?
    - Are the control buttons at a height that can be used by people using wheelchairs and other mobility aids such as crutches?
    - Do the control buttons have raised buttons and Braille information?
    - Does the lift provide audio announcements telling people what floor they are arriving at?
  - If there is a speaker's platform or lectern, is it accessible? If not, are radio/lapel microphones available and in working order?
  - Are there accessible toilets in the same location as other toilets or close by? If so, are they clean, serviced and useable?
  - Are there any steps or other barriers to break-out rooms, dining areas or outdoor areas being used by participants?
  - Are the doorways wide enough for electric wheelchairs?
  - Is there an air space between the room and any outside area that would be a reasonable barrier for infection control, cleanliness and heating control for people with respiratory impairments?
  - Is there enough room for people to comfortably move around in break-out rooms, dining areas or outdoor areas being used by participants, including those using electric wheelchairs?

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- If the venue has fixed seating, are there wheelchair accessible spaces provided at various locations throughout?
- Is the venue large enough to allow people with disabilities to freely move around when all participants are present?
- Is there good air circulation throughout the venue?
- Are there good acoustics?
- Is there a hearing augmentation system such as an audio induction loop (“hearing loop”) and is it functioning properly? If there is no hearing augmentation system, you should book one as soon as possible. Make sure there is time between the close of registration and the event for you to cancel this service if there has been no request for it. If the venue is infrared enabled, infrared headsets are required for participants.
- Are there rest-rooms available, if required?
- Are there clear evacuation procedures? Do these take account of people with disabilities, including people with sensory impairments and mobility impairments? Is information about evacuation procedures communicated in ways that include people with vision impairments and/or hearing impairments?
- Are there trained first aiders and/or personnel who can assist with personal needs should there be no accompanying person?
- Where required:
  - Are there facilities for assistance animals and appropriate support for their needs? eg. water and a place for dogs to rest when off duty; a place for them to excrete and someone to clear up when they do .
  - Is there adequate ventilation and/or a separate space for people with allergies to animals?
- If you are arranging an after hours event at the University, be aware that the security personnel act in the role of Fire Wardens. Contact the building’s Chief Warden and the Work Health and Safety Officer for the Faculty in the building to confirm that security personnel are available after hours, and to find out the best way to contact them in the event of an emergency.
- If you are booking a venue outside the University, you should also consider:
  - Is the venue operator aware of anti-discrimination laws and their responsibility to provide equal access for people with a disability?
  - Have there been any access issues in the past and, if so, how has the venue operator dealt with them?
  - Have venue staff had disability awareness training so that they can respond appropriately to the requirements of people with disabilities?

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- Are fire wardens trained in emergency procedures for people with disabilities?
- Are venue staff aware of the right of people using assistance dogs to bring them into the venue?
- Is there a toileting area and water available for assistance dogs?
- If you are booking an outdoor event, you should consider:
  - Does the event layout provide for appropriate access and circulation?
  - Does the location of furniture and equipment block kerb ramps?
  - Do grassy areas need to be covered with materials that make mobility easier?
  - Do cables present a trip hazard?
  - Is there seating available in the shade?
  - Is drinking water available at clearly identified points?

## **2: TRANSPORT TO AND FROM THE VENUE**

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- If you are providing information to participants about transport to the venue, you should also provide information about accessibility for people with disabilities.
- Before you book a venue, you should consider:
  - Are there accessible bus or train services running close to the venue?
  - Are there any accessible travel apps that would assist participants?
  - Is there a clear level path of travel from the public transport to the entrance of the venue, with no steps or other barriers such as bollards placed closely together?
  - Do ramps have tactile ground surface indicators at the top and bottom?
  - Is there a drop-off point for cars and taxis close to the venue?
  - Is there a kerb ramp at the drop-off point to allow a person using a wheelchair to get from the road to the entrance to the venue?
  - If the venue has its own car park, are there accessible parking bays clearly identified?
  - Are the accessible parking bays close to the entrance to the venue?
  - Is there a clear level path of travel from the accessible car parking bays to the entrance of the venue, with no steps or other barriers such as bollards placed closely together?

### **3: PROMOTING THE EVENT**

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- If you are promoting the event on the Centre's website or by email:
  - Check that the information is accessible and compatible with specialist hardware and software that people with disabilities use to access electronic information.
  - All web pages should comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (W3C Guidelines):  
<http://www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/accessibility>
  - PDF documents are generally not considered to be accessible and should not be the only available electronic format.
  - Provide alternative contact details, such a telephone number for phone and text messages, fax or email address.
- You should ensure that any promotional material is finalised in an accessible electronic format, such as Word, html or rtf before sending it off for desktop publishing, if required.
- You should use large font size in a clear sans serif style, such as Arial, and use a good contrast for text and background.
- You should use appropriate language in promotion material when communicating information to people with disabilities. As a general rule, the person always comes before the disability.

For example:

- 'people with disabilities', not 'disabled people';
- a 'person who is blind', not a 'blind person'.
- 'people who use wheelchairs', not 'wheelchair bound people' or 'people confined to wheelchairs';
- 'accessible' toilets and parking, not 'disabled' toilets and parking.

### **4: REGISTRATION**

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- If participants are required to complete a registration form, you should consider whether there are alternatives for people with disabilities. For example, have you provided a telephone number so that people can supply their information over the phone, or by text message, web or paper based registration?
- If the registration form is online, you should check that it is accessible and compatible with specialist hardware and software that people with disabilities use to access electronic information. (See above.)
- You should ensure that the registration form includes information on accessibility features, such as wheelchair access, hearing augmentation and accessible parking.

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- You should include space in the registration form for participants to provide information on any specific individual requirements for access. Include one of the following:
  - The conference/workshop/seminar venue is accessible for people using wheelchairs. Hearing augmentation\* will be provided and all presentations and hand-out materials will be available in an accessible electronic format on request. If you have any other access requirements, please provide relevant information on this form or contact us by telephone, text or email. All information will be treated confidentiality.
  - \* Specify which type of hearing augmentation will be provided e.g. “A hearing loop is available that is compatible with hearing aids equipped with a telecoil function.”
  - If you have any access requirements in order to participate in this conference/workshop/seminar, please note them in the space below and we will contact you to discuss your requirements further. All information will be treated confidentially.
- When special arrangements are requested, you should send an email advising what accommodations will be made.
- Some people with disabilities will be accompanied by support workers or personal assistants. Their role is to assist the person with the disability to participate fully in the event. If the person is solely there to provide assistance, you should not charge admission or registration fees. You may charge fees to cover basic costs, such as catering (lunch, morning tea etc.).
- If a sign language interpreter is required, book one as soon as possible because they are in high demand. For longer sessions (over two hours) two interpreters may be required.
- You should ensure that all records concerning disability related access needs are stored securely, and that the information is used only for the purpose for which it was obtained.

### **5: MAKING INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE**

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- When producing written information for the event, including programs, presentations, handouts and agendas, consider how to make these accessible for people with disabilities. Depending on the needs of participants, it might be necessary to produce information in different formats.
- If a presentation will be given in PowerPoint, the presenter will need to provide an accessible version prior to the event with descriptions of figures and graphs. The event organiser will need to distribute the accessible version to people who are blind or vision impaired prior to the event.
- Presenters should be advised well in advance that they will need to verbalise visual information on their slides, as they may need time to consider how to describe complex images such as charts and graphs.

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- There are a number of different formats that people may prefer or require. For people who are blind or vision impaired, these include large print, Braille, audio tape or an accessible electronic format.
- Where possible, you should consider giving participants copies of papers in accessible formats before the event, to assist people with a vision impairment, brain injuries and learning impairments.
- If presenters are proposing to show film clips, subtitles and audio description should be provided wherever possible.

### **B. RUNNING AN EVENT**

The Centre's aim is to improve the social and economic participation of people with disabilities, and all participating Centre staff (including presenters) are responsible for making events accessible for people with disabilities. You and your colleagues should ensure that you are well prepared, flexible and ready to make necessary changes and respond to challenges on the day, as the need arises.

Ensure that you treat people with disabilities with respect, and follow the practice points below on communicating and assisting people with different types of disabilities. Remember that we all have our own preferences and requirements for participation and personal comfort. Always focus on the person, listen carefully and check that you have understood their needs. Always ask a person with a disability if they need assistance – do not assume that they need it.

### **6: REMOVING BARRIERS TO ACCESS**

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- Before the event commences, you should consider:
  - Have Centre and venue staff been briefed on access issues, including designated seating arrangements, which parts of the venue are covered by hearing augmentation technology, and assistance dog toileting arrangements?
  - Are centre and venue staff aware of any specific responsibilities to assist people with disabilities, such as getting tea and coffee or meeting participants at the entrance to the venue?
  - Do centre and venue staff know who to contact if an issue arises?
  - Are technical staff available to check and assist with audio visual and access technology?
  - Is the hearing augmentation system working? If the venue is infrared enabled, are the infrared headsets working?
  - Is event signage in place and clearly visible? Is the font large? Is the formatting clear?

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- Is there clearly displayed signage, with instructions on how to get to key places including conference rooms, bathrooms, car parks and eating areas?
  - If there is a reception desk, is it at a height that is accessible for people using wheelchairs?
  - Is the furniture set up in a way that facilitates access for people using wheelchairs?
  - Is the accessible toilet clean, serviced and useable?
  - Have appropriate arrangements been made for anyone assisting people with disabilities, such as sign language interpreters and support workers?
- Even with good planning, unexpected barriers to access for people with disabilities can arise prior to or during an event. Good housekeeping is crucial. During the event you should be on the lookout for things that might go wrong, including bags on floors, double swing doors where one door is locked and chairs creating hazards for people who are blind or have vision impairments. It could be that groups of people are gathering on designated access paths, or that people have rearranged furniture, preventing access for people using wheelchairs.
  - Where appropriate, participants with additional needs should be greeted on arrival by a person who has been designated to assist them during the event as required.

### **7: SOUND AND LIGHTING**

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- Lighting must be appropriate for all participants. You should pay particular attention to people with disabilities to ensure that they can follow what is happening. For example, a person with a hearing impairment will be unable to lip-read if there is insufficient lighting on the speaker.
- If it is necessary to dim the lighting when speakers are using visual aids such as slides or videos, make sure that speakers and any sign language interpreters are suitably spotlighted and there is good light for reading.
- To ensure that people who are blind or have a vision impairment can access the information in a PowerPoint presentation or video, remind presenters that they should give simple description of what other participants are seeing.
- Check the quality and volume of the public address system for clarity and comfort.
- Ask all speakers and presenters to use and speak into a microphone (otherwise any infrared technology will not work).
- If members of the audience are invited to ask questions or make comments from the floor, make sure there are portable microphones for participants to use.

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- If portable microphones are not available, ask speakers and presenters to repeat any questions or comments from the audience.
- Consider using closed captioning or Live Remote Captioning where appropriate.
- Check that air quality and temperature can be maintained at comfortable levels. People who are unable to move may get colder than those who can move around. People with respiratory impairments may find it difficult to breathe in too hot or too cold environments.

### **8: CATERING**

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- Catering at events can range from a cup of tea and a biscuit to a sit down buffet. It is useful to provide different catering choices where possible and to ensure that catering staff are briefed on assisting people with disabilities.
- If self-service is the only option available, ensure that staff are available to assist people with their food choice and carrying their food and drink to the eating area.
- Provide a choice of crockery and cutlery, and offer drinking straws. A mug may be easier for some people to use than a cup and saucer. Others may be unable to hold a cup, glass or mug.
- Where appropriate, consider having more than one food and beverage service area.
- Make sure there are chairs and tables available, and that there is room for everyone to move safely between them.
- Ensure that rubbish bins are covered with lids to prevent distraction for assistance dogs, which can cause stress for their handler.

### **9: COMMUNICATION AND ASSISTANCE**

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- Ask the person with a disability if they have any special requirements that would assist them to participate in the event. Be prepared for the possibility that they may not want assistance. Their wishes should be respected.
- Where appropriate, offer to give a briefing to other participants, presenters and event staff about how to assist people with disabilities (if they require assistance).
- For briefing content see below in sub section 'For people who have vision impairment or are blind' and above in Section 6 'Removing Barriers to Access'. e.g.
  - Ask all people involved in the event not to interact with assistance dogs if any are present, and to be careful not to drop food and crumbs.

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- If people with mobility aids (wheelchairs, crutches etc) are present, remind participants to be aware not to block access ways by standing in groups or putting bags on the ground etc.
- If you are having a conversation with a person using a wheelchair that will take more than a few moments, bend to eye level or pull up a chair.
- For people who may have a learning difficulty, an intellectual disability, dementia or a brain injury:
  - Address the person clearly, listen carefully, speak clearly and check for understanding.
  - Use clear language and do not be patronising.
  - Allow the person time to ask questions and try not to rush them.
  - Try not to overload the person with questions or information.
  - Make it clear that you are there to help if they forget the information.
- For people who have a hearing impairment or are deaf:
  - Always face the person so that they can read your lips.
  - Try to make sure there are no bright lights behind you that may limit their ability to read your lips.
  - Do not cover or obstruct your lips when speaking.
  - Use your normal tone of voice and volume. If possible, move out of areas with lots of background noise.
  - If a person is there with a sign language interpreter, always address your comments directly to the person who is deaf, not to the interpreter.
  - Have a pen and paper on hand to help you communicate with people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment.
- For people who have a vision impairment or are blind:
  - Always identify yourself by your name. If appropriate, ask for their name so that you can address them directly and so that they know you are talking to them and not to someone else.
  - If a person who is blind asks for assistance to go somewhere, ask which side you should be on and offer your arm so that they can hold it just above your elbow. Be aware of potential obstacles, including narrow doorways.
  - Never pat or distract a guide dog or offer it food while it is in a harness – it is a working animal under the control of its owner.
  - To assist the handler, do not speak to a guide dog or make eye contact. Do not feed a guide dog and avoid dropping crumbs where possible.

### **C. RUNNING A WEBINAR OR ONLINE EVENT/MEETING**

You should use the same principles for meeting the needs of participants with disabilities when planning and running a webinar as you use for other types of seminars and workshops. Make sure that you give consideration to accessibility at the earliest stages of your planning process, and be prepared and ready to resolve any access issues on the day.

- Prior to the webinar or online event/meeting, ask your participants whether they have any specific access requirements.
- Inform participants about the webinar or online event/meeting software and the software system requirements prior to the webinar or online event/meeting date and offer a trial linkup to ensure accessibility and compatibility. All current University of Sydney webinar platforms offer support for accessibility. You must familiarise yourself with the accessibility features of your platform before organising a trial linkup.
- If issues cannot be resolved in a trial linkup, you should engage an accessibility expert to enable people with disabilities to participate in the webinar.
- Where appropriate:
  - Book a telephone-based teleconferencing facility in addition to the webinar. This will allow participants to have access to the meeting if the webinar is not accessible. Make plans for how these participants will ask questions or contribute to the meeting.
  - Book live captioning for people who are hearing impaired. Make plans for how these participants will ask questions or contribute to the meeting.
- If documents are going to be used during the webinar or online event/meeting, make sure that these are distributed in an accessible format prior to the meeting. If you make changes, send out an update so that participants are not misinformed.
- If the presentation was recorded, provide accessible versions of the recording when requested. Videos require captioning and a transcript.