

Communication support needs

Definition

Human communication is the effective exchange of information between two or more people.

Communication involves two processes:

- getting messages in: **understanding**
- getting messages out: **expression**.

Our definition of a communication support need is any individual who requires support with one or more of the following:

- understanding
- expressing themselves
- interacting with others.

Who has communication support needs?

There are diverse reasons for people requiring communication support.

Some are now well recognised. For example members of linguistic minority communities such as British Sign Language users, and those for whom English is an additional language, may require interpreting and translation services.

Others remain less understood. A communication disability can be a hidden disability. This lack of recognition can be a barrier to effective participation.

Quote: Communication disability – a hidden disability

‘My name is Sheila, and I live with MS and a range of neurological problems which impact on my communication. As I look OK, the difficulties can be unseen. My cognitive difficulty affects my speed of comprehension and difficulty with word finding, especially if there is a lot of distraction and background noise. My difficulties can impact on me more than my mobility difficulties.’

Lack of understanding can result in people's behaviour being misunderstood. A person may be described as 'challenging'. But their behaviour may be a result of an unmet communication support need.

Do any of the following examples sound familiar?

Presenting behaviours	Possible explanations
A person does not turn up for an important event	They cannot read the invitation. Was this misinterpreted as lack of interest?
A child is disruptive in a group.	The child cannot take part in a group activity properly because they do not understand the instructions. So they make lots of mistakes. Was this misinterpreted as naughtiness?
A woman swears at an advice worker.	The woman is frustrated because she has word-finding difficulties following a stroke, and because the advice worker does not understand her. Was this misinterpreted as verbal abuse?
A man looks distracted during a group discussion.	The man cannot understand what is being said when more than one person is speaking at a time. Was this misinterpreted as boredom?
A young person arrives late for a focus group.	The young person stammers. Their name is the hardest thing to say. So they avoid introductions at the beginning of groups. Was this misinterpreted as lack of interest and rudeness?
People do not use your service, or fail to turn up to an event or exhibition stand.	They don't understand the directions, or think no-one will understand them when they get there. Was this misinterpreted as apathy?

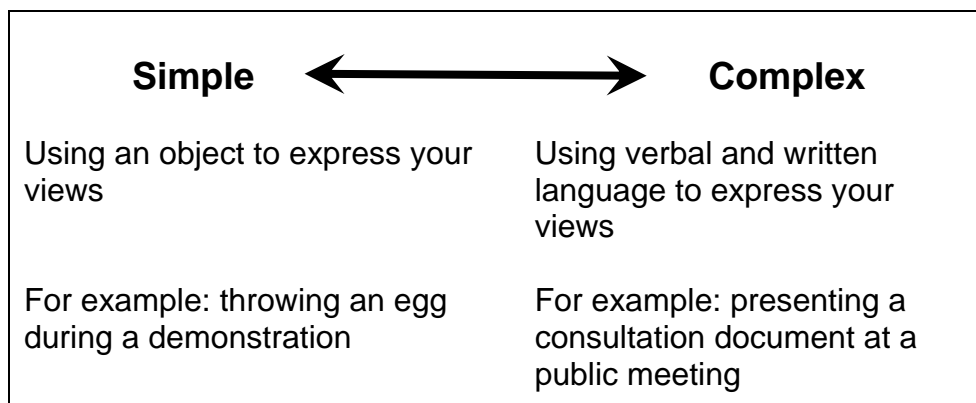
Important fact to remember

I may have difficulty expressing myself (getting a message **out**). This does **not** always mean I have difficulty with understanding (getting messages **in**).

I may be able to express myself (get a message **out**). This does **not** always mean I can understand (get messages **in**).

Ways of getting messages in and out

We use a limited number of methods both to understand and to express ourselves. We use these methods in combination. They range from the simple to the complex.



The most complex way to communicate is using language, both verbal and written. Many people take this for granted.

Inclusive communication makes use of the broadest range of methods to help people understand and express themselves.

Impact of communication disability

People with communication support needs face barrier because others may lack:

- understanding of the ways they communicate
- the knowledge, skills and resources to give them the opportunity to communicate to the best of their abilities.

Everyday activities

Difficulty **understanding what people say or write** might affect everyday activities such as:

- understanding what a receptionist tells you
- finding your way around a building
- following a group discussion
- responding to an invitation letter
- reading the minutes of a meeting
- following instructions on a ballot paper.

Difficulty **expressing yourself through speaking or writing** might affect everyday activities such as:

- giving your name to a receptionist
- asking for directions
- replying to a question during a group discussion
- filling in a booking form
- taking minutes
- completing an online questionnaire.

Decision-making

These barriers can also prevent individuals with communication support needs from being actively involved in decision-making affecting them and their community.

The range of communication support needs

Every individual is different.

Some people will experience multiple disabilities.

It is important to recognise the diversity of communication support needs. For example:

- People who have autism
- People who have had a brain injury
- People who have cancer affecting organs for speech
- People who have cancer affecting the brain
- People who have cerebral palsy
- People who are deaf
- People who have dementia
- People who have disordered language development
- People with dyslexia
- People who have epilepsy
- People with a learning disability
- People with mental health problems
- People with progressive neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, Parkinson's and progressive supranuclear palsy
- People who stammer
- People who have had a stroke
- People with visual impairment

This is not an exhaustive list. The main emphasis is on communication support needs which are less understood.

You should ask yourself “What can I do to help remove barriers people may be facing?”

Practical advice for how to make it easier for people to engage effectively is outlined under the Communication Support Principles section in the Talk for Scotland toolkit. Examples of putting these principles into practice in public engagement activities are included also.

Remember that an individual's communication may differ significantly at different times of the day or depending upon how they are feeling.

