

Top tips on caring for and projecting your voice

As an MP, you use your voice to speak up on behalf of your constituents. These tips will help you to care for and project your voice as you do so.

General advice

- Aim for good hydration. Drinking 8-10 glasses of water a day is recommended as dehydration, caused by alcohol or caffeine in drinks, can lead to vocal cord irritation.
- If you are hoarse, don't whisper – speak in a soft voice to avoid strain.
- Try to 'warm up' your voice through gentle humming or speaking, before public speaking.
- Get enough sleep and exercise. Your voice reflects your general health and wellbeing.

Things to avoid

- Avoid overusing your voice for long periods, especially speaking over background noise.
- Heartburn/reflux can lead to vocal cord irritation, so avoid foods that cause indigestion and avoid eating late at night.
- Reduce/avoid smoking. Smoke irritates the vocal cords and causes them to swell.
- Avoid lots of dairy produce because this can cause thick secretions and throat clearing.
- Throat clearing leads to vocal cord irritation, so try to avoid this by coughing gently or sipping water.



Projecting your voice

- Aim for an open and relaxed stance with weight evenly distributed and balanced posture. Poor posture affects vocal delivery, so avoid locked knees, weight on one leg, raised shoulders and forward thrust of the head and neck.
- Wear comfortable shoes and clothes.
- Try to develop a relaxed form of delivery with controlled breathing.
- Articulate clearly and use a good range of intonation to improve your projection. Emphasis, energy and variety projects the voice better than a loud and strained voice.
- Don't try to speak too loudly as it can lead to a constricted and often harsh vocal pitch.

Pay attention to the environment

- Be aware of the acoustics of the space to determine the amount of reverberation (vibrations and/or echo from your voice).
- When speaking outdoors, if possible stand on a platform or near a wall.
- When possible, use amplification to avoid voice strain.

SUPPORTING YOUR COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR CONSTITUENTS

As an MP, you will be aware of the need to be accessible to those who have a range of disabilities. Ensuring accessibility might include providing wheelchair access, the use of sign language, Braille or induction loops.

Did you know that you also represent many people who have speech, language and communication needs? These constituents will require accessible communication in the following areas:

- Interpersonal communications
- Public documents
- Websites and online tools and/or services
- Presentations
- Social media

Accessible communication benefits everyone by making information clear, direct and easy to understand. It takes into consideration the various barriers to accessing information, and provides opportunities for feedback.

We have designed these tips to help you communicate with your constituents with communication needs.



COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH COMMUNICATION NEEDS



MAKING ME WELCOME

Being respectful of any communication difficulty, supporting me and not making assumptions.



GIVING ME TIME

Being patient, giving time to communicate and not rushing or ignoring me.



SPEAKING DIRECTLY TO ME

Talking to me (rather than to my carer or support worker) with appropriate eye contact.



ASKING WHAT HELPS

Adapting communication as required. Communication is a two-way process!



LISTENING TO ME

Listening carefully and asking for repetition if you do not understand. Checking I have understood.



PROVIDING INFORMATION IN A WAY I CAN UNDERSTAND

Writing things down when needed and providing accessible information in an appropriate form.

ORGANISING AN ACCESSIBLE OFFICE

GENERAL GUIDANCE

- Ensure the physical environment is accessible with clear signage.
- Welcome people and introduce yourself using your name.
- Speak and write in a concise and simple style to ensure users understand content quickly and completely.
- Avoid jargon.
- Explain all acronyms.
- Use short sentences and plain English.



PRODUCING ACCESSIBLE LITERATURE

LAYOUT

- Use wide margins.
- Justify all of your writing to the left.
- Use at least 1.5 spacing between lines.
- Number the pages at the bottom right hand side.
- Use large font: at least size 16.
- Use a clear font like Arial.
- Use numbers, not the words for numbers: 8 not eight.
- Do not use text boxes as the formatting is hard to adjust.

ORGANISATION

- Use headings and subheadings. Use colour, bold and large font to highlight information. Check colours used will copy well in black and white if appropriate. Always use the same font across all the headings.
- Always finish a word on the line.
- Always finish a sentence on the same page.
- Always finish a paragraph on the same page.

IMAGES

- Use symbols, pictures, photos or drawings to support main points.
- You can purchase “picture kits” from specialised organisations.
- Make sure the pictures are relevant and age appropriate.
- Don't put pictures over the words.
- When using photos make sure they are up to date and clear with not too much in the photo.



Which of your constituents will have communication and/or swallowing needs?

Communication and swallowing problems can affect people at any age. They can be the result of a condition affecting someone from birth or happen later in life. Just some of the areas in which speech and language therapists will support your constituents include:

- Autism
- Stammering
- Mental health
- Hearing impairment
- Stroke
- Dementia
- Parkinson's disease
- Motor neurone disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Cerebral palsy
- Down syndrome
- Learning disability
- Voice
- Brain injury
- Cleft lip and palate
- Various cancers, including head and neck cancer
- Various respiratory conditions

You will also have many constituents who have specific difficulties understanding and using spoken language, including those with developmental language disorder.

How many of your constituents will have communication needs?

Many of your constituents will have communication needs.

- Over 10% of children and young people – some 1.4m in the UK – have long-term communication needs. This includes those with developmental language disorder (7.6% of children) and language difficulties related to other conditions (including autism and hearing impairment) as well as other communication needs, such as stammering.
- In areas of socio-economic disadvantage, around 50% of children can start school with delayed language or other types of communication needs.
- Speech, language and communication needs are a common type of special educational need. In England, for instance, they are the most common primary type of need at 22% of children with special educational needs.
- Five times as many children with a mental disorder report having speech or language problems than those without.
- 20% of the adult population may experience communication difficulties at some point in their lives.

Left unidentified and unsupported communication needs can lead to a range of negative outcomes. These can relate to: mental health and well-being, educational attainment, relationships, employability, and contact with the criminal justice system.

How many of your constituents will have swallowing needs?

Many of your constituents will also have problems swallowing (this is known as dysphagia).

- Over 80% of people with motor neurone disease
- Up to 80% of people with Parkinson's disease
- 50-75% of nursing home residents
- 50-60% of head and neck cancer survivors
- More than 40% of stroke survivors
- 33% of the people with multiple sclerosis
- 27% of those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- 15% of people with a learning disability require support to eat and drink

Left unsupported, difficulties with safe eating and drinking can lead to choking, chest infections, pneumonia, hospital admission and, in some cases, death.

ABOUT SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPISTS

Speech and language therapists support your constituents with communication and swallowing needs to achieve the outcomes that matter to them. This can involve working with individuals directly, or with their friends and families. They also train the wider health and social care, education and justice workforce.

As the professional body, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists works for better lives for people with communication and swallowing needs. We aim to promote excellence in speech and language therapy to improve the quality of your constituents' lives. We have offices in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, or a personal briefing about the work of speech and language therapists, please contact:

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