



Challenges facing disabled people in the UK in 2018 June 2018

Executive Summary

- Communication disability in the UK affects millions of people. Up to 20% of the UK's population experience communication difficulty at some point in their lives and almost 10% of all children start school with some form of language disorder.
- People with communication disability can face challenges in their daily lives, including accessing and engaging with education, securing and retaining employment, or accessing and benefitting from health and social care services.
- Making reasonable adjustments to ensure that people with communication disability are able to communicate in the way that best suits them is essential if they are to successfully overcome the challenges they face.
- In our submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in June 2017, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists argued that the definition of a disabled person in the Equality Act 2010 should be extended to include communication impairment.

Communication Disability

There are an estimated 2.5 million people in the UK with a communication disability. This can be the result of a number of conditions such as a stammer, but also as co-morbidities. These can include: stroke; head injuries; neurological conditions, such as motor neurone disease, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, and dementia; autism spectrum disorders; mental illness; learning disability; certain cancers; sensory disabilities, such as hearing and visual impairment; and physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy.

The Equality Act provides protection to individuals with 'physical or mental impairments' that have 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effects on a person's ability to do normal daily activities, which may include communication disabilities, **but may not protect individuals with communication disabilities that are distinct from physical or mental impairment.**

People with communication disability may have difficulty in one or more of:

- understanding the spoken word and/or other non-verbal communication, also the written word;
- expressing themselves through speech and/or writing or other non-verbal communication;
- language functions affecting their ability to express all they want to get over in a meaningful, appropriate and/or socially acceptable ways;
- interacting with others in socially acceptable ways.

Prevalence of Communication Disability

Communication disability in the UK affects millions of people - it is estimated that between 1 and 2% of the UK's population¹ at any one time has a severe speech language and communication disability, requiring specific assistance in order to have their needs met. There is a much larger group, perhaps up to 20% of the population,² who may experience some difficulties with communication at some point in their lives relative to the population as a whole.

- More than 10% of children and young people – 1.4m in the UK - have long-term speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) which create barriers to communication or learning in everyday life:
 - 7.6% have developmental language disorder; (This is a condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. There is no obvious reason for these difficulties – no hearing problem or physical disability explains them.)³

- 2.3% have language disorders associated with another condition such as learning disabilities, autism, cerebral palsy, brain injury, sensorineural hearing loss, and Down's syndrome.⁴
- SLCN also include conditions such as speech difficulties, stammering and many others.
- Around 50% of children in areas of social disadvantage start school with delayed language.⁵ This figure includes children with the range of identified SLCN.
- SLCN are the most common type of need in primary-aged children with statements of special educational need. 26.5% all mainstream-educated, statemented children in this age group have speech, language and communication as their primary need.⁶
- Two-thirds of 7-14 year olds with communication difficulties have additional behaviour problems.⁷
- 66-90% of young offenders have low language skills, with 46-67% of these being in the poor or very poor range.⁸

Challenges faced by people with communication disability

At present between 1 and 2 % of the UK's population with communication disability may be left open to discrimination in the areas of employment, education, access to goods, facilities and services, buying or renting land or property, and for tenants to seek disability-related adaptations if their communication disability is distinct from any physical or mental impairment.

Service providers might provide services on worse terms to people with communication problems if they do not have to make reasonable adjustments for them.

What can be done to support people with communication disability?

Inclusive communication techniques should be adopted to create supportive and effective communication environments, using every available means of communication possible to aid understanding and expression of need and choice. This can include spoken language, written language and all forms of non-verbal communication. The latter can involve the use of supported and Augmentative and Alternative Communication – using gestures, signing, symbols and pictures, word boards, communication boards, and other forms of technology to support or replace spoken communication.

Amendments to the Equality Act 2010

In our submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in June 2017, we argued that the definition of a disabled person used within the Equality Act 2010 should be extended to ensure greater recognition and alleviation of the adverse effects of communication disability. We argued that the definition should be changed from 'a physical or mental impairment' to 'a physical, mental or communication impairment'.

Notes

1 Law, J., Gaag, A., Hardcastle, W. J., Beckett, D. J., MacGregor, A., & Plunkett, C. (2007). Communication Support Needs: a Review of the Literature. Scottish Executive.

2 Ibid.

3 Norbury, Courtenay Frazier, et al. "The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: evidence from a population study." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 57.11 (2016): 1247-1257.

4 Ibid.

5 Locke, Ann, Jane Ginsborg, and Ian Peers. "Development and disadvantage: implications for the early years and beyond." *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders* 37.1 (2002): 3-15.

6 HC 1048-III Health Committee Written evidence from I CAN and The Communication Trust (PH 163)
<https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhealth/1048/1048vw156.htm>

7 Cohen et al 1998

8 Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* 2007; 42, 505-520.

For more information, please contact Peter Just on peter.just@rcslt.org or 020 7378 3630.