Support in the NHS for patients with learning disabilities

November 2026

Why communication matters: safe and equitable healthcare

People with learning disabilities experience significant health inequalities, including poorer health outcomes, premature mortality and avoidable deaths.

The NHS England-commissioned Learning from Lives and Deaths (LeDeR) 2024 report highlights the scale of these inequalities. It found that adults with learning disabilities died, on average, 19 years younger than the general population, with over a third classified as avoidable.

These inequalities underline the importance of ensuring that people with learning disabilities receive timely, appropriate, and equitable healthcare.

Effective communication is fundamental to safe healthcare. People must be supported to understand information about their health, communicate symptoms, pain and concerns, express their wishes and preferences, give informed consent and participate in decisions about their care.

When communication needs are not recognised or supported, there is a risk that symptoms are missed, concerns are misunderstood, diagnoses are delayed and people do not receive appropriate treatment.

People with learning disabilities have diverse communication needs. Some communicate verbally, while others use alternative and augmentative communication (AAC), visual supports, signs, symbols or other non-verbal means of communication. Some require additional time, specialist support or communication partners to express themselves.

Healthcare services must recognise these individual differences and ensure that people receive the communication support they need, rather than making assumptions about their ability to understand or communicate.

Why accessible information and communication matter

Meeting people's communication needs requires more than simply providing information in an accessible format. It means recognising, recording and sharing individual communication needs, providing appropriate communication support and making reasonable adjustments consistently across NHS services. This may also help to ensure that services are meeting their legal requirements under the Equality Act.

Speech and language therapists have an important role in supporting people with learning disabilities who have speech, language and communication needs. They help people communicate their needs, understand information and participate in decisions about their

health and care. They also support healthcare professionals to understand and respond to people's individual communication needs.

The Accessible Information Standard

Despite existing requirements, people with learning disabilities continue to experience barriers when accessing healthcare.

Research by Healthwatch across South West London GP practices highlights significant gaps in the implementation of the Accessible Information Standard. The review, involving 144 patients and carers and 82 GP staff, found that 73% of patients and carers were unaware of the Accessible Information Standard. People also reported having to repeatedly explain their communication needs at different appointments.

These findings highlight the gap between having a national standard and ensuring that people actually receive the information and communication support they need.

The Reasonable Adjustment Digital Flag

The Reasonable Adjustment Digital Flag offers an important opportunity to improve how people's reasonable adjustment needs are identified, recorded and shared across health and care services.

All providers of NHS and publicly funded health and social care services in England were required to achieve full compliance with the Reasonable Adjustment Digital Flag Information Standard by 30 September 2026.

However, recording someone's needs is only the starting point. The flag must translate into meaningful action. Staff need to understand the information recorded and ensure appropriate adjustments are delivered consistently across services.

The Digital Flag complements the Accessible Information Standard but has a broader purpose. While the Accessible Information Standard focuses on information and communication support needs, the Digital Flag supports the recording and sharing of a wider range of reasonable adjustments.

Key challenges and gaps

1. Communication needs are not always recorded, updated or shared consistently between GP practices, hospitals and other NHS services.
2. Staff need to understand what the information means and take action. A flag must translate into practical adjustments, such as Easy Read information, additional processing time, communication support and appropriate appointment arrangements.

3 Healthcare professionals may not know how to communicate effectively with people with learning disabilities, particularly people with complex communication needs.
4. Information can be lost when patients move between services, meaning people and families have to repeatedly explain their needs.
5. Families often have to advocate for people, explain their communication needs and challenge services when reasonable adjustments are not provided. While families and carers play an important role, responsibility for meeting people's needs must rest with services and should not fall to families alone
6. Better monitoring is needed to establish whether reasonable adjustments are actually delivered, not simply whether a flag has been added to someone's record.

Questions for the Minister

1. Reasonable Adjustment Digital Flag – implementation and accountability

With the 30 September 2026 deadline for full conformance with the Reasonable Adjustment Digital Flag Information Standard now passed, what proportion of NHS and publicly funded health and social care providers have achieved full conformance, how many remain non-compliant, and what action is the Government taking to address any outstanding gaps? How will it ensure that the flag leads to meaningful improvements in people's experiences, including the consistent delivery of the reasonable adjustments recorded?

2. Accessible Information Standard – communication support

What action is the Government taking to ensure consistent implementation of the Accessible Information Standard, including appropriate communication support and staff training, and how will it monitor and hold organisations accountable for meeting people's individual information and communication needs?