

April 2006

Accessible events – a guide for organisers

Foreword

Events such as conferences, festivals, annual meetings, award ceremonies, fundraisers and seminars are big business and an important part of the lives of many people.

This Guide, which has been developed by the Meetings and Events Industry of Australia in collaboration with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, is designed to help those responsible for organising events and to ensure they are accessible for people with disabilities - whether they are presenters, sponsors or participants.

It is based on the experience of organisers who are responsible for creating accessible events.

Under both State/Territory and Federal law, making events accessible for people with disabilities is a legal requirement, but with approximately four million people with disabilities in Australia who have significant spending power, providing access is also an important commercial decision.

Organisations wanting to make an event more accessible often have difficulty in finding out what they can do to ensure the best possible access is provided.

We hope that this guide will help you to do this.

Linda Gaunt
Meetings and Events Australia

Feedback

Readers are invited to submit their ideas and suggestions for making events more accessible for people with disabilities. Please let us know how useful you found this Guide.

Please forward comments to: mea@mea.org.au

Contents

Section 1 About this Guide	
Section 2 Why should I think about access?	
Section 3 What the Law says.	
Section 4 Thinking about access in the early planning stages	
Section 5 The venue	
Section 6 Transport – getting there and getting away .	
Section 7 Promoting your event.	
Section 8 Tickets, booking and registration	
Section 9 Making information accessible.	
Section 10 The Team	
Section 11 Sound, lighting and other technology	
Section 12 Additional services	
Section 13 Acknowledgments	
Section 14 Glossary	
Section 15 Further contacts	

Section 1 - About this Guide

This practical Guide aims to help you to make events more accessible for people with disabilities who may be attending as presenters, participants or sponsors. It gives information and guidance on best practice that will open up to you a section of your potential market that is often overlooked, and help you to meet your existing legal responsibilities.

The Guide does not attempt to list everything that will need to be done for every type of event. It is not designed as a technical checklist covering detailed specifications. Instead, it outlines principles which will lead to the development of best practice and increase access for people with disabilities to a range of events.

This Guide aims to help you:

- think about access and participation when you plan an event;
- identify features that make it impossible or difficult for people with disabilities to access your event;
- understand what you can do to ensure the best possible access;
- understand the relevance of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) and State/Territory anti-discrimination laws;
- find further sources of advice, information and assistance you might need.

Definition of an event

This Guide uses the term 'event(s)' to cover the broad range of functions such as exhibitions, conferences, awards ceremonies, Annual General Meetings, film festivals, fundraisers, outdoor concerts and local community street fairs. The Guide uses the term 'event organiser' to describe the person or organisation hosting the event.

Who should use this Guide?

This Guide will be useful to anybody who is involved in organising events whatever the nature, size or location of the event. You might be a professional organiser of events like conferences or exhibitions, a Government Department or local authority, a voluntary organisation, or chair of a local fundraising group. You will also find this Guide useful if you are a student of event or hospitality management.

Section 2 - Why should you think about access?

There are many reasons why you should think about access and how you plan to meet the requirements of people with disabilities:

- There are around four million people with disabilities in Australia representing a considerable proportion of your potential audience or customers.
- People with disabilities can also influence the choices of their families and friends if they have had a previous bad experience.

- Everyone benefits when access is better, including other attendees, people making deliveries, people with heavy baggage, young children, those with prams and many older people.
- Under the law you have a legal responsibility to prevent discrimination against people with disabilities. Complaints of discrimination could result in costly court proceedings and rulings.

Section 3 - What does the law say?

While all States and Territories have similar laws that prohibit discrimination, this section provides a brief overview of the Federal *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA). The DDA aims to ensure that people with disabilities are not treated less favorably than people who do not have a disability.

The DDA covers areas such as employment, access to goods, services and facilities, education, access to premises and transport. The DDA defines disability very broadly and includes, for example:

- people who are blind or vision impaired;
- people who are Deaf or hearing impaired;
- people with intellectual and learning disabilities;
- people with mobility and manual dexterity difficulties;
- people with psychiatric disabilities;
- people who have a brain injury;
- people who have epilepsy; and
- people who have a disease-causing organism such as the HIV virus.

Service providers, such as events organisers and sponsors have a legal responsibility under State/Territory and Federal laws to avoid discriminating and, when barriers exist, to remove them.

What sort of access problems might there be?

Access for people with disabilities is not only about physical access to buildings for wheelchair users, but also includes access to written information for people with vision impairments and access to public announcements for Deaf people.

The following are examples of actions that might lead to discrimination complaints:

- Door stewards at a rock concert refuse entry to a ticket holder because he has cerebral palsy and has difficulty controlling and co-ordinating his movements.
- A conference centre has a policy of only providing a self-service buffet at lunchtime for delegates. Some people with mobility impairments or vision impairments may find it difficult or impossible to carry or hold food from a buffet selection and to eat without placing their plate on a table.

- An awards ceremony takes place on a platform that can only be accessed by two steps so a graduate who uses a wheelchair cannot participate in the ceremony in the same way other students can.
- Motions being put to an important company general meeting are only available as printed material making it difficult for a blind shareholder to participate in the debate.
- The keynote speech at a conference is delivered in a room with no hearing augmentation system for people with a hearing impairment.
- A senior staff member of a major conference sponsor has to go to another building to find an accessible toilet.

Who is responsible for making sure an event is accessible?

If you run an event you are a service provider and you will be the person responsible for making sure the event is accessible.

This is reasonably straightforward where, for example, an event organiser holds an event in their own premises and provides all the services such as information, catering, staff and entertainment. However, in other cases, there will be a number of service providers involved in a single event. The following examples help to illustrate this.

Example

A local council is running a program of consultation events for people living in the local area. It is hosting these meetings in community centres that it owns and operates. The service provider is the local council and it would be responsible for ensuring that each event, including the content of the consultation and any supporting materials, are accessible for people with disabilities.

Example

Food is available to buy from a burger van at an agricultural show. The fast food van was asked to attend by the show organisers and to provide hot food at the event. The service provider in this situation is the owner of the van and he or she may have responsibilities under the DDA to ensure that people with disabilities can get access to the fast food service being provided.

Example

An exhibition organiser rents out exhibition stand space to companies wishing to be represented at the exhibition. The exhibition organiser would be responsible for ensuring that the exhibition stand spaces are accessible, but the exhibitors might be responsible for ensuring that the services provided in the stand space are accessible.

Example

The organiser of an international two-day conference offers to make hotel bookings for delegates. The organiser is providing a hotel booking service and it will be responsible for ensuring that the booking service itself is accessible to people with disabilities. However, the

hotel is also a service provider and it would be responsible for ensuring that the hotel rooms and services are accessible for all guests, including guests with disabilities.

Where there is any doubt about whether a particular event is covered by the DDA or concerns about who is the responsible service provider, you should seek further advice (see Section 15).

How can you make sure that services supplied to you as an event organiser are accessible?

If you contract services for an event you are organising, you could ask suppliers for details of how they make their services accessible for people with disabilities. If they are providing a service to the public then they should already be aware that they have responsibilities under the DDA and know how they plan to meet those responsibilities.

Services supplied to you by others might include things like the venues, sound systems and catering services. Other services might include those supplied by professional conference, event or exhibition organisers you hire to help you put on your event.

What happens if someone believes they have been discriminated against?

If a person with a disability tells you they feel they have been discriminated against when they have tried to access your event, you should consider what you can do to put things right. The guidance in Sections 4 to 12 can be used to help find solutions.

It is important that you take any complaint seriously and look for ways to resolve the issue through discussion and negotiation.

If a person with a disability decides to make a complaint to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), or a state/territory anti-discrimination body, you will be informed of the complaint and asked to provide your side of the story.

The HREOC will try to conciliate an agreement between you and the person who has complained, but if this is not successful the complainant will be advised of their right to take their complaint to the Federal Court or Federal Magistrates Court. (The process is similar under state and territory anti-discrimination laws.)

If the Federal Court or Federal Magistrates Court finds that you have discriminated and there is no unjustifiable hardship defence (see below) it can order you to remove the barrier or stop the discrimination and to make changes to avoid discriminating again in the future. The Court can also order you to pay compensation to the complainant.

To get an idea of the type of agreements that have been reached to resolve complaints in the area of service delivery, look at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's web site at http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/decisions/conciliation.html#area

Do you always have to remove barriers or make changes to avoid discrimination?

In some circumstances; the law says you might not have to remove barriers or make changes to ensure equal access. This is referred to as a defence of 'unjustifiable hardship.' Factors that may mean you would not have to provide full access include:

- the cost of making a particular change or providing a particular service would impose an 'unjustifiable hardship' on you as the service provider; or
- a health and safety regulation is applicable at the venue that prevents a particular change to the premises from being made; or
- the adjustment will change the nature of the service or make it impossible for you to provide that service for other people.

It's not possible to say for certain what would be an unjustifiable hardship as every complaint of discrimination has to be assessed on its own merit. The resources available to some organisations would make it difficult for them to successfully argue unjustifiable hardship in most situations, whereas other organisations may have so few resources available to them that any significant additional costs could seriously threaten the viability of the event.

All that can be said is that as an event organiser you need to carefully consider any decision you make about not providing equal access to your event.

If you do decide that providing full access to a particular aspect of the event might cause an unjustifiable hardship that does not mean that you have justification to do nothing. Your broad responsibilities under the law still apply and you should concentrate on the changes that you can make, including considering alternative ways of making your event accessible.

Example

Even if the main public entrance to an event cannot be made accessible because of technical or cost reasons, there may be an alternative means of providing access through a different entrance.

Example

Even if it is not possible to provide all documents for a conference in Braille, it might still be possible to provide them in an accessible electronic format such as a Word document on a CD.

Section 4 - Thinking about access in the early planning stage

The most effective way of ensuring access for everyone is to think about access at the very earliest planning stages of your event. This means thinking about the access requirements of attendees, staff, speakers, performers and exhibitors who may have a disability.

It will often be more expensive and more time consuming to address the requirements of people with disabilities if you treat access as something you add on at a later stage.

Example

If you produce all your publicity material and conference papers in an accessible electronic format such as Word or html before getting it desk-top published it will be much easier and cheaper to meet the access needs of blind people at a later stage.

Example

If you ensure that physical access to a venue and good internal signage are some of your initial criteria for booking a venue you will not have to look for access solutions at a later stage.

Involving people with disabilities

A good way of ensuring the best possible access would be to involve people with disabilities in planning your event. If you have a steering group or committee you could include the views of people with disabilities by inviting some to join the group. You could also speak to local groups or contact voluntary organisations for information and advice. You can find out about these organisations in Section 15.

Section 5 - The venue

Choosing the venue is likely to be one of the first things you do and one of the most important. You may have your own venue that you want to use or you might be looking for a venue to hire for your event. In both cases there are things you can do to make it easier for people with disabilities to come to take part in your event.

Choosing a venue

Finding an accessible venue can be very difficult. Many venues available for hire are not accessible or only have a few access features.

You might already have criteria to use in your search for a venue such as the location, the number of people it can hold, the cost, or whether it has the facilities to suit your event such as a stage area, seminar breakout rooms or outdoor areas.

At this early stage, you should also be thinking about criteria to help you find a venue that is equally accessible for everyone.

As a starting point, you should only consider venues that allow people to enter, exit and move around the building with ease, that offer accessible toilet facilities and where, ideally, the event can take place on one floor only.

If the venue is not ideal it may be possible to make improvements for your event.

Example

A community centre is accessed from the street by climbing two steps and is regularly used for local events. The venue management get permission from the council to create a ramp at the front of the building. This helps people with a mobility impairment to enter the centre. Until the ramp is completed the venue management might provide a temporary ramp.

Example

A hotel conference centre has each of its rooms identified with small, hard-to-read signs with low contrast. The venue might add larger, high-contrast signage including room numbers rather than names. Apart from assisting people with a vision impairment this would also assist anyone who is unfamiliar with the venue.

Visiting the venue

While many venue managers will have a clear understanding of what access features they have, unfortunately many do not, and it is not uncommon to arrive at a venue that its management claims is accessible only to find one or two steps at the entrance. It is good practice, therefore, to check the venue in person before confirming a booking as well as asking the venue management for information. If in doubt, you could carry out or commission an access audit.

What do we mean by an Access Audit?

An access audit is ideally an independent, professional assessment of the access features of a venue and its policies and practices. An audit will result in a report outlining existing access provisions and recommendations for improvements. You can find details of where to find an access consultant in Section 15.

There are also audit tools available if you are not able to arrange for a professional access audit. You can find information about how to find an audit consultant in Section 15.

Top Tips for finding an accessible venue

The following list of tips is not exhaustive, but will assist in identifying accessible features at a venue:

- Is there good access with no steps or other barriers from the arrival point at the venue, through the main entrance(s), to all the areas being used by participants?
- If there is a reception desk? Is it (or a part of it) at a height that is accessible for people using wheelchairs? If not, can an alternative desk be provided for the event?
- Are there any steps or other barriers to facilities being used by participants such as 'break-out' or workshop rooms, dining areas, outside areas and exhibition areas?
- If there is a speaker's or performer's platform, is it accessible?
- Are the accessible toilets at the same location as other toilets or close by? Check to make sure they are not being used as a storage room!
- Is there clear signage to direct people from the entrance(s) to any information desk and all the facilities being used?
- If participants have to use lifts to get to facilities are they large enough for people using wheelchairs to use? Are the control buttons at a height that can be accessed by people using wheelchairs? Do the control buttons have raised buttons and Braille information? Is there audio information in the lift telling people what floor they are arriving at?
- If the venue has fixed seating are there wheelchair-accessible spaces provided at various locations spread throughout the venue?

- Is there a choice of seating available that will provide extra support for people with disabilities who might need it?
- 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 (see Section 15) and is it functioning properly?
- Are the surfaces on the paths, inside and outside, even and slip resistant?
- Are there clear evacuation procedures in place? Do they take account of people with disabilities including people with sensory impairments and mobility impairments?
- Is there good manoeuvrability around exhibition stands?
- Have staff received disability awareness training so that they can respond appropriately to the requirements of participants with disabilities?
- Are staff aware of the right of people using assistance dogs to bring them into the venue?

Features such as entrances, lifts, ramps and corridor widths are all subject to building laws and should comply with specifications in Australian Standards (see Section 15 – Information about building specifications and requirements). If you are in doubt about whether or not the accessible features of the venue are built to the relevant building law specifications check with the venue owner/operator, use one of the checklists referred to in Section 15, or arrange for a professional access audit before confirming your booking.

Outdoor events

If you are organising an outdoor event you will need to consider other issues including:

- ensuring the event layout, for example, where stalls are located, provides for the best access and circulation;
- providing some parking spaces close to the event for people with disabilities;
- installing portable accessible toilet facilities, marquees or first-aid cabins;
- supplying occasional seating points;
- designating small areas close to a stage for use by people using wheelchairs;
- covering some grassy areas with materials that make mobility easier;
- ensuring cables are secure and don't present a trip hazard;
- producing an 'Access Map' for the event.

For more information on outside events organisation, see Section 15.

Making changes

If you have identified changes that need to be made, you should discuss with the venue management who will be responsible for making the changes (see Section 3 – 'What the Law says').

Changes might be permanent and take some time to put into place, like leveling external paving, or may be something simple like moving furniture on a path of travel, or changing the layout of chairs in seminar rooms.

You will need to be sure that the venue management can implement the changes they are responsible for before your event takes place. Alternatively, you could consider finding another venue.

Section 6 - Transport - Getting there and getting away

Getting people to and from the venue, safely and efficiently, is very important. If you plan to give out information about how to reach the venue and about public transport then you should think about people with disabilities who want to attend and about their transport requirements.

Public transport

If you plan to provide details of public transport, such as train stations or bus services running near the venue, you should also find out about how accessible they are for people with disabilities and pass this information on to your attendees.

Drop off points

Areas where cars, taxis and coaches set down passengers should be as close as possible to the entrance of the venue. Check if there is a kerb ramp at the drop off point to allow a person using a wheelchair to get from the road to the entrance.

Car parking

If the venue has its own car park, some of the spaces should be reserved for people with disabilities.

There are technical standards applicable to car parks, but these are not always complied with. This could make it very difficult or impossible for some people with disabilities to attend your event even though they may have already travelled a long way or paid to do so.

Top Tips for car parking

- Is the car park clearly signed and are the accessible car parking bays clearly identified?
- Are the accessible car parking bays on firm level ground?
- Are the accessible car parking bays close to the entrance(s)?
- Is there a clear level path of travel from the accessible car parking spaces to the entrance(s)?
- Is there a kerb ramp if a pavement or walkway needs to be crossed?
- If there is an intercom system at the entrance of the car park, make sure a person with a hearing impairment or reduced limb movement is not disadvantaged in using the system.

If you are in doubt about whether or not any of the spaces are built to the relevant building standards check with the venue owner/operator or arrange for a professional access audit before confirming your booking.

If there are no parking facilities at the venue, find out about local on-street and car park facilities. It may be possible to reserve spaces for people with disabilities attending your event.

Getting Away

Don't forget going home! Think about arrangements for leaving, especially if there are likely to be crowds and long queues. It might not be possible for some people with disabilities to stand for long periods of time. There may be arrangements you could put in place such as seating or using stewards to let people know when their transport is at the front door.

Section 7 - Promoting your event

You will want to market your event, sell tickets and fill places. This section looks at how you can promote your event in ways that are accessible for all.

Telling people about access at your event

You will have a lot of information about your event that you can share with people with disabilities.

You may use mailouts, advertise in newspapers or magazines, or even on radio and television. More and more event organisers are using a web page or e-based networks to communicate relevant information. Each of these methods has access implications for people with disabilities particularly, for example, for people who are blind or vision impaired, Deaf or have a hearing impairment, or who have learning disabilities.

Top tips for promoting your event

- If you promote your event on a web site, check it is accessible and compatible with the range of 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). Generally pdf documents are not considered to be accessible and should not be the only available format on your web site (see Section 15).
- Provide alternative contact details such as a telephone number, fax or e-mail address. Some people with disabilities will require one or another of these. You should also consider offering a telephone typewriter (TTY) number for Deaf people or people with a hearing or speech impairment to contact you directly (see Section 15).
- In all your promotional material, ensure the content is finalised in an accessible electronic format such as Word, html or rtf before sending it of for desktop publishing. This will mean that if a blind person requires access to the material it is easy to produce it in a preferred format.

- In your written material use a large font size in a clear sans serif style such as Arial and use a good contrast for text and background. You can find out more about this in Section 9 – Making information accessible.
- Use appropriate language in your promotional material when communicating information to people with disabilities. For example, talk about ‘accessible toilets and parking’ rather than ‘disabled toilet or parking’, talk about ‘access for people with disabilities’ rather than ‘disabled access’, talk about ‘people who use wheelchairs’ rather than ‘people confined to wheelchairs’, talk about ‘a person who is blind’ rather than ‘a person who suffers blindness’.
- Having made the effort to ensure good access, don’t forget to promote your event through organisations and networks aimed at people with disabilities in order to fully access all possible markets (see Section 15).

Section 8 - Tickets, booking and registration

Different types of event will have different ticket, reservation or booking systems in place. This section looks at some of the features of ticketing and booking and makes suggestions on how to make these more accessible for people with disabilities.

Selling tickets

If you are selling tickets for your event, you will need to ensure the system for booking is accessible. For example, box offices should be located in a place where people using wheelchairs can access them and booking agencies should have accessible web site booking systems.

If you are using a third party ticketing agency, make sure they are able to provide accessible sales services and accurate information about access to and at the venue.

Seat allocation

If seats are allocated at the time of booking, you will need to consider how to make sure that people with disabilities are not discriminated against in this service.

Conference venues and stadiums may have allocated seating for people who use wheelchairs. This might be in an area designed specifically for people who use wheelchairs or it might be an adaptable area where seating is removed as necessary.

Check to make sure there are flexible seating arrangements that allow for a choice of positions; requiring everyone who uses a wheelchair to sit at the back behind a pillar is not appropriate.

If you are issuing seats on a first come, first-served basis, you should allocate wheelchair accessible seats last so as to ensure they remain available if people with disabilities need them.

People who are Deaf or have a hearing impairment are likely to prefer seats where they have a good view of what is happening on the stage or speakers’ platform. Ensuring this option will

assist people who lip read to do so and also ensure that any communication support, such as sign language interpreters, are not obscured.

Registration forms

Asking people to complete and return registration forms is a common feature of events such as conferences and seminars. However, you need to be flexible as some people with disabilities may need to pass on their information over the telephone for registration.

You can use the form to let people know what access provisions are already in place such as physical features, sign language interpreters and large print material.

Examples of suggested wording for this would be:

Access for people with disabilities

The conference venue is accessible for people using wheelchairs and all handout materials will be available in accessible electronic format. If you have any other access requirements in order to participate fully, please let us know on this form.

Or:

Access for people with disabilities

If you have any access requirements in order to participate in this workshop please note them in the space below, and a conference organiser will contact you to discuss your requirements further.

If you receive a request for something you are not sure about or that you believe might involve an unjustifiable hardship, consider the issues raised in Section 3: What does the law say? If you decide you cannot respond to the request, talk to the applicant about any alternative ways of responding as soon as possible.

Remember; treat all information you receive confidentially.

Support workers and assistants

Some people with disabilities may be accompanied by support workers, or personal assistants. Their role is to assist the person with a disability to participate fully in the event and they will only attend to the requirements of the person they are there to support.

You will need to think in advance how you will respond to support workers who attend your event. Each situation will be different but, in general terms, if the person is solely there to provide assistance, you should consider not charging admission or registration fees, or charging only enough to cover basic costs such as catering.

Section 9 - Making information accessible

This section looks at making information accessible for people with disabilities.

Written Information

When you produce written information for your event, such as programs, hand outs or agendas, you will need to think about how you will make these accessible for people with disabilities. Sometimes this might include producing information in different formats.

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.

If you are running a conference or seminar, you may be planning to give attendees reading material that has not been produced by your own organisation. This could be material produced by sponsors or exhibitors and inserted into delegate packs. You could ask these organisations to ensure they provide you with accessible information including information in alternative formats.

If they are service providers they are likely to have duties under the Disability Discrimination Act and similar State and Territory laws and should be prepared to meet any requests or to offer an alternative means of making the information accessible.

Many people with a vision impairment and others, including those with brain injuries, will welcome receiving copies of papers before the event as this gives them an opportunity to read them and to be able to concentrate on what is being said once they are at the event.

You can find out more about different formats and how to provide them in Section 15.

Visual information

When using presentation tools such as power point or video be aware that the information presented may need to be communicated in a different form in order to ensure that blind people can access the information. This may involve a simple description of what other participants are seeing or may involve the production of accessible electronic, audio or Braille copies of the material.

Audio information

There are a number of ways in which access to audio information can be provided for Deaf people or people with a hearing impairment.

Material may be provided in a written form prior to or at the event. Note takers may provide a running 'commentary' on the event; hearing augmentation systems may be available, such as a hearing loop or infra-red system; a stenocaptioner may be employed to reproduce speeches in real-time, projected onto a screen; and for those people who use Auslan sign language an interpreter may be provided.

For more information on how to provide these services see Section 15.

Section 10 - The Event Management Team

Everybody in the event management team including venue staff, performers, exhibitors, session chairs, booking staff, suppliers and speakers can contribute to making your event more accessible for people with disabilities.

This section looks at the different people involved in making your event a success as it will be important to make sure that everyone knows about access arrangements.

Your team

Your own team is critical to ensuring your event is as accessible as possible. If they are well prepared and trained they will be able to deal with any problems and make any necessary changes on the day as the need arises.

You should think about training for you and your staff. Disability awareness training is available and can be tailored to meet your needs. You can expect disability awareness training to include an introduction to the DDA, an awareness of disability, and how to meet some of the requirements of people with disabilities.

An on-line kit and some organisations that can supply disability awareness training or signpost you to other suppliers are listed in Section 15.

Even after planning to ensure good access, many barriers can arise throughout the day at an event, which is why good housekeeping is so important. Remind staff to be on the look out for things going wrong. This might be double swing doors where one door is locked, bags on floors, or open cupboard doors and portable display stands creating hazards for people with vision impairment. It could be that groups of people are gathering on a designated access path preventing access for wheelchair users.

Venue staff

If you are using a hired venue for your conference or event, you may find that the venue will supply staff. Their duties may cover roles such as management, security, catering, reception, operating car park facilities or setting up exhibition areas. They may also be responsible for technical roles, such as operating lighting and PA systems where these are available.

You could ask the venue management if you can brief all staff, including any temporary and contract staff, before the event, or ask the venue management to do so. This might take the form of a briefing session on the day of the event or information in writing.

You will need to tell venue staff about any adjustments you have made, or changes that you would like them to make. Changes you might highlight in your briefing could include that you want furniture to be set up in a certain way to accommodate wheelchair access. It will be important that venue staff do not rearrange your requested changes.

You will also need to make sure staff are aware of any roles they have been given specifically to assist people with disabilities, such as serving food at the self-service buffet and carrying trays to tables.

Chairs, speakers and presenters

Session chairs, speakers and presenters need to be aware of the requirements in advance of people attending an event. For example, they may need to supply copies of power point presentations in an accessible electronic format such as Word or html for people with vision impairment.

You may also require a briefing session to explain how to work with sign language interpreters who are supporting Deaf people, and any other arrangements that may need to be put in place.

It is also important to remind speakers to describe any slides or visual material they use during a presentation for audience members who have vision impairments.

Chairs may have additional responsibilities, like explaining evacuation procedures, and they need to be aware that they should describe exits in terms of left, right, and north, south rather than pointing or saying 'over there'.

Attitude, communication and assistance

In a recent UK survey, 41% of people with disabilities valued a positive attitude above value for money. A positive attitude by staff can make all the difference on the day. How your team responds to requests for assistance and how they put things right if they go wrong will count for a lot.

It's not difficult to train your staff on how to communicate effectively with all your clients and how to give practical assistance when it's needed.

Tips for communication and assistance

Generally:

- Understand that each person with a disability is an individual with their own likes and dislikes. Always focus on the person, not their disability. Always address the person directly, not the other people who may be with them (such as a sign language interpreter or assistant).
- Always ask the person first if they want assistance; do not assume they need it.
- If you are having a conversation that will last more than a few moments with a person using a wheelchair, bend to eye level or pull up a chair.

For people who may have a learning difficulty, an intellectual disability or brain injury:

- Address the person directly, listen carefully, speak clearly and check for understanding. Always use clear language without being patronising.
- Allow the person time to ask questions and try not to rush them. Try not to overload the person with information. Make it clear 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 they can read your lips. Try to make sure there are no bright lights behind you that may limit their ability to see your lips.
- Use your normal tone of voice and volume. If possible, move out of areas with lots of background noise.
- If a Deaf person is there with a sign language interpreter, always address your comments directly to the Deaf person rather than to the interpreter.
- Pen and paper: have a pen and paper on hand to help you communicate with the person.

For people who have a vision impairment or are blind:

- Always identify yourself by name. If appropriate, ask for their name so you can address them directly and so that they know you are talking to them and not someone else.
- If a blind person asks for assistance to go somewhere, ask which side you should be on and offer your arm so they can hold it just above your elbow.
- Never pat or distract a guide dog or offer it food while it is in harness; it is a working animal under the control of its owner.

What's the best language to use?

If you are making the effort to make your event more accessible it is also important to make sure your staff and the signage you use is consistent with that effort.

Use signage that identifies:

- 'Accessible Toilet' not 'Disabled Toilet';
- 'Accessible Parking' not 'Disabled Parking';
- 'Accessible Entry' not 'Disabled Entry'.

And always refer to:

- a person with a disability rather than a disabled person;
- a person who uses a wheelchair rather than someone confined to one;
- a person who is blind rather than a person who suffers blindness.

Section 11 - Sound, lighting and other technology

Many events use technology and special effects to add to impact or to overcome issues such as the large size of the venue. This section shows how you can consider the impact for people with disabilities of any technology you use.

Flash lighting, strobes and other special effects

Some special effects can have a detrimental effect for people with disabilities such as those with epilepsy or tinnitus. If part of your event involves flash lighting, strobes and other special effects, you will need to consider how you let people know about this.

You should let people know about the special effects before they buy a ticket as well as at the event before the effect takes place. Remember to give enough notice for people to leave the area if they wish to and to let them know when the special effect stops so that they can return to the audience.

Dimming lights

Lighting must be appropriate for whoever is sitting in an audience. Particular attention must be paid to people with disabilities to ensure that they can all follow what is happening. For example, a hearing impaired person will be prevented from lip-reading if there is insufficient light on the speaker.

At some events the lights are dimmed as part of the entertainment value of the event. At conferences and seminars lights are sometimes dimmed when speakers are using visual aids such as slides or videos.

It may be necessary to dim the lights in these circumstances because any glare on the screen prevents many people in the audience from being able to see the text or images on the screen. This is something you could check when you audit the venue. It may be possible to overcome this by closing curtains and blinds and keeping suitable lights on in the room.

If dimming lights is absolutely necessary to allow delegates to see the projected images then you will have to ensure that speakers and any sign language interpreters are suitably spotlighted and there is good light for reading. It is also a good idea to give a copy of the projected images to people with a vision impairment before they come to the event in their chosen format such as large print or Braille.

Public Address systems

Public Address (PA) systems play an important role at many events, helping to ensure that people can hear what is being said in large venues. At conferences and seminars, where members of the audience are invited to ask questions from the floor, it will be important to have staff equipped with portable microphones for the audience to use.

You should check the quality and the volume of the PA system for clarity and comfort.

You should also ensure the PA system is supplemented by a hearing augmentation system to assist people with hearing impairments (see Section 15).

Section 12 - Additional Services

There are many other services that might form part of your event and it will be important that they also be accessible. This section gives guidance on a few of the most common services.

Catering

Catering at events can range from a cup of tea and a biscuit, to fast food outlets, or a sit-down banquet. It is useful to provide different catering choices where practicable and to ensure that catering staff are briefed on helping people with disabilities with their selection and service.

Top Tips for Catering

- If self-service is the only option available, ensure that staff are available to assist people with disabilities, including those with mobility and vision impairments with their food choice and their being able to carry their food to the eating area.
- Make sure that there are seats and tables available. Some people with disabilities need to sit down. Seating also helps those who are talking to a person using a wheelchair so that they do not have to constantly look up to engage in conversation.
- Make menus more accessible by printing them in large sans serif fonts using contrasting paper and print. Ensure staff are prepared to talk through the menu.
- Provide a choice of cutlery and crockery. A mug may be easier for some people with disabilities to use than cups and saucers or plastic cups that do not have handles. Offer drinking straws as standard.
- Don't overlook the small things. Sachets of condiments, and milk in very small containers, can be difficult to open. You could consider ensuring help is on hand for people experiencing difficulty.
- Make sure there is room for everybody to manoeuvre safely between tables. When you conduct a site visit to the venue think about what it will be like when lots of people are moving around and sitting at tables.
- Consider having a number of food and beverage service areas spread around the venue. This is helpful for people with disabilities as there is likely to be a service point closer to where they are. Everyone will benefit from the shorter queues if you only have a short period for a break before continuing the event program.
- Consider dietary needs such as gluten-free food and the needs of diabetics and ensure buffet food is clearly marked as being gluten-free or vegan for example. Registration forms may need to include a question on dietary needs.

Accommodation

Some events may include accommodation, whereby the event organiser may offer a service to book accommodation on behalf of people attending or working at the event. The information or booking services should be accessible for people with disabilities. Information should also be provided on the hotels and their accessibility.

Quiet Room

It is a good idea to provide a quiet room for rest, especially if your event is going to be long and crowded. Some people with mental health issues or fatigue will particularly welcome this.

Evening entertainment

Some events may include a supplementary evening social event, such as an award ceremony, barbeque or dinner dance. It is important to think carefully about the evening entertainment being offered as this service is likely to be covered by the DDA.

Section 13 - Acknowledgments

This guide has been developed in collaboration between Meetings and Events Australia and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Reproduction of this material is encouraged so long as the source is acknowledged.

The guide draws on material developed by the UK Disability Rights Commission.

Section 14 - Glossary

Audio Description - audio description is available on some videos, DVDs, digital TV and cinema films. Digital access equipment enables people with a vision impairment to listen through personal headphones to a narrator describe what is happening on the screen.

Braille - Braille is a tactile system of reading and writing used throughout the world by people who are blind. It is based on a 6-dot "cell", and by using various combinations of these 6 dots, it is possible to represent the alphabet, as well as the specialised symbols used in subjects such as Mathematics and Science.

AUSLAN or Australian Sign Language - AUSLAN is a language that uses visual gestures and space using the hands, body, face and head and has its own principles of grammar. AUSLAN interpreters translate what is being spoken to AUSLAN for Deaf people.

Hearing Loop system and infrared system - assists people using hearing aids to hear more clearly by cutting out background noise. A loop system can be set up with a microphone and a transmitter to send signals via a loop system to be picked up by hearing aids that are switched to 'T' setting. In larger event situations, infra-red systems that allow for stereo sound may be more practical.

Telephone typewriter (TTY) - a machine that has a keyboard and a screen. It may be built into a telephone or be connected to one. A Deaf person, or a person with a speech impediment, can use the machine to communicate with another person who also has a TTY by typing the message and reading the reply. TTY users can call people who do not have a TTY by using the National Relay Service provided by the Australian Communication Exchange (ACE). This allows the Deaf person to send or receive messages from ordinary 'voice' telephones.

Section 15 - Further contacts

Information about access audits

Association of Consultants in Access Australia has a list of members who can provide audit services <http://www.access.asn.au/>

Information about Disability Awareness Training

Free on-line training program <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~dakit/welcome.htm>

WA Disability Services Commission Disability Awareness Training
<http://www.dsc.wa.gov.au/default.aspx?et=3&ei=61&subSiteID=48>

Some members of Association of Consultants in Access Australia also provide Disability Awareness Training <http://www.access.asn.au/>

Information about disability organisations who can assist

Links to national peak disability groups
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/links/links.html#community

Most of these national peak groups have local branches or will know of local groups who may provide assistance. Many Local Government bodies also have Community or Disability Officers who may be able to provide advice and identify local contacts.

Information about the law

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Disability Rights homepage
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/index.html

State and Territory anti-discrimination agencies
http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/links/links.html#EOCs

Information about other guides and checklists for accessible events including outdoor events

WA Disability Services Commission Access Resource Kit
<http://www.dsc.wa.gov.au/default.aspx?et=3&ei=58&subSiteID=48>

Canterbury City Council has produced guidelines for the management for outdoor events
<http://www.canterbury.nsw.gov.au/council/disability/disability.htm>

Melbourne City Council has checklists under their 'Good Access is Good Business Program.
<http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=112&pa=1066&pg=1073>

The Queensland Department of Education and the Arts has a checklist used for its own events.
<http://education.qld.gov.au/workforce/diversity/equity/access-checklists.html>

The UK Centre for Accessible Environments has also produced a useful checklist covering in more detail access issues for events <http://www.cae.org.uk/pdf/venues/index.html>

Information about building specifications and requirements

The Building Code of Australia (BCA) includes access requirements for different types of building. It is developed by the Australian Building Codes Board <http://www.abcb.gov.au/>

The BCA references a number of Australian Standards which provide details of the technical specifications. <http://www.standards.com.au/catalogue/script/search.asp> AS 1428.1 is the primary technical reference.

Information about how to access sign language interpreters

The web addresses below provide access to organisations who will assist in booking a sign language interpreter.

ACT: <http://www.actdrc.org.au/>

NSW: <http://www.deafsocietynsw.org.au/>

NT: http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/multicultural/interpreter/inter_service.shtml

South Australia: <http://www.deafsa.org.au/main/>

Tasmania: <http://www.tasdeaf.org.au/>

Victoria: <http://www.vicdeaf.com.au/>

WA: <http://www.wadeaf.org.au/>

Queensland: <http://www.qds.org.au/>

Information about website accessibility

Human Rights Commission Advisory Notes

http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/standards/www_3/www_3.html

World Wide Web Consortium Guidelines

<http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>

Information about TTY

Telstra Aged and Disability Centre (National Disability Line, phone: 1800 068 424). Rental TTYs are available from Telstra on application.

Australian Communication Exchange (ACE) also have a fact sheet listing TTY retailers:

http://www.aceinfo.net.au/Resources/FactSheets/tty_retailers.html

Information about the National Relay Service

The National Relay Service (NRS) is an Australia-wide telephone access service which provides access to anyone in the wider telephone network for people who are Deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment. As a business you could ensure people with a speech or hearing impairment are aware that they can contact you through NRS for a Fact Sheet on this see: http://www.aceinfo.net.au/Resources/FactSheets/bus_numbers13.html

Information about how to provide information in Braille and other alternative formats

To be finalised

Information about how to arrange for hearing augmentation systems

To be finalised

Other useful contacts

To be finalised

Unless otherwise indicated in this document, it is Copyright of the Commonwealth of Australia and the following applies:

Copyright Commonwealth of Australia. This material has been reproduced by permission but does not purport to be the official or authorised version. You should make independent inquiries and obtain appropriate advice before relying on the information in any important matter.

If you have any queries, please contact Capital Monitor, a division of LexisNexis Australia, on 02 6273 4899.