



welcome

A guide to welcoming our disabled customers



A letter from our disability champion



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on Disability.

Dear Colleague

This guide will help you meet the needs of many of our disabled customers in an effective and professional manner. The aim is to offer practical advice and guidance on how to avoid attitudes and behaviours which can act as major barriers.

It is easy to think of installing ramps and hearing loops as key to serving disabled customers (and indeed these types of adjustments are vital), but even more important is the attitude these customers will encounter when they bring their business to us.

While we may need to do things slightly differently to help some of our disabled customers, it must be remembered that like all our customers they expect a high quality of service and we all have a responsibility to ensure that this is provided.

Wherever you work in the Royal Mail Group it is important that everyone you serve is treated with respect and in accordance with their individual needs.

Please keep this booklet handy, so that you can refer to it on an ongoing basis.

David Mills

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Expectations of disabled customers

Everyone deserves good customer service and this guide is not about giving preferential treatment to disabled customers, but about ensuring that they can access our services in the same way as all our other customers. It is about the quality of customer service and how to deal with new responsibilities for all businesses under the Disability Discrimination Act.

The principle, **“If we get it right for disabled customers, then we’ll get it right for most customers”** is gathering credence throughout a range of businesses. This principle of good practice can also work for you. Disabled customers will be expecting to get an excellent quality service from Post Office Ltd, Royal Mail Letters and Parcelforce Worldwide, and the law backs up this expectation. If they do not get the level of service they expect, they may go elsewhere, and they may take others with them – they may also have grounds for taking us to court.

- **1 in 4 customers in the UK is disabled or close to someone who is disabled**
- **Less than 8% of disabled people are wheelchair users**

Many people assume that access to our services is just about ramps and special lifts. In fact, it’s more than that – access is about the attitudes of our staff and colleagues and it’s also how we deliver services to our customers.

Some people have very specific needs, but the needs of the majority can be addressed quite easily if approached in the right spirit.



Responsibilities under the DDA

The Disability Discrimination Act makes it illegal to:

- **Refuse to serve someone who is disabled, without legal justification**
- **Offer a disabled person a service which is not as good as the service being offered to other people without legal justification**
- **Provide a service to a disabled person on terms which are worse than the terms given to other people, without legal justification**
- **Fail to make reasonable adjustments.**

Good customer care means looking at how you can improve your response to the needs of your customers so that you can reap the benefits in terms of increased business. Ensuring that you offer a quality service to your disabled customers is no different.

Steps should be taken to understand disabled customers preferences and requirements.

Responsibilities under the DDA are to make reasonable adjustments to anything

which gets in the way of disabled customers accessing our services.

Examples might include making adjustments to:

- **Policies or procedures (e.g. disabled customer policy)**
- **Physical barriers (e.g. can you widen an aisle?)**

or

- **Providing auxillary aids or services (e.g. induction loop)**

Further examples might be as simple as a member of staff:

- **Being patient and taking time to go through information with a customer with a mental health issue or learning disability**
- **Reading out information for a blind or visually impaired customer**
- **Writing something down for a hearing impaired customer**

Giving excellent service to disabled customers

You will all have some experience of serving disabled customers and this guide will enhance your confidence in continuing to provide a good quality service.

You should:

- **Never patronise, or make assumptions, or think you know best**
- **Be ready to offer assistance – but never impose it**
- **Confidently ask whether the customer has specific requirements and be able to respond sensibly**
- **Offer the use of equipment e.g. a clip board, as an alternative writing surface**
- **Use appropriate ways of communicating, e.g. writing things down if someone finds speech difficult to understand**
- **Be courteous, patient and always talk to a disabled customer directly, never through their companion**
- **Never shout or call attention to someone**
- **Never compromise the customer's right to privacy or confidentiality**



- **Check to make sure they have been understood.**

Whenever possible:

- **Ask disabled customers about their requirements. For example, "Please let me know if you need any assistance"**

Avoiding negative attitudes and behaviour

The golden rule is to ask yourself how you would like to be treated. You should always be willing to adapt to a person's individual preferences.

It is useful to bear in mind that:

- **'Disability' is not a 'sickness'. The general health of disabled people may be as good as that of anyone else**
- **Improving access means removing all barriers (attitude and physical) to providing good service. It is not just about spending money on structural alterations**
- **The word 'access' should be applied in its broadest sense i.e. in every way that you communicate with our disabled customers and in attempting to make our business as welcoming as possible.**



Attitudes continued...

Communication skills are vital in developing relationships with both disabled and non-disabled customers. Certain words and phrases may give offence. Although there are no concrete rules, it is helpful to understand why some terms are preferred to others.

People are increasingly sensitive to the way the 'language of disability' can inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes.

General Guidance

Many disabled people may not see themselves as disabled at all – even though the DDA may define them as such.

A disabled person is not defined by their impairment. Labels say nothing about the person, they simply reinforce the stereotype that disabled people are 'sick' and dependent upon the medical profession.

Many disabled people would prefer you to:

- **Say 'disabled people' or 'people with a disability' rather than 'the disabled' or 'handicapped'**
- **Avoid words that imply frailty or dependence (e.g. 'suffers' from Multiple Sclerosis – has Multiple Sclerosis is fine)**
- **Say 'John has epilepsy' rather than 'John is an epileptic' or a 'victim of epilepsy' if you need to refer to a person's impairment**
- **Avoid saying he or she is 'wheelchair bound' or 'confined to a wheelchair'. It is better to say 'John is a wheelchair user'.**
- **Be natural. Don't worry about using everyday words and phrases that may seem to refer to an impairment such as 'see you later' to a blind person.**



Advice on specific impairments

Serving customers with a visual impairment

- Introduce yourself clearly
- Remember that most people with impaired vision do have some residual sight
- See the 'Helping Hands Pack' for appropriate items such as a signature template and page magnifier
- Guide dogs for customers with a visual impairment should always be allowed to accompany the customer.



- If you do not understand what someone has said, ask him or her to repeat the sentence. Do not pretend you have understood if you have not
- Ask the person to tell you how they prefer to communicate
- Consider writing down any information that could be helpful
- Make sure a deaf person is looking at you before you begin speaking as he or she may need to lip read. Keep background noise as low as possible
- Check regularly that you have been understood.

Serving customers who are deaf or hard of hearing

There are many different degrees and types of deafness, and different ways for deaf people or those who are hard-of-hearing to communicate.

- Try not to feel uncomfortable about communicating with a deaf or hard of hearing person, even if the communication feels awkward at first

- If a sign language interpreter is present, speak to the individual, not the interpreter
- Do not raise your voice - speak normally and clearly

Many people reinforce what they hear with lip-reading. A few deaf people with no hearing at all rely on lip reading alone. This is a demanding and tiring skill:

- Look directly at the person you are speaking to
- Speak clearly and at an even pace, do not distort or exaggerate your lip movements
- Stop talking if you must turn away
- Do not use exaggerated gestures
- Do not cover your mouth



Serving customers who are deafblind

While deafblindness is a combination of hearing and sight impairments, remember that deafblind people are not always completely deaf and blind. In fact, most deafblind people do have some residual sight and/or hearing. The advice provided in the sections on people with impaired vision or hearing may, therefore, also apply.

- A deafblind person may be supported by a communicator-guide or interpreter. Remember to speak to the individual rather than their assistant

Advice continued...

Serving customers with speech difficulties

- **Be attentive, encouraging and patient – but not patronising**
- **Slowness or impaired speech does not reflect a person's intelligence**
- **Refrain from correcting or speaking for the person. Wait quietly while the person speaks and resist the temptation to finish sentences for them**

Serving customers with a mobility impairment

- **Speak directly to a wheelchair user, not their companion**
- **Offer the customer use of a clipboard as an alternative writing surface**
- **People who use walking aids may find it hard to use their hands when standing up, for example to count out money or fill in a form.**

Serving customers with learning disabilities

Many people born with learning disabilities, those in the early stages of dementia or people who acquire a brain injury, live full and independent lives in the community. Most can make their own choices, with varying levels of support.

The following may apply to any of these individuals:

- **Begin by assuming the person will understand you**
- **Speak to the person as you would anyone else. Do not presume that you can predict from your initial impression that the person will or will not understand you**
- **Keep all communication simple. Avoid jargon**
- **Consider putting information in writing**



Advice continued...

Serving customers with a facial disfigurement

Some people are born with a disfigurement and others acquire it through accident or illness. Disfigurement is usually only skin deep, but it can be associated with facial paralysis and other impairments such as speech difficulties.

Just because a person has a facial disfigurement it does not mean they are different, and is no reflection of intelligence.

Most of the difficulties, indeed discriminations, people with facial disfigurement experience, stem from others people's behaviour.

- **Make eye contact as you would with anyone else**
- **Don't ask personal questions such as "What happened to you?", as it is likely to be inappropriate**
- **Listen carefully and do not let the person's appearance distract you.**

Finally

I hope this guide has given you confidence to provide an excellent service to disabled customers, but whatever the situation, if you are not sure what to do:

- **Listen to the customer**
- **Deal with unfamiliar situations with calmness and courtesy**
- **Offer assistance but don't impose it**
- **Ask the customer to tell you the best way to help**

Welcoming all our customers and being able to provide a quality service to everyone makes good business sense

Reference point

• Royal Mail Group Disability Action Centre (DAC)

Practical expertise in disability issues for employees and agents. DAC can give advice on employment and access to goods and service issues.

Monday to Friday 9.00 am – 5.00 pm.
Calls through Tynetalk and TextDirect are welcomed.

Telephone: 0114 241 4731,
Fax: 0114 241 4534,
Email: dac@royalmail.com

Disability related information can also be found at the DAC website:
www.royalmail.com/dac

• Employers' Forum on Disability

Nutmeg House
60 Gainsford Street
London SE1 2NY
Tel: 020 7403 3020
Email: efd@employers-forum.co.uk

EFD has an information line providing general information on disability in the workplace, and regarding disabled customers.

• The Disability Rights Commission

DRC Helpline
FREEPOST MIDO 2164
Stratford-upon-Avon
CV37 9BR
Telephone: 0845 7622633

Contact

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