

Designing in Disability

How government and the private sector can support people with disabilities through service design

This roundtable was held in partnership with Scope.

Summary

This roundtable comes at a pivotal time in the discussion around disability rights and legislation. In December, the Government committed to introducing a National Strategy for Disabled People by the end of 2020 “to improve the benefits system, opportunities and access for disabled people in terms of housing, education, transport and jobs”.

At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to the way disabled people, like many other vulnerable groups, live, work and get around. It has particularly accelerated the transition to a digital society, with many in-person services necessarily moving online, without safeguards to ensure they are accessible for all. The economic fallout from the pandemic has also disproportionately affected disabled people, compounding many of the existing difficulties that they face.

The roundtable considered how service and product design can better take account of the needs of disabled people, to ensure that the transition to a more digital society is emancipating rather than exclusionary for disabled people. We discussed how technology can be a tool for lifting barriers to access to everyday services and providing independence if done well, but how it can be a hindrance if not properly considered.

The conversation was clear about the scale of the challenge but optimistic about the ability to make real headway if industry, charities and government work together. The discussion highlighted that ensuring design has accessibility in mind from the start is simply a good business decision, and should be considered in all sectors. Therefore, it is crucial that technology developers are given the skills required to ensure accessibility is not seen as something that can be a last minute addition to future innovation.

The event was held via Zoom under the Chatham House Rule on 15 July 2020.

Key discussion points

- 1. There is consistency in diagnosing the problem.** There was a general consensus amongst attendees on the key challenges faced in increasing accessibility. These included:
 - **Lack of consistency.** While there are minimum standards, 98% of organisations do not meet them. Many designers are self taught, and even those who do get a formal education are not taught to make accessibility part of the design process. There is a general view that accessibility detracts from design, which is not rooted in reality. This inconsistency also flows through to inconsistency between platforms and a lack of ability for individuals to choose which they'd like to use. There are no standards when it comes to language, and technology may not be the answer to this. It needs to be that once services are accessible, they can be understandable for all.
 - **Too much onus on the disabled person.** When solutions are found to accessibility are found, it is often by accident and frequently down to the service user to address. This has led to a high level of frustration, and a significant waste of time and resources. There was a consensus amongst the group that it should be down to businesses to identify the right service, not the user.
 - **Lack of complaint mechanism.** There is no formal way to complain when issues are faced. Only 1 in 10 disabled people complain when they reach online barriers, indicating an issue with a lack of voice for the disabled customer.
 - **Social exclusion exacerbated barriers.** People in poverty already pay more for basic services, and there is already a strong link between disability and the poverty premium. This problem will only be exacerbated over time, as more technology becoming available leads to more people being locked out.

- 2. The expectation should be for accessibility to be built in from the start.** The participants agreed that adaptations are too often made at the end of a design process, rather than during the product or service design process. Instead, it should be an evolving process with open dialogue with service users. Most businesses try to offer a service for as wide a customer base as possible, so not making services accessible shuts organisations out from millions of consumers. The group suggested that we may need legislation to support economy-wide minimum standards from the start of the design process.

- 3. There was an expectation that change should come from the top.** Some organisations have made huge strides in improving accessibility. Organisations are willing to share best practices and problem solving tools but they lack the support and regulation to do this on a grand scale. Participants remarked that:
 - Government has the resources, but they need support from stakeholders to know how and where to direct them. Regulators should play a key role in setting out guidelines and providing support, as they have an opportunity to kick start standardisation and training.

- For example, Ofcom needs to mediate between different stakeholders in linear television. All regulators need to work together for a shared vision across all sectors. It is crucial that regulators involve service users in the decision making process.
- There would be immense value in creating regular focus groups that regulation could be passed through, to highlight any issues in accessibility early on, and to ensure that disabled people are not left behind.

4. But that pressure needs to be bottom up. Understanding the challenges faced everyday by those with additional requirements isn't possible without consulting those who experience them. It was agreed that:

- Harnessing disabled people themselves would enable greater consultation with those who will actually use accessible services. Disabled people are often called upon to provide insights on their lived experiences for free. A Disabled Consumer Group could allow businesses to pay disabled users for feedback on product and service design to ensure accessibility.
- It is important that legislation enables disabled people to use their skills and experience to both fill skills gaps, and have a greater voice. At the moment there is only one statutory body for disabled people, in transport. There is a case for creating a new statutory body to better advocate for the needs of disabled people.
- This might take the form of a complainant body, like Which? or Citizens Advice, which have successfully used super complainant powers to drive protection of consumers in utilities markets. This direct institutional pressure would lead to regulators and companies paying greater attention to inclusive design and to be more robust in enforcing regulatory standards.

For more information on Onward's upcoming events, please contact Katie Fairclough, at katie.fairclough@ukonward.com