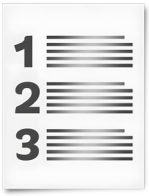
easy read

Public Service Ombudsman

Accessible communication: your stories, your rights



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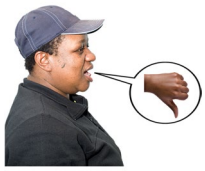

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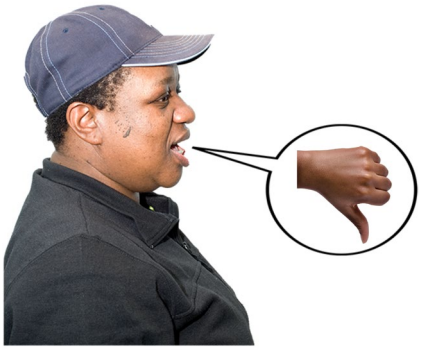
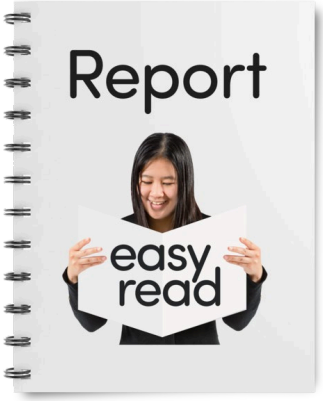
Who we are

We are called the Public Service Ombudsman.

We look at **complaints** about UK government services and the NHS in England.



A **complaint** is when someone is unhappy and tells an organisation about it.



What this report is about

We get lots of complaints about how organisations have communicated or talked to people who use **public services**.

Public services are things that everybody can use like hospitals, dentists, job centres and benefits offices.

Good communication is important. Good communication helps you understand services and means you can tell them what you think and feel.

Everyone should get information they can understand.
This means having **accessible communication** for people.

Accessible communication includes things like British Sign Language (BSL), Braille, large print, easy read, Makaton, and audio to listen to.

This report tells you about complaints we have looked at about services not having good accessible communication.

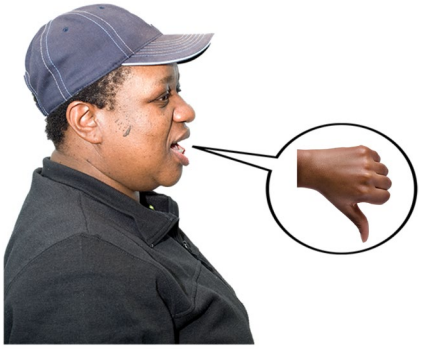
It also tells you how to make a complaint if you are not happy with how a public service has communicated with you.

What the law says

The Equality Act 2010 is a law that says public services must help disabled people access information using a **reasonable adjustment** if they need it.

A **reasonable adjustment** means making information available in the way the person needs it.

The NHS has a set of rules called the accessible information standard. These are rules about making information easy to understand for everybody.



What your complaints say

We looked at the complaints we got from people who had problems with accessible communications.

We found mistakes that caused big problems for some people and their families.
We told the services how to fix these mistakes.

This report talks about the complaints we got from 5 people called Jen, Derek, Elliott, Samantha and Carol.
We have not used their real names or real photos.

Jen’s complaint

Jen’s father was Deaf.
He used BSL (British Sign Language) to communicate.
He could not understand written English very well.

In 2021, he had to stay in hospital for 2 months.
Jen says the hospital did not get a **BSL interpreter** enough times for him.

A **BSL interpreter** is a person who helps Deaf people and people who speak English to talk to each other.

Jen says the hospital used members of her family as interpreters.
This included her 2 children.

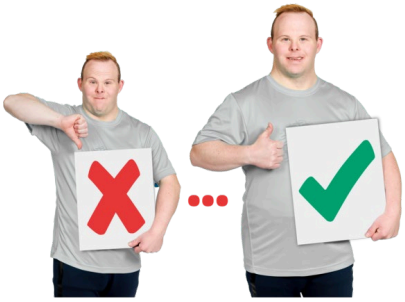
The family had to use BSL to tell Jen's father that he was very poorly.
This made the family stressed.
Jen's father then sadly died.

We looked at Jen's complaint very carefully.
We found the hospital had made some mistakes.

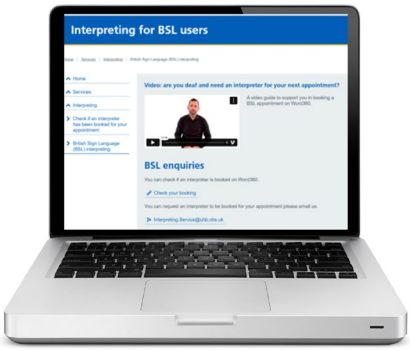
NHS rules say patients should be given proper BSL interpreters if they need one to understand English.

The rules also say that family members should not be used as interpreters.
Asking children to be an interpreter can make them upset.

We said the hospital should say sorry to Jen and give her 750 pounds.
The hospital should give 900 pounds to each of her children too.



We also said the hospital should learn from this complaint so that it does not happen again to another family.

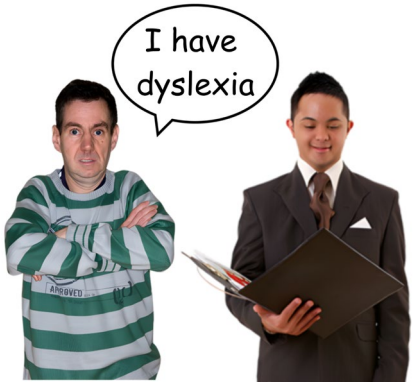


The hospital has now made it easier to book BSL interpreters on their website.

Derek's complaint

In May 2019, Derek asked NHS England for a meeting to check something.
He wanted to check if his mother could get money to help with the cost of her healthcare.

Derek has **dyslexia**.
Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that makes it hard to read, write and spell.

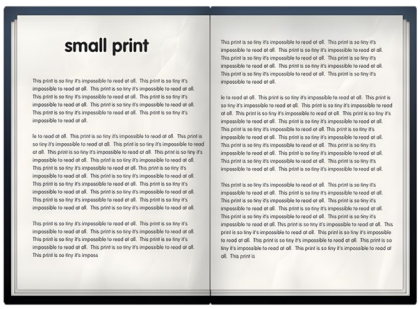


Derek asked for special help before the meeting with NHS England.
He wanted to be able to tell the person in charge of the meeting about his dyslexia.

NHS England did not arrange for Derek to speak to the person in charge before the meeting.
This made him stressed and upset.

Derek asked for help for his brother who would also be at the meeting.
His brother needed a hearing loop in the room to help him hear better using his hearing aid.

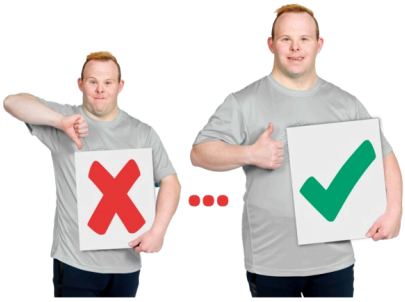
The hearing loop in the meeting room did not work.
So Derek could not get any help from his brother.



Derek could not understand the report that was sent to him after the meeting.
The writing was not the right size for him to read.

We looked at Derek's complaint very carefully.
We found NHS England had made some mistakes.

We said NHS England should say sorry to Derek and give him 500 pounds.



We also said NHS England should learn from this complaint so that it does not happen again.

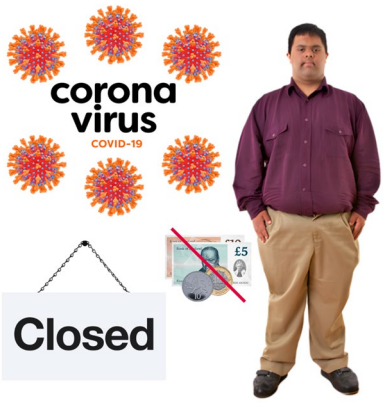
NHS England have now made new rules to support people who need special help.

Elliott's complaint

Elliott has dyslexia and **ADHD**.
ADHD is where the brain works in a different way to most people.
It can make things like concentrating difficult.

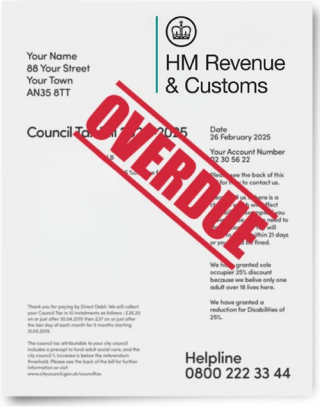
Elliott needed help to use the services of **HMRC**.
HMRC is a government service that looks after things like the taxes people pay.

HMRC knew that Elliott needed help.
They sent him audio files he could listen to instead of letters to read.
This was a reasonable adjustment.

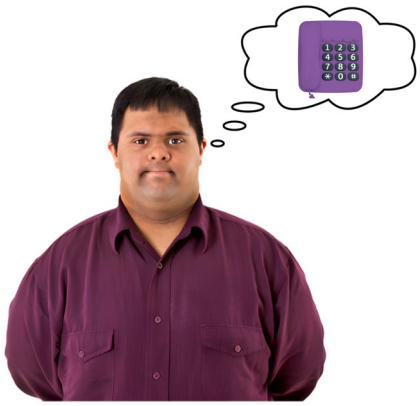


When it was the COVID-19 pandemic, Elliott needed to ask HMRC for money.
This was because he could not work.

This money was a **grant** from HMRC.
A **grant** is money that you get for a special reason.
You do not have to pay it back later.



But Elliott was late getting his form to HMRC to ask for money.
HMRC said he could not have any money because the form was late.

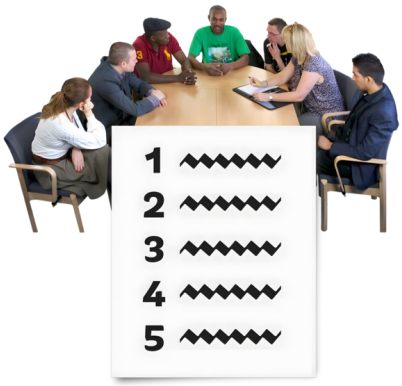


Elliott told HMRC that the form was late because of his disabilities.
He wanted to tell them about this on the phone as he was not good at writing things down.

HMRC said they would call Elliott so that he could tell them everything on the phone.
But they did not call him.

Elliott did not have enough money for more than a year.
He was very worried and stressed.

HMRC did not tell Elliott that there was a special way they could have helped him.
This special way was called a **discretionary board**.



A **discretionary board** is a group of people who look to see if there are any reasons why a person should be given a grant.

After 14 months, the discretionary board looked at Elliott's reason for his form being late.
The board said he should be given a grant of 5 thousand 600 pounds.

HMRC also said they would give Elliott 150 pounds to say sorry for the worry it had caused him.
But Elliott said this was not enough.

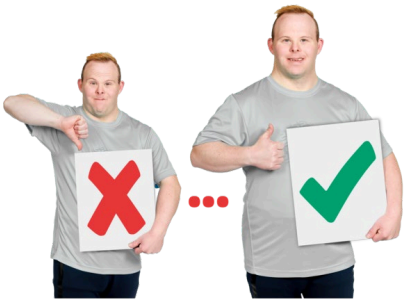
So Elliott talked to his **MP** who sent his complaint to us so we could look at what went wrong.

MP is short for Member of Parliament.
Your MP speaks up for people living near you and tells the Government what people need.

We looked at Elliott's complaint very carefully.
We found HMRC had made some mistakes.

We found HMRC knew about Elliott's reasonable adjustment but did not help him properly.
HMRC also took too long to send the case to the discretionary board.

We said HMRC should say sorry to Elliott and give him 1 thousand 500 pounds for his worry and stress.



We also said HMRC should learn from this complaint and do better next time.

Samantha’s complaint

Samantha is Deaf and uses BSL to communicate.

In October 2022, Samantha went to the doctor’s surgery for a **flu jab**.
A **flu jab** is an injection that helps protect you from the flu virus.

Samantha went to the appointment with her grandmother.
There was no BSL interpreter at her appointment.

Samantha showed a phone message to the person giving her the injection.
The phone message said flu jab only.

Samantha was not asked any questions about her health.
She was not told about how the injection could make her feel poorly.

Samantha was then given a COVID-19 injection instead of the flu jab.
The doctor's surgery thought Samantha wanted the COVID-19 injection at that appointment.

The person who gave the injection said they had asked Samantha's grandmother about this.
But Samantha's grandmother was in another room.

We looked at Samantha's complaint very carefully.
We found the doctor's surgery had made some mistakes.

We said the doctor's surgery should say sorry to Samantha and give her 450 pounds for how upset it had made her.

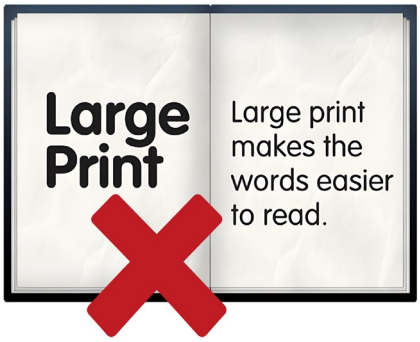
We also said the doctor's surgery should learn from this complaint.
It now works with a sign language company.

It also has posters on the wall with information for patients with communication needs.

Carol's complaint

Carol was not happy with the care her boyfriend got in hospital.
He had an operation to have his leg removed.

Carol's boyfriend was called Neil.
Neil was in his 60s and had a **visual impairment**.
A **visual impairment** means he could not see things clearly.



The hospital did not give Neil information in large print.
This meant he could not read it.

Neil could not read the information about his medicine or who to call if he needed help.
This made him upset.

The hospital said sorry for this mistake.
But we do not think they had done enough to fix the problem.

We looked at Carol's complaint carefully.
We said the hospital should do some things to stop the same mistake happening again.

The hospital made sure everyone knows what to do if a person with a visual impairment comes in.
The hospital also made information easier for patients to read.

Some good communication

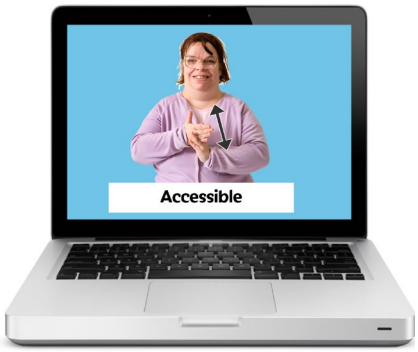
We do see public services using good communication with disabled people as well.

A hospital in Warrington listened to deaf people who felt like they were being ignored.
They worked with the local Deaf Club to talk about how to fix the problems.

The hospital made some big changes that helped deaf people get the help they needed.

The big changes were putting special notes on patient records so that doctors and nurses knew if a person in the hospital was deaf.

And people that worked at the hospital were given training to help them communicate better with deaf patients.



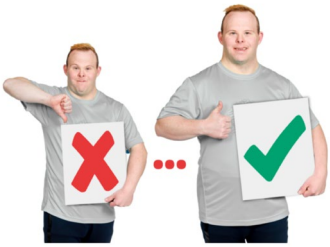
The hospital also made a guide for patients on how to get a BSL interpreter for appointments.

This shows how public services can communicate better with disabled people.

How to make a complaint

If you are not happy with the service you got from the NHS in England or a UK government department, you can make a complaint.

Public Service Ombudsman



Telling us about your complaint can make services better for everyone. It can help to stop mistakes happening again.

There are Easy Read leaflets on our website that tell you how you can make a complaint.

Find out more

You can contact us to find out more about this report or ask for a copy in a different format.

You can also contact us if you have a question about making a complaint.

Phone

0345 015 4033

Website

www.ombudsman.org.uk

You can read this report on our website or watch a BSL video about it. Scan this QR code with the camera on your phone or visit our website.