

Better acknowledging and resourcing the information accessibility sector in Australia

Short summary report

Ariella Meltzer*, Emma Barnes* and Ayah Wehbe**

*Centre for Social Impact, UNSW

**Silent Signs

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Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Bedegal people as the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Centre for Social Impact UNSW is located in Sydney. We pay our deep respect to Bedegal elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander peoples.

1 Introduction

People with disability have **always** needed good quality accessible information. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic and the bushfires and floods in Australia in recent years have highlighted what it means and what it takes to provide this information well.

This report is about the organisations who make accessible information, what they experienced during the pandemic, bushfires and floods, and what we can learn from their experiences for the future.

1.1 Research questions

The research questions covered in this report are:

- a) What concept/s of accessibility need to be foregrounded for effective accessible information production in Australia?
- b) What was the experience of accessible information providers during the pandemic, bushfires and floods?
- c) What facilitators and barriers do accessible information providers currently face?
- d) What structural, resourcing and policy changes are required in Australia to best ensure the provision of accessible information for people with disability during public health crises and weather-related disaster events?

1.2 Research participants and methods

The report draws on the perspectives of 17 accessible information provider organisations and one other stakeholder involved in making accessible information. Their views were collected through in-depth interviews and then analysed thematically.

The accessible formats the organisations collectively covered (made and advised on) include Easy Read, Easy English, interactive symbolised formats, screen readers, audio formats, Braille, captioning, hearing loops and Auslan interpretation.

2 What does it mean for information to be accessible?

Based on the perspectives of the research participants, the following five considerations are important when judging if information is accessible:

Who is the information for?

- Information needs to be clearly for and specific to a chosen audience.
- Avoid making generalisations about how the information might be used beyond this chosen audience.

How is the information made?

- The technical features of the information are high quality.
- The information is made using co-design and user testing processes.

How is the information found?

- The information is easy to find and get to people who need it.
- Information is given out in accessible ways, including (where relevant) hard copies.
- Making sure the information is given out the right way is part of accessibility itself.

How is the information used?

- Information is made so it can be used in realistic and practical ways.
- Some people use information independently and others have help from a supporter.
- Information is used not only to find out news or facts, but also to learn and discuss.

When is the information trusted?

- Information is updated, verified and accurate, and made by people/groups with appropriate expertise.
- Information covers what the audience really wants and needs to know.
- Information is delivered with a 'human touch' - i.e. with a relationship between the people/groups who make it and the person using it.

3 Accessible information during the COVID-19 pandemic

The accessible information provider organisations spoke about the experience of making accessible information during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the early days of the crisis in 2020 and the extended lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Their key points were:

- 1. It was difficult to respond to the intensity of the crisis.** Accessible information provider organisations knew there was a high level of need for accessible information. They had to make a larger amount of accessible information than they ever needed to before and they had to make it quickly. The details of COVID-19 safety constantly changed and it was hard to get accurate information to put into accessible formats. They sometimes had to create new accessible products, because they knew some people with disability would not have support to use the usual accessible formats.
- 2. It was difficult to make decisions about content, phrasing and detail.** Accessible information provider organisations knew they had to pass information on as accurately as possible – but often it was not clear how much detail to include, what words to use or what people might want to know. For some, it was particularly hard to know how to pass on medical information when they did not fully understand it themselves. They also knew that a lot of people did not trust information in general during the pandemic, so being a trusted source of information was a big responsibility.
- 3. It was difficult to do the extra work without enough resources and staff.** Many accessible information provider organisations got no extra funding for their COVID-19 work. Some got a little bit of extra funding, but not enough. It was hard to do the work within their usual resources, particularly because some staff were unavailable due to being sick or homeschooling.
- 4. Other groups did not help enough.** Accessible information provider organisations said that other groups did not help them enough – for example, they said it took government a long time to make and give out accessible information about COVID-19 and some information was hard to find or was missing details. Groups who could help did not always want to.

4 Accessible information during bushfires and floods

The accessible information provider organisations spoke only a little about creating information during the bushfires and floods. Their key points were:

1. **Making disaster preparedness information.** Many accessible information provider organisations spoke about making information to help people with disability get prepared for disasters like bushfires and floods, but less about making information during the height of a disaster event. This might be because the information most relevant during a disaster (e.g. evacuation orders) has to be immediate, without time to outsource to groups like accessible information provider organisations.
2. **Capacity building.** Some accessible information provider organisations ran capacity building activities to help emergency services and news media learn more about accessibility. This appeared to be a way that they could indirectly influence the immediate information needed in a disaster. For example, some taught how to phrase Plain English emergency text messages and what information to read out on screen to be accessible to people who are blind.
3. **Gaps in disaster-related accessible information.** Accessible information provider organisations highlighted some gaps in the disaster-related accessible information currently available: accessible information for use in evacuation centres and accessible information about recovery services and entitlements after a disaster was over.

5 Facilitators and barriers of accessible information

Accessible information provider organisations spoke a lot about the facilitators and barriers to their work. Their key points were:

- Most aspects making the work of accessible information provider organisations possible are drawn from their own organisation – for example:
 - Skilled staff.
 - Staff and consultants with lived experience of using accessible information.
 - Collaboration with colleagues with a variety of skills.
 - Access to technology and technical resources.
- Some barriers come from the conditions of the information accessibility sector as a collective – for example:
 - Competition between providers.
 - High costs of resources (e.g. picture sets for ‘easy’ information).
 - Lack of guidelines and accredited training programs for ‘easy’ information.
 - Not enough Auslan interpreters.
- Most barriers come from those funding and/or commissioning accessible information products – for example:
 - Lack of ongoing funding for critical resources that cut across individual projects.
 - Extensive time spent on business development.
 - Tight timelines for delivery.
 - Few open tender processes for new work.
 - Funders commissioning inadequate formats.
 - Accessible products not timed together with the standard information.
 - Lack of whole-of-sector market research about accessible information.
- Some facilitators and barriers come from the broader system – for example:
 - Facilitators include legislation and policies requiring accessible information in specific areas and increasing accessibility features built into commonly used technologies.
 - Barriers include lack of one clear place where the requirement for accessible information is legislated and lack of understanding among general society and graphic design, news media and communications staff of basic accessibility requirements.

6 Recommendations

The recommendations made based on the research are below. The full report includes more detail on each one. The recommendations show what is needed to support the information accessibility sector in general. This is because, if the sector is well-resourced during non-crisis times, then it will also be better placed during public health crises or disasters as well.

The recommendations align with those from the Disability Royal Commission for accessible information to be covered under a new Disability Rights Act and for an Associated Plan on accessible information connected to Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031. They also align with the possibility of funding for accessible information under the Disability Services and Inclusion Act 2023. The ideas and detail in the recommendations here can help in implementing these aspects already on the Australian disability policy agenda.

Recommendation 1: Introduce an explicit legal requirement for accessible information

- Introduce an explicit legal requirement for accessible information, with guidelines attached and co-design and user testing specified.
- Include responsibility by the sector/industry in which the information originates.
 - This should include responsibility by public health and weather emergency/disaster response sectors.
- Inform the guidelines with a dedicated piece of research into what accessible information products people with disability currently use and how they use them, which is conducted at a whole-of-sector level.
- Include education mechanisms to support the policy change.

Recommendation 2: Resource the information accessibility sector in an ongoing, informed/realistic and diversified way

- Provide a dedicated, ongoing resourcing stream for information accessibility work, with capacity for automatic expansion during public health and weather-related disaster events.
- Base the resource stream on an informed and realistic understanding of the sector's rates and requirements, including co-design and user testing.
- Diversify which businesses are engaged and funded.

Recommendation 3: Provide support to develop clarity and infrastructure for Easy Read and Easy English accessible information production

- Develop government-supported guidelines on Easy Read and Easy English formats, including clarity on terminology, guidance on places where providers commonly vary in their practices and quality control guidance.
- Invest in the development of a picture set (or sets) for 'easy' information which is shared, affordable, editable, culturally appropriate and customised to Australian demography and imagery, and which has capacity for Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA) creative commons licensing.
- Further explore potential sector buy-in for certification and accreditation of 'easy' information providers, with linked training.

12 Authorship, acknowledgements and contact details

Authors and contact details

Dr Ariella Meltzer Centre for Social Impact, UNSW, a.meltzer@unsw.edu.au

Emma Barnes Centre for Social Impact, UNSW

Ayah Wehbe Silent Signs

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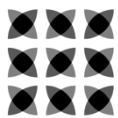
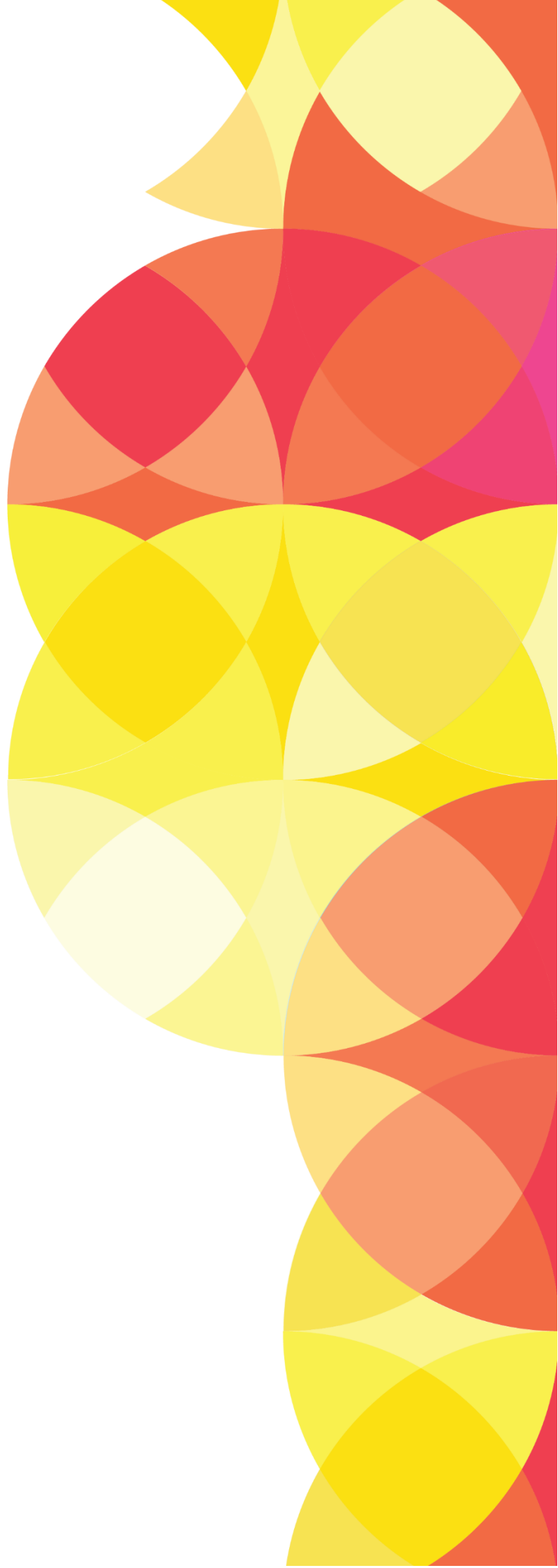
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The opinions in this report reflect the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Centre for Social Impact or the research funder, the UNSW Disability Innovation Institute.



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