

Campaigning for change

The Communications Act 2003

When introduced into Parliament in 2002 the then Communications Bill did not fully meet the access needs of blind, partially sighted and other disabled people. RNIB, in coalition with other partners like Age Concern, began a Parliamentary campaign to amend the Bill to take account of the needs of people with sensory, physical and learning disabilities.

What needed changing

Concern focused across a number of areas;

- improving the design of equipment like set top boxes for disabled and older people's use.
- ensuring that disabled and older people's interests would be well represented within the new communications regulator (Ofcom).
- improving access to digital TV services through audio description (an audio narrative that explains non-verbal action in programmes), subtitling and signing and electronic programme guides.

Lobbying for change

- Hundreds of campaign supporters lobbied their MPs and the government from 2002 up until the time the Bill received Royal Assent on 17 July 2003.
- A coalition of older people's and disability charities worked together to brief jointly on the Bill.
- Peers from the All Party Parliamentary Disability Group championed our concerns in the House of Lords and secured amendments to the Bill.

Due to the determination of all involved the Communications Act was reshaped in most of the ways hoped for.

Accessible equipment

Ofcom now has a duty to encourage manufacturers of TV, radios and mobile phones to make accessible and easy to use equipment widely available.

Representation for disabled and older people.

A high level Statutory Advisory Committee on Elderly and Disabled People has been set up within Ofcom. This was a significant gain, and will ensure that the voices of potentially marginalised consumers are heard within the regulator.

Access to Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs).

Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs) are the on-screen listings of channels and programmes. They present difficulties for blind and partially sighted people who are unable to read text.

Ofcom, in its code of practice on EPGs, will be required to include measures that assist people with disabilities affecting their sight or hearing or both, so they can make use of EPGs for the same purposes as non-disabled users.

Broadcasters will be required to ensure subtitled, audio-described and signed programmes are properly indicated on EPGs so they can be easily accessed.

Other new measures impose a general duty on broadcasters to promote awareness of services like audio description and signing to disabled people. This means that these programmes will be watched by greater numbers of disabled people, who will be able to locate them with greater ease.

Digital teletext

Teletext will be switching over to a digital format, and this will present serious difficulties for many blind and deafblind people who use access technology that translates the screen text into braille or speech output. The Government accepted an amendment that ensures the digital teletext licence includes requirements to ensure that blind and deafblind people can continue to use this vital source of news and information. Deafblind people will also now get specific consideration in Ofcom's TV access code.

Subtitling for cable and satellite

The Government also accepted the need for an accelerated timetable for the subtitling of cable and satellite television programming over the next ten years. A demanding interim target of 60% of programmes with subtitling in five years has been introduced for those broadcasters.