

Events for people

What organisers and speakers can do to improve accessibility and participation for people with intellectual disabilities

inclusion europe

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We wrote this mostly for ourselves

When you see this document, you may think: Why do we need one more document on how to make events accessible? There are many guides on making events accessible. They cover venues, agendas, sometimes event clear language.

But, you also know people with intellectual disabilities are still left out of events. Often, they do not know the event is being organised, that they could contribute and participate, or what is expected of them when they do.

And yes, that sometimes includes events organised by us, too.

We made this document in large part for ourselves.

And we think it can be useful to you and others organising events that should include people with intellectual disabilities (ie. all).

We made this document to gather practical guidance based on our knowledge and experience, and to address issues preventing people with intellectual disabilities from participating.

We made this with a simple question in mind: How does a person experience an event, connect with others and have a real opportunity to contribute?

Accessibility and participation

An event needs both accessibility arrangements and actual participation. These are connected, but not the same.

Accessibility makes taking part possible. You can think of it as the “practical”, “technical” side of things:

- accessible information and clear language,

- venue without barriers,
- agenda with enough time,

Most of this document is about this. Without it, some people simply cannot take part. They can't read the document, can't follow the discussion, or don't know what is happening.

But you can get all of that right, and still miss on people participating.

Participation is what makes being in the room worth it. This is the human side: whether people are engaged as people, whether the content connects to their lives, whether anything true and worth remembering happens. This is harder to plan for. But this is what decides that the experience stays with the person.

When the technical side is missing, people are shut out. They are in the building, but unable to take part. When the human side is missing, people are let in but leave untouched. They were there, but none of it stays with them.

What this document covers

This document is about participation of people with intellectual disabilities. It focuses on clear communication, information people can understand, and taking part in a meaningful way.

Many people with intellectual disabilities also have other accessibility needs, for example physical or sensory. These needs are important: We do not cover them in detail because there many good recourses already.

The most important rule is the same for everyone: ask people what they need, and do not assume.

How you can use this document

If you organise events, this is for you. This document is also for people who organise and give trainings, for conference speakers, and moderators or facilitators.

Start with the sections that match what you need:

- **Organising an event?**

  Start with “Before the event”.

  Then use “During the event” and “After the event”.
- **Speaking or training?**

  Look for “For speakers and trainers” in “Reach the person in the room”, “Before the event” and “During the event”.
- **Moderating or facilitating?**

  Read “For moderators and facilitators”.
- **Organising online or hybrid event?**

  Read “Online events” for advice on including people who join online.
- **Need a quick check?**

  Use the quick checklist on page 38 when you plan the event, on the day and after the event.
- **Want to help more people take part?**

  Read “Reach the person in the room”.

Just being in the room is not enough

Sandra Marques has organised meetings, training sessions and events for 30 years.
László Bercse is a self-advocate who takes part in many meetings, conferences and training sessions.

Sandra organises events.
László takes part in them as speaker and participant.
Both come to the same conclusion: Just being in the room is not enough.



Sandra Marques

For the last 30 years, I have organised many meetings, training sessions and events. And I have sat in a lot of them too.

Some of them I remember well; most have not stayed with me at all.

And this is both as a participant and organiser.

For many years, I thought that if I did the organising part well - the right room, the agenda sent in good time, the information made easy to read - I had done my job.

But when I think about the events I actually remember, almost none of them come back to me because they were well organised.

What I remember is someone who stood up and spoke about the topic from a human perspective and held the whole room. Someone we all felt connected to. Someone we wanted to keep listening to. I do not remember the program around that speech.
I remember the speech.

When I try to understand why, one idea keeps coming back: I only remember the ones I could relate to my own life and experiences, or that felt real to me. The ones I relate to at a personal level.

And this is not just when I listen to speakers at a conference. It also happens in training. If I can connect with the trainers at a human level, it will be easy for me to learn.
As a trainer I know that if I connect with the trainees at a personal level, it will be easier for them to remember what was said.

What I was missing

We can prepare everything down to the smallest detail and still leave people just sitting there, present but not connected.

I want the events I am part of to be more than just well organised. I want people to leave with something that felt true. Something they can carry into their own life, make it their own.

That is why this document matters to me. Not as a set of rules to follow, but as a way of remembering what we are trying to do: bring people together.

Sandra Marques, self-advocacy coordinator, Inclusion Europe



László Bercse

I have taken part in many meetings, conferences and training sessions.

Some were easy to follow. Others were difficult.

I have learned that small things can make a big difference.

For me, accessibility is not only about entering a building or reading a document.

It also means:

- I understand what is happening.
- I have time to think.
- I can say what I think.
- I feel that I am really part of the event.

Give us time, and use clear language

Speakers should use easy-to-understand language.

We need enough time to understand the information.

If someone speaks too quickly, even easy words can be hard to follow.

It is better to explain a few important things, and give us time to think and ask questions.

There should also be enough time for interpretation and support.

If we do not understand something, please explain it in a different way.

An example, a picture, or a story from everyday life can help a lot.

It also helps to have an easy way to show when we do not understand.

For example, we can use cards:

- Green means “I understand.”
- Yellow means “I am not sure.”
- Red means “I do not understand.”

But they are useless if speakers do not act on our feedback.

Ask us what we think

Please ask us what we think.

People with intellectual disabilities may need support.

But we also have our own ideas, opinions and experiences.

If I come with a supporter, speak to me, not only to my supporter.

My supporter can help me understand and communicate.

But I am the person taking part in the event.

I do not want to just sit and listen.

I want to ask questions, talk to other people, and share my experiences.

We want to take part in different ways. We can:

- speak
- write or draw
- use pictures
- talk in a small group
- share our opinions with the help of a supporter, if needed.

Involve us, from start to finish

It helps a lot when it is easy to find where we need to go.

For example, with clear and visible signs.

Please involve us in planning the event from the beginning.

Ask us what would help us.

Ask us what has worked well before.

Ask us what has made it difficult to take part.

After the event, ask us what worked well, and what should change.

And if you change something because of what we said, please tell us.

Being in the room does not mean that I can take part.

For me, real accessibility means that I understand what is happening,
I have time to think, I can say what I think, I am listened to, and I feel that I belong.

László Bercse, Chair of the European Platform of Self-Advocates,
and Vice-President of Inclusion Europe



Reach the person in the room

This section is about what **organisers, speakers and trainers** can do for a good participation of people with intellectual disabilities during events.



For organisers

As an organiser, you do not reach the people in the room yourself.

But you select the people whose job it is to do so. Much gets lost here, before the event even starts.

Why are you doing this?

It's one thing to organise an event – it's another to know what you want the participants to take away from it.

So, start with answering that question, and build from there.

Choose speakers who can reach a room

Who speaks at the event is your decision. One aspect of it is that the speaker knows about the subject. Equally important is that the speaker can relay that knowledge in a clear, engaging way.

Tell the speakers what you want from them

Most of the time speakers get briefed on agenda, timing, tech and what slides template to use. That is not enough.

Brief your speakers about the audience:

- Tell them who will be in the room. What kind of roles and expectations bring them to the event.
- Make it clear the message should be made relevant and engaging to this audience.

Give space to people with intellectual disabilities

This is one thing you control. Have people with intellectual disabilities on the program as speakers.

When a self-advocate is invited to speak or participate, use the “Working with self-advocates” guide.

Make room in the programme

A packed agenda makes it hard to allow for the connection moments: the story, the question, the real exchange. Leaving space is a decision you make. This is what lets a speaker reach people instead of racing the clock.

For speakers and trainers

It is your job to make sure people can understand and use the information you came to talk about.

Speak to the person in front of you.

Prepare

- **See a person, not a category.** You are not speaking to “people with intellectual disabilities.” You are speaking to specific people, each with their own life. The label tells you almost nothing about who they are. And it can mislead you when assuming competences or knowledge.
- **Decide what your main message is.** However big your topic, there’s always one main thing you want your audience to remember and do.
- **Check your attitude, not only your slides.** Ask both questions:
  “Is my information clear?” and
  “Am I ready to listen, respond and engage with the people in front of me?”
- **Use clear language, and everyday words.** Using big words and complicated expressions doesn’t make you and expert – being able to explain complicated things in clear terms does.

- **Make it relatable.** Clear language helps people understand the words. Relatable content helps them understand. Use with stories and examples that connect with people's lives. It is easier to remember something we can relate to.

> Two people are asked to speak about independent living.
>
> The first explains Article 19, national law and government policy. Everything is correct, and easy to follow.
>
> The second begins: "When I first moved into my own flat, my mother called me every evening to ask if I had remembered to cook."
> Then they use that story to talk about choice, support and independence.
>
> **Both speakers covered the topic.**
> **But the second gave people something to connect to.**

Engage – and make room for engagement

- **Use your time well.** Just because you have 5 or 15 minutes to speak does not mean you have to speak for 5 or 15 minutes. Do not fill every second with your words. Give people time to hear and process what you say.
- **Show emotion.** For people to engage with and relate to a topic, they need to see the emotional side of it. Is a thing good or bad? Is something joyful or sad? Tell them and show them.
- **Give people an opportunity to contribute and share their take.** For practical ideas on how to give people different ways to contribute, see "Help everyone take part" in the section "During the event".

> Beware!
>
> Do not make people with intellectual disabilities to share their “personal stories”.
>
> No other conference speakers talk about their relationship status or other deeply personal topics.
>
> **Sharing a story does not mean sharing your personal life.**
>
> For example: Sharing a story about leaving institutions should be about what life was like there, what kind of support and steps it took to move, what are the differences, what worked well and what didn’t. Not about if the person can cook, if they have a romantic partner and want to get married.

Before the event

This section explains **how to plan an event** that people with intellectual disabilities can take part in. It covers asking people what they need, sharing clear information and helping people prepare.



> *"They invited us to take part, but everything had already been decided."*

Accessible events begin with preparation.

Start by involving the people who will take part. Ask what they need, and use their answers to plan.

For organisers

Start with people

Before you decide anything about the event, think about who it is for.

If people with intellectual disabilities are taking part, you need to involve them from the beginning. Ask them:

- what would help them take part
- what has worked well at other events
- what has made taking part difficult

Then, use this information to plan. It may change your agenda, your timing, how people work together, or how information is prepared.

Do not ask people what works for them and then keep the same plan as always.

Ask what people need

Different people need different things. Do not guess. You may ask about needs when you invite people or when they register.

It is not enough to ask "Do you have accessibility needs?" People may not know what you mean.

Ask about what would help them to take part, like:

- *What would help you understand the information we send?*
- *What would help you follow the meeting and take part?*
- *How do you prefer to share your ideas?*

Always give people a chance to tell you something you did not ask about.
And, when someone tells you what they need, take it seriously.

Be clear about what you can cover

Taking part can depend on more than what happens in the room, for example travel, accommodation or personal support. Be clear from the start about what you can cover and what you cannot.

Make information easy to understand

People need information to take part. Making it easy is not only about using simpler words. It is about what you want people to know, when you want them to know, and what do you want them to do with it.

Some things you should do:

- Decide what information is important (keep that), and what is fluff (delete it).
- Put the main message first and use clear headings.
- Use everyday words and short sentences, one idea at a time.
- Give each piece of information when people need it and not all at once.

Instead of	Try
Participants are requested to submit their workshop preferences prior to the event.	**Choose your workshop before the event.** Tell us your choice by Friday (*how*).

Inclusion Europe's Easy-to-Read guidelines can help you make information easy to understand: inclusion.eu/easy-to-read

Help people know what to expect

People take part better when they know what is coming.

Before the event, tell people what it is about, what they will be doing, what to prepare, and what the day will look like.

Write the program so it says what will happen, not only session titles.

Instead of	Try
14:00 – Participatory session on policy priorities	**14:00 – We will work in small groups. You can say what changes you want politicians to make.** **Each group will choose two ideas to share**

Make the place work

Think about your venue from the participants' perspective:

- Can people find the entrance, the room, the toilets, the breaking space?
- Is the space comfortable? Think about noise, light, and room to step away.
- Is it clear who people can ask for help?

Walk the journey yourself before people arrive, and fix what is unclear.

For speakers and trainers

Prepare a speech people can follow.

Use clear language and every-day words.

Speak to help people understand, not to exhaust the topic

- Choose a few key messages. Do not try to say everything. Practice explaining them to someone who does not know the topic.
- Plan how you will explain difficult ideas. Add an example, a story, something familiar.
- If there is time, plan what people will do, not only what you will say.
- Leave time for people to understand, think and respond.

If you are using slides, make them useful:

- Use short, clear sentences.
- Use large fort (minimum 32 points).
- Put one idea per slide.

During the event

This section explains what organisers, speakers, trainers, moderators and facilitators can do to **help people follow what is happening and have a say**.

Getting through your programme is not the same as helping people take part.

During the event, make sure to pay attention to the people attending.
It is important to adapt and respond to what is happening.

We want people to be able to follow what is said and also to take part and stay involved.



> I stayed until the end. But much of the day, I didn't know what we were doing or what was expected of me." – participant at a training

For organisers

- Keep the time. Seriously, keep the agenda as announced. It helps everyone in knowing what is happening and what'll come next.
- If you have to make changes to the agenda, announce them in advance and explain what's changed.
- DO NOT shorten the breaks. Breaks exist so that participants can step away from listening to speakers, process what they heard, and make ready for the next speaker.
- Pay attention to what's happening in the room. Especially when you are using the green-yellow-red cards.

  Green, yellow and red cards help participants show whether they understand what is being said during a meeting:
  Green: I understand. Please carry on. I agree.
  Yellow: Please slow down. I have a question.
  Red: Please stop. I do not understand and need you to explain again.
  During an online meeting, participants can hold a card up to their camera so the speaker or organiser can see it and respond.

Sending information in advance does not mean that everyone knows what to do or will have no questions.

This is especially important for online events, where people may need help to join or take part. When someone asks a question, answer it (instead of just saying “it is in the document we sent you”).

For speakers and trainers

Speak at a pace people can follow

- Speak clearly, and pause between important ideas.
- Give people a moment to take in what you said before you move on.

Making time to think is part of understanding. You do not have to fill every silence.

If someone does not understand what you are saying, repeating the same words won’t necessarily help. Try to use different words, give an example, or describe a situation that illustrates your point.

Make sure people are following

Asking “Does everyone understand?” may not help. Try instead:

- “What is the main thing you learned from this?”
- “Is there anything you would like me to explain in another way?”

Help people see what they can do with the information, and do not rush to finish.
It is fine to leave something out or share it afterwards.

For moderators and facilitators

Some people speak quickly and confidently. Others need more time, support, or a different way to share what they think.

Help everyone take part

Give people time and different ways to contribute.

Ask one clear question at a time, then wait. Do not answer the question yourself just because nobody replies right away.

Speaking in a big group is not easy for everyone. Offer other ways to contribute:

- talk with one other person first
- discuss in a small group
- write or draw an idea
- share with support from another person

Notice who is taking part, and listen

Think about the people whose voices you're hearing and leave room for those who have not yet spoken. Invite them to speak – but do not insist or pressure.

Speak with the participant, not their support person. Make it clear you want to hear from the participant. Sometimes, the support person will answer because that's what the participants wants. The difference is if the participant was consulted first, or the support person just went ahead and answered without.

Show that you heard what people said.

Help people understand what is happening

It is easy to lose track of a long event. Help people know where they are.

- At the start, explain what will happen and what you hope to achieve.
- Say clearly when you move from one part to another, and why.

- When something changes, stop and explain it. Do not assume everyone understood.
- Name decisions clearly and write them where people can see them.
- At the end, bring it together: what did we do, what did we decide, and what happens next?

Remember

Being in the room is not the same as taking part.

Help people understand, take part, and know what is happening.

After the event

This section explains how to **tell people what happened with their ideas**, ask **what helped them** take part and **use their feedback** to improve the next event.



> *"We're always answering questions and then we're never told anything"*
> - participant at a focus group

An event does not end when people leave the room.

People shared their time and their ideas. Two things should happen next.

Show them what came from it. And learn from them, so the next event is better.

Tell people what happened

If you asked people to take part, come back to them.

Share the important outcomes. People do not always need a long report, but they should know:

- What did we talk about?
- What did we decide?
- What is still not decided?
- How will we use your ideas?

Show what happened with their ideas

Explain what happened with what people said. For example:

- "You told us the feedback form was difficult to understand. We are going to rewrite it"

Sometimes you cannot do what people asked for. Say that too, and explain why.

Do not leave people wondering whether anyone listened.

People ask you to hold the next meeting in person.

You do not have the budget for travel.

Do not just leave the suggestion unanswered.
Tell them:

"You asked us to meet in person next time.
We cannot pay for travel this year, so the next meeting will still be online."

People need to know what happened with their idea,
even when the answer is negative.

Be clear about what happens next

If there are next steps, say what will happen, who will do it, and when.

Tell people whether they will be involved again, and how they can follow what happens.

If the outcome will take time to write up and put together, say so. You can say:

- "We do not have the final decision yet. We expect it in September, and we will tell you when we know."

Follow up while the event is still fresh. Keeping people informed is better than saying nothing. Do it, even when you do not have any new information. Just say that.

Learn from people

The people who took part know what it was like to experience the event.

They can tell you what helped them take part, and what made it difficult.

Do not just ask:

- “Did you enjoy the event?”

Someone can enjoy an event and still find parts of it difficult. Ask questions that help you understand people’s experience:

- *What helped you understand and take part?*
- *Was there anything that made it difficult to take part?*
- *What should we keep, and what should we do differently?*

Make it easy, and make it okay to be honest

Not everyone finds a written form easy. Let people talk with someone, answer in a group, write, or give feedback later.

People may say everything was good to be polite. Show that you want to hear both sides. You could say:

- “We want to know what worked well, so we can do it again. We also want to know what we could do better.”

When someone tells you something did not work, listen. Do not explain or defend. Just try to understand how it was for them.

Use what you learn

Use what people tell you along with what you noticed during the event.

Decide what to keep, what to change, and what to stop doing.

Share it with the people who organised, spoke or facilitated. For example:

- **“People found the morning too long. Next time we will have fewer sessions and a longer break.”**

Online events

When people take part on a computer

“For online events, we have the same right to take part as everyone else.
Events should be easy to access,
we should get support if we need it,
and the rules should be available in Easy to Read”

Soufiane El Amrani, Accessibility Expert

Online events can open the door to people who cannot travel.
They can also close it in new ways.

The same principles apply online: start with people, use information they can understand, and make sure they can take part.

But some things work differently on a screen.
It is harder to notice when someone isn't involved. People get tired faster. And someone can be connected and still not be able to take part.

This tool is about those differences. It also covers hybrid events, where some people are in the room and some are online.

Before online event

Consult participants on which platform to use

Before you decide how to meet, ask the people taking part:

- which platform they already know and feel comfortable with
- what they will use to join: a computer, a tablet or a phone
- if they will join alone or with someone supporting them

A platform people already know is often better than a new one with more features.
Use as few links, apps and tools as you can. Each one is one more thing that can go wrong.

Explain how to join and how to take part

Instructions to join are part of the information about the event. They need to be easy to understand too. Tell people:

- how to join, step by step, with pictures if you can
- what they need: a device, an internet connection and, if possible, headphones
- how they can take part: speaking, writing in the chat, raising a hand
- who to call if something does not work on the day

Instead of	Try
Please ensure your audio and video settings are configured prior to joining the session.	**Click the link 10 minutes before we start.** If you cannot hear us, call Ana. Ana's number is below.

Offer a test before the event

Offer everyone a short test a few days before. People can try the link, the sound, the camera and the buttons they will use.

It is also a chance to meet someone from the team. On the day, there will already be a familiar face.

Offer the test to everyone. Then nobody has to ask for help to get it.

Be clear about what you can provide

Taking part online needs a device, a good internet connection and a quiet place to join from. Not everyone has them.

Ask early if this could stop someone from taking part. Be clear about what you can provide and what you cannot. Where possible, look for solutions together.

Plan for the screen

Concentrating on a screen is tiring for everyone. Plan for it:

- keep sessions shorter than you would in person
- plan more breaks, and invite people to step away from the screen

- say when each break ends, and keep to it
- change activity often: listen, talk, do something

Half a day online is often better than a full day.

Slides and screens

People may see your slides on a small screen, even a phone.

Use large text (minimum 32 points), few words and one idea per slide.

During the event

Start slowly, and show how things work

Open the meeting a little early, so people can join without rushing.

- At the start, show the buttons people will use, and let everyone try them once.
- Say what will happen today, and when the breaks are.
- Ask one person in the team to help with technical problems, so the chair can focus on the people. Tell everyone who that is.
- If you want to record, say so before you start. Explain why and who will see it, and ask people if they agree.

Tell people how they can re-join the meeting if they lose connection:

- “If you lose the connection, use the same link to join again.”

Help everyone take part

Online, it is harder to see when someone isn’t involved, when they are and when they want to speak. Check more often.

Slow down, and wait longer

There is often a short delay online. Speak slowly, and pause even more than you would when in the same room as the audiance.

After a question, wait. Some people need time to find the microphone button.

People cannot see you point at things. Say what you are showing.

Give different ways to take part

Let people speak, write in the chat, raise a hand, or send a private message to the facilitator.

If people write in the chat, read the messages out loud. Not everyone can read and listen at the same time. Do not let the chat become a second meeting that only some people can follow.

Do not make cameras “a must”. Some people do not feel comfortable on camera, or their connection is weak.

Prepare the breakout rooms

Explain the task before people go and write it where they can see it.

Say how long they will have, and that they will come back to the main room.

Make sure each room has someone who can help the group.

Visit each room to check that people know what to do.

If some people are in the room and some are online

In hybrid events, people online are easily forgotten. The room fills the space, and the screen goes quiet.

Give one person in the room the job of following the people online: the chat, raised hands, people who want to speak.

Make sure people online can hear everyone. Everyone in the room uses the microphone, also for questions.

Make sure people online can see what is written or shown in the room.

Take turns between the room and online and say it out loud.

- “Now, let us hear from the people online.”

People online are participants, not an audience.

After the event

Follow up, and ask how it was online

Follow up as you would after any event. Tell people what happened, and what happened with their ideas.

If you agreed to share the recording, slides or summary, send them as soon as possible.

Ask about the online part too:

- Was it easy to join?
- Could you see and hear everything?
- Could you take part the way you wanted?
- Was it too long, or too tiring?

Also ask people who left early or could not join. They can tell you what did not work.

Quick checklist to improve participation of people with intellectual disabilities in events

Before the event

Start with people

- ☐ I know who the event is for and who needs to be there.
- ☐ I involved people with intellectual disabilities in the planning.
- ☐ I asked people what would help them take part.
- ☐ I planned the event around what people told me.

Prepare the information

- ☐ Event information is easy to understand (easy-to-read).
- ☐ People know what the event is about and what they will be doing.
- ☐ People know if they need to prepare anything, and have time to do it.
- ☐ Each piece of information reaches people when they need it.
- ☐ People know what costs are covered, or what they need to pay.

Prepare the program

- ☐ The program has time for people to understand, take part, and to rest.

Choose your speakers based on their knowledge and public speaking skills.

- ☐ Your speaker is good at public speaking and reaching the audience.

- ☐ You briefed the speaker about the audience.
- ☐ You have a speaker with intellectual disabilities (especially when the topic is about people with intellectual disabilities).

During the event

Organisers help people be comfortable and participate

- ☐ People can find their way around the venue, feel comfortable and get help when needed.
- ☐ People know what part of the event is happening, and how to participate.
- ☐ We are on time, and we respect designated break times.

Speakers help people understand and take part

- ☐ Speak clearly, give people time to think, and do not rush.
- ☐ Explain things another way if something is not understood.
- ☐ Offer different ways to take part (small groups, writing, one-to-one...).
- ☐ Notice who participates frequently and make space for those who have not.
- ☐ Speak with the participant, not their support person.

After the event

- ☐ We told participants what happened and what was decided.
- ☐ We told participants what happened with their ideas.
- ☐ People know what happens next, and whether they will be involved again.
- ☐ We asked participants what worked, and what made taking part difficult.