# NHS Accessible Information Standard: in-depth research with blind and partially sighted people

## Summary

During August and September 2021, we sought views from a range of blind and partially sighted people from around the England about their experiences of accessible health information. 33 individuals registered sight impaired or severely sight impaired helped us with this research.

We found that, five years after the introduction of the NHS Accessible Information Standard (AIS), most people were not receiving important healthcare information in a format that they could read and understand.

## What is the Accessible Information Standard?

The AIS says that all publicly funded adult social care and health providers, including GPs, hospitals, and care provided by social care services, must identify and meet the information and communication needs of those who use their services. They also need to keep a record of these needs on a person’s file in a way that’s clear and consistent.

Under the AIS people can specify if they need:

* To be contacted in a certain way (e.g. via email instead of on the phone)
* To receive information in a different format (e.g. large print)
* Communication support for appointments (e.g. a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter or communicator guide)
* Additional support to communicate (e.g. hearing aids or lipreading)

## What our study found

### Accessible information provision poor

90% of the blind and partially sighted people we spoke to were not regularly receiving medical information in their preferred format. One third said they had never received accessible medical information. Just one person said they had always received information in an accessible way. This is really worrying and disappointing, many years into the implementation of the NHS AIS. For the blind and partially sighted people involved this can mean an inability to read or understand correspondence from healthcare professionals, missed appointments and potential errors with medication or implementing medical advice.

### Not being asked

Three quarters of blind and partially sighted people we spoke with as part of our research said they could not remember ever being asked by the NHS what their preferred information format is. This is a key requirement of the AIS, that patients and service users should be asked about their needs and their requirements recorded. Many of our participants reported frequently asking for accessible information, e.g. large print letters, and still not receiving them.

### Lack of understanding

Half of our research participants reported that when they requested information in an alternative format, healthcare staff did not understand why they were requesting the information. This is concerning and suggests that awareness of the AIS and the needs of those with a requirement for an alternative format is not well embedded into the NHS.

### Online resources little better

We asked our participants whether they used any local NHS online provision as an alternative to accessing printed or other alternative formal medical information. Two thirds of our respondents did make use of online services, but many reported that the content was inconsistent and not always accessible to screen readers or voiceover technology designed to help blind and partially sighted people access online content.

The UK Government introduced the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 three years ago to ensure that all public websites and mobile applications were accessible to those with disabilities and additional access requirements. Despite this, two thirds of the blind and partially sighted people we spoke to told us that they had not noticed any improvements in online accessibility over that time.