

»» Talking about disability »»

A practical guide

Contents

Introduction	3
A note from the partners	4
How to use this guide	4
Part one: What are strategic communications?	5
Why we need to rethink how we communicate	5
How to make people care	6
Part two: How to talk about disability	12
What we found: the current dominant narrative about disability	12
Alternative narrative about disability	14
Messaging	16
Disability terminology	17
‘Dos and don’ts’ for talking about disability	20
Structuring your messages	23
Example messages to use and adapt	24
A final word	29

Introduction

To understand what and how people currently think about disability, and to transform the way we talk about it, Inclusion London, Inclusion Barnet, Equally Ours and a partnership of seven Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations (DDPOs) undertook an innovative research project, called 'Talking about disability', funded by City Bridge Trust Cornerstone Fund.

The aim of the project is to build greater public understanding of the equal worth of Disabled people,¹ the causes of disability inequality, and the essential role of DDPOs in creating positive change.

The research was conducted in two phases: desk research and public research. The desk research involved studying past and current ways of thinking and talking about disability, including in the media and parliamentary debate. The public research consisted of focus groups and an online survey of over 3,000 Londoners, a quarter of whom answered 'yes' to 'having a disability, or long-term physical or mental health condition'.²

1. We use the term 'Disabled people' in this guide to cover the following groups of people: people with physical impairment, visual impairment, hearing impairment, people with long-term health conditions, people with hidden impairment, Deaf people, people with learning difficulties, people who experience mental ill health/distress and people who are neurodivergent.
2. The standard wording used by the polling company.



A note from the partners

This project has been a transformative journey for all of us involved. As seasoned activists in the disability justice movement, we've developed our own language and shorthand within our circles. Initially, the idea of altering our way of talking about disability, especially the social model, was met with hesitation, even resistance. There was a fear we might water down our social model position and, after all, we're the experts, right?

Throughout this project, we engaged in the research, absorbing and analysing the evidence. We discovered that our initial assumptions about outdated attitudes were largely accurate. However, we also unearthed some encouraging signs, such as growing public awareness and understanding of non-visible impairment/conditions.

The research also highlighted that some of our customary communication tactics, intended to sway public opinion, weren't resonating effectively. In fact, they sometimes had the opposite effect: turning people off altogether.

While there are strengths to our tried and tested ways of communicating about disability, we now recognise their limitations in reaching a broader audience. These include persuading colleagues, employers, commissioners, funders, and local councils, who are often influenced by established ways of talking about disability prevalent in media, social media, and political discourse.

This project has provided a platform for DDPOs across London (and potentially beyond) to collaborate and craft a more positive and empowering narrative about disability. We hope that this new narrative will be embraced by DDPOs everywhere, gradually shifting public perceptions, influencing policy, and, ultimately, fostering a more equitable society for Disabled people.

How to use this guide

This guide aims to give anyone working to make society more inclusive for Disabled people some powerful tools to help change hearts and minds on disability.

The guide is in two parts.

Part One ('What are strategic communications?') is a brief introduction to strategic communications and framing – what it is, why it's important and what it involves.

Part Two ('How to talk about disability') is based on our research insights. This includes an overview of the current dominant ways of thinking and talking about disability; ways of talking that lead to a more progressive understanding of disability; and guidance on how to bridge the gap between the two using the strategic communications good practice covered in part one.

Part one:

What are strategic communications?

Why we need to rethink how we communicate

The way many of us communicate at the moment isn't as effective as we'd like to be – it's not creating the change we want to see. We hope that if we tell people the facts about an issue and just how bad things are, they will agree with us, be fired up and get behind our cause. But this isn't how humans work.



Even if we think we're rational, our hearts rule our heads. Cognitive science has shown that our brains respond better to stories than facts, and that we make sense of new information based on our existing ways of thinking about the world.

This means that we pay more attention to facts that fit in with what we already believe and we're more likely to criticise or ignore facts that don't.

We all do this. Our brains take lots of shortcuts to help us understand the world. But this does mean we need to re-think how we communicate if we want people to listen and if we want to change people's minds.

We need to take the time to understand how and why people think and feel what they do. And then we can start to understand what opportunities there are to show how our work is deeply connected to the things people care about. This is what we mean by strategic communications.

How to make people care

Frames and framing

The words we use matter. How we talk about an issue influences public opinion. And public opinion influences policy change. How we talk about an issue is sometimes called framing.



Very simply put, frames are the unconscious stories – the mental shortcuts – we use to understand the world. Because we process new information through the frames we already hold, the frame through which we view something influences how we understand that issue, and what solutions we will support.

Everything is framed, even if we don't know it. Framing is about being intentional about what we do and don't say about an issue in order to influence how a person understands and feels about that issue and, crucially, how they act.

The way we think and talk about tax is a good example of the difference framing can make. When we use terms like 'tax relief' and 'tax burden' we are framing tax as something we want to escape. This common and well-established frame makes and reinforces the argument that tax is bad, and lower taxes therefore should be a priority over providing public services.

An alternative way of framing tax is as the building blocks that provide our schools, hospitals, the roads we all use – a foundation for our society, and something we're proud to contribute to.

Strengthening your frame

It can take a long time to establish a frame and make it popular. But, as we can see with the 'tax burden' frame, once it's taken root, it's powerful and hard to dislodge.

So how do we establish a new frame about an issue?

Repetition, repetition, repetition. The more as many people as possible use the same frame over and over again, the more likely it is it will become the dominant way of thinking and talking about that issue. And that will help us achieve the change we want. That doesn't mean everyone using exactly the same messages – the words you use will always depend on the audience and purpose of the message – it means setting the right frame and using the right values and good strategic communications practice. You can find out how to do this in 'The six key ingredients of framing' section on pages 8 to 11.

Who we need to talk to

It's important that what we say chimes with those who live and breathe this issue – for example Disabled activists – because they will get behind and amplify the messages. We want to energise them but we don't need to spend too much time convincing them of the need for change. And we also don't need to waste time trying to convince those who will never get behind the change we want to achieve.

That leaves us with what we call the 'conflicted' public. So named because they tend to hold conflicting views on a social issue at the same time. And there are a lot of them: over 40% of the British public fall into this group, and there's evidence that this figure is growing.

They are also known as the 'persuadables' or, in the US, the 'moveable middle'. This is exactly why we should care about them: if we talk to them about our issue in the right way, we can persuade them to see that issue in a new way. And this is important to social change because this group influences political will and therefore public policy choices and decisions.

The six key ingredients of framing

So how do we frame our issues in a way that will persuade the conflicted British public to think about them in the same way as we do and support the change we want? Here are the six key ingredients of framing.

1. Root your messages in the good values we all share



Our values are the things that really matter to us. They are what unite and divide us, and are central to the frames we use to make sense of the world.

The values that are important to progressive social change are what we call intrinsic values – these are our compassionate and community-focused values and include things like freedom, honesty, responsibility, loyalty, equality and social justice.

The values that support the status quo are what we call extrinsic values – these are self-focused values and include things like success, material wealth, image and social power and recognition.

We all have all of these values but some are more important to some of us than others. The important thing is that we can activate or suppress values through our communications.

When our messages appeal to intrinsic values, we suppress people's extrinsic values and strengthen support for positive social change. And values are like muscles: the more we exercise the intrinsic value muscles in our audience, the stronger they become. This is why values are so important to long-term narrative change.

And the opposite of this is true: when we exercise people's extrinsic values in our messages, we strengthen people's concern for themselves – for what they have. This is why we should avoid making the economic case for change.

This doesn't mean we never make the economic argument – there will sometimes be important reasons for doing so – we just never lead with it.

By framing our issue and our facts with the intrinsic values we share and hold dear, we show how the problem we're trying to solve runs counter to those values. And that increases the likelihood our audience will be open to hearing about and engaging with it. We open doors – and hearts – to the issue.

An example of what this looks like done well is the Together for Yes campaign in the 2018 abortion referendum in Ireland. They thought carefully about the values in their messaging. They appealed to voters' better nature, and to the values of generosity, caring, and fairness in asking people to vote yes, and repeal the eighth amendment, which banned abortion outright. It worked – they won the referendum in a landslide.

Our research has shown that the most helpful values to engage when talking about disability are the empowering self-direction values of freedom, control and independence, coupled with equality and social justice, and the unifying values of community and interdependence.

You can find out more about how to use these values in your communications in part two of this guide.

2. Tell a different story to the one you want to change



It's very tempting – and very human – to spend time refuting the arguments that undermine our cause. Especially if they contain misrepresentations or outright lies. We love to myth-bust!

But this often hurts our cause more than helps it. When we repeat an opponent's argument – even if we're repeating it to question its validity – we call to mind the very things we're trying to invalidate. And when we do that, we actually reinforce them in people's minds, strengthening the very opposite message to what we intended.

For example, if we say, 'it's just not the case that migrants are benefits scroungers', we risk inadvertently reinforcing the connection between migrants and 'scroungers'. And, similarly, if we say, 'Disability does not equal incompetence' (a real headline used in a blogpost), we risk reinforcing the idea that Disabled people aren't competent.

So, what do we do instead? **We tell our own story, focus on our own arguments, and inspire people with our vision. We focus on making the case for the future we want.** And that leads us to...

3. Paint a picture of a better world and show how to get there



This is about our vision. About saying how we want the world to be rather than focusing on how bad it currently is.

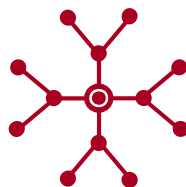
This is because hope is a much greater motivator than fear. When we use crisis talk, people can feel like the problem is too big and impossible to solve, which leads to fatalism and sticking their heads in the sand. You only have to think about the climate emergency to get this point.

When we inspire people with our vision for a better world instead, they are more likely to get behind us. But (and it's a big but)... we also need to show the steps to achieving that vision and who or what is responsible for them. And those steps need to be concrete and realistic. When we can't see how a vision will be achieved, it can feel 'pie in the sky' and that, too, can lead to fatalistic thinking. When talking about disability, this means being really clear and concrete about exactly what needs to happen for Disabled people to be fully included in society.

If possible, it also really helps to show how the change we're working towards has already happened elsewhere or in the past. That makes it feel much more within reach.

All this doesn't mean there's no place for anger and protest – both of which play an important role in achieving change in the right context. It's about using additional tools that work better with certain vital audiences, balancing talking about the systemic barriers Disabled people face with hope and a clear roadmap for change.

4. Link personal stories to the wider structures and be clear that these can be changed



Lots of us use personal stories and experiences in our communications and campaigns. They are powerful because they make an issue real and human and elicit empathy and compassion.

But **it's easy for one person's story to be seen as a one-off, an exception to the rule.** We just can't assume people will make the connection between that story and the wider systems and structures behind it.

Take racism for example. The public tend to see racism as about a few bad people, rather than something that is deeply embedded in the UK's systems, culture and institutions. And focusing on 'triumph over adversity' – for example how Paralympians are often described – is another really common example of this sort of unhelpful, individualistic storytelling.

So we need to spell out the connection between the individual story and the bigger picture. To talk about the structures we can and need to change.

But there's a second part to this key ingredient. **We also need to show that those systems and structures – like the economy and our laws – can be changed.** That they were designed by humans in the first place and can therefore be redesigned by humans. If we don't make that clear, they can seem too big and complex and fixed, which can lead to fatalism and inaction.

5. Use metaphors but handle them with care



Metaphors can be a powerful framing tool. They're highly visual, and help us to convey complex information quickly, drawing on shared cultural reference points. And this makes them sticky – when we come across one, it can stick in our minds.

Metaphors can be hard to grasp for some people but, because so many successful frames are captured in metaphors, it's important to be aware of them. For example, the need to 'tighten our belts' when talking about our own finances or the public purse. And explaining how social care helps to 'weave the web' of relationships and support in our local communities – a metaphor Social Care Future developed and tested. And metaphors are everywhere – news headlines, political speeches, etc.

But because they're so powerful, we need to be conscious of and careful with the metaphors we use as they may have unhelpful unintended consequences. For example, talking about 'crippling poverty' both uses an offensive term and reinforces the damaging association between Disabled people and suffering. And using the term 'frontline workers' implies that the people we all rely on to survive and thrive are going into battle, sometimes unprepared, unprotected and unarmed, and risking their lives.

6. Widen who counts as 'us'

This final – but no less important – key ingredient of framing is about avoiding 'us and them' thinking and talking, but never losing sight of inequality.

We need to show how the issues we work on matter to us all, not just to particular groups or communities. This links to our good values: community, connectedness, and concern for others. When talking about disability, this means making it clear that Disabled people are part of life – which is a good thing! – and that an inclusive society benefits everyone.

But our messages about inequality must still be there – while our 'us' may be broad, we are not all the same. We don't all have equal chances to thrive – some of us are much more held back by structural inequality.



Part two: How to talk about disability

The public research dug deep into current ways of thinking about disability – what and how people think, why they think it, and the deeper beliefs about the world that underpin it. And it tested new ways of talking about disability, based on the expert view of DDPOs and using framing good practice, to see whether this would get people thinking about disability in a different and more positive way.

The research focused on the ‘conflicted’ public in London, identified through a screener question. As outlined in part one of this guide, this influential segment of the British public are important for narrative and social change work because they tend to be conflicted about a range of social issues and therefore open to progressive change.



What we found: the current dominant narrative about disability

There is limited public understanding of disability and therefore the different barriers Disabled people face and the impact of these on day-to-day life. This means the extent of progress made on accessibility and inclusion tends to be overestimated, and the prejudice, barriers and structural inequality that Disabled people experience in their daily lives underestimated.

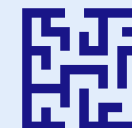
The dominant narrative is the most prevalent and entrenched narrative about an issue that is inaccurate. It is often embedded in long-held beliefs and stereotypical social norms or in misinformation.

A brief summary of the current dominant narrative about disability

People are either Disabled or they are 'normal', and disability is a personal tragedy.



There have been lots of improvements in recent years: lots of places are accessible now. More change is needed in principle, but it takes a long time and is very hard and complicated.



Disabled people should be treated equally and with respect but there is a limit to the extent to which Disabled people can actually be equal and active members of society, because of their condition/impairment. This includes limits to Disabled people being in charge of decisions about their lives and their own organisations.



There's a limit to the extent society can afford the changes that could and should be made to make society inclusive for Disabled people; there's only so much money to go around, and other things and people need investment, too. (Note that this is known as 'zero-sum' thinking and it's divisive as it sets up competition over resources.)



The challenges that Disabled people experience are largely down to the condition itself ('Medical Model') rather than the way society is designed and run and other people's limiting attitudes about disability and Disabled people ('Social Model').



On a more positive note, the research showed that there's now quite a high level of awareness of 'non-visible' conditions, along with empathy for how society treats people who have them. This demonstrates greater understanding of just how prevalent and diverse impairment is.

Alternative narrative about disability

The alternative narrative about disability developed through this project stays true to the Social Model of Disability¹ while applying evidence-based, values-based strategic communications techniques so that it connects with a wider audience.

¹ Disabled people's lives are very varied. For some Disabled people the condition itself can be tough, for some it's less so. But for all Disabled people, other people's ideas about what we can and can't do, and how things are designed and run can be the most disabling thing in our lives. For example, being left out of conversations and decisions about our lives, and not having access to vital health information or a decent education. For more information on the Social Model of Disability, please see Inclusion London's [factsheet](#).

The alternative narrative about disability:

- aims to expand public understanding of what disability is, and of the systemic and structural barriers Disabled people face that can and should be removed
- aims to bridge the gap between what people currently think and the Social Model of Disability
- brings people closer to the Social Model of Disability by acknowledging the sometimes difficult reality of having an impairment or a long-term health condition, while foregrounding the extent to which society disables people rather than the impairment or condition itself
- shifts the focus from describing problems (as important as that is) to describing solutions
- shows how long-term structural change is both necessary and realistic to achieve.

A brief summary of the alternative narrative

Disabled people are part of life; people have a wide range of impairment/conditions, and any one of us could be disabled at any point in our lives.



It's within our power to create a fully inclusive society so that Disabled people can live full lives. And we know how to change society to achieve this.



Conditions/impairment may or may not be hard to live with, but Disabled people are often more disabled by how society is currently run than by their condition/impairment.



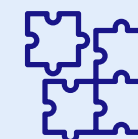
Disabled people can and should be in charge of their own lives, including leading their own organisations.



There should be equality in practice, not just theory, between Disabled and non-Disabled people.



Disabled people can and do work at every level of many organisations, and have a vital role in helping create change.



An inclusive and equal society benefits us all.



Messaging

The alternative narrative on disability was expressed through a number of core messages, which were tested with the public. These messages are underpinned by intrinsic values of freedom, control, independence, equality and social justice, and community and interdependence. (See part one of this guide for more information on the role of values in communicating for change.)

The messages are examples of how this evidence-based approach to communicating can work in practice to change how people think and talk about disability in line with the expert view. It wasn't possible to test messages covering all aspects of this narrative and for all audiences. But the research insights and the good strategic communications practice outlined in part one of this guide can be applied to all messaging on disability, tailored to specific issues and audiences.

What follows is a section on disability terminology, some 'dos and don'ts' for talking about disability, and some example messages to use and adapt.

There are four target audiences for this work:

1. The 'conflicted' public, as described earlier in this guide
2. People who could – but don't currently – identify as Disabled. This includes people who have so-called 'hidden' conditions, and are not 'out' about that. They're an important audience to engage
3. Funders and policy-makers that DDPOs want to influence, many of whose views about disability will be the same as the conflicted public's views
4. The media, many of whom use some Social Model words (eg 'Disabled people') but still frame everything else in a Medical Model or individualistic way (eg 'a Disabled person overcoming barriers and being a superhero').

People who already live and breathe the Social Model of Disability are not a target audience for this approach to communicating for change because they don't need to be persuaded about the Social Model itself. But they and DDPOs are vital to changing the hearts and minds of the target audiences. This guide is a tool to help DDPOs change how they talk about the Social Model to do just that.

Disability terminology

DDPOs and activists use a range of terms and acronyms that are helpful for describing and talking with each other about our work. Those terms matter and should still be used in the right context. Because we want to make sure the language we use makes sense to, engages and expands the understanding of people who aren't currently part of the movement, we used the public research to explore some of the terms. We have made some recommendations about what to try, based on this research and the cognitive science behind strategic communications.



The Social Model of Disability

DDPOs need to be able to describe what the Social Model of Disability is, whether that's for internal use or to use with the public, potential supporters and members, the media, funders or policy makers.



Recommendation

The research showed that it's important to do the following three things when describing the Social Model:

- 1. Acknowledge that an impairment or long-term health condition itself is real and can be difficult or painful for some Disabled people – although not for all.**

This nuance reflects the reality for some Disabled people and addresses the criticism that the Social Model trivialises or denies impairment. It therefore enhances the credibility of the message and acceptance of the Social Model

- 2. But make it clear that the hardest part about having an impairment or long-term health condition is often other people's fear and unease and what they think Disabled people can and can't do, and the way society is currently designed and run that excludes and disadvantages Disabled people.**

The research found that people tend to overestimate the extent of the progress made and therefore underestimate the day-to-day reality of being a Disabled person in our society

- 3. Move beyond describing the problem and focus more on showing that an inclusive society is possible by describing the changes needed and who is responsible for making them.** When people understand how change is achievable, they're more likely to get behind it.

An example message to describe and explain the Social Model of Disability can be found in the messaging section on page 27. Please see Inclusion London's [factsheet](#) for more information on the Social Model of Disability.

Disability vs impairment

Focus group participants frequently talked about ‘disabilities’ or ‘having a disability’ meaning impairment or condition. That is not surprising given the dominance of medical model framing; it’s reflected in many places in everyday life.



Recommendation

‘Disability’ as understood by the Social Model of Disability describes the social and structural inequality people with impairments and conditions experience and should be used in that way. **‘Disabilities’ should be avoided completely because it wrongly conflates impairment and disability and in doing so reinforces the medical model.**

Person- or identity-first language

Throughout the research we used identity-first language (‘Disabled person’) which is preferred by UK DDPOs as it helps explain how the Social Model of Disability works (people with impairment/conditions have a shared experience of being disabled by society), rather than person-first language (‘person with a disability’). The public use both terms interchangeably and there was a lack of understanding of the difference between them. But there was nothing in the findings to suggest that DDPOs should change from identity-first to people-first language.



Recommendation

DDPOs should continue to make clear why identity-first language is preferred, helpful and important for creating positive change.

Impairment or condition

Impairment and condition are terms used to describe physical, cognitive or biological loss of function, or difference. There are differing views about these terms among DDPOs, and both terms carry the risk of medicalisation, with impairment historically being the accepted term in Social Model theory. In the research we asked the public which is the more appropriate term – condition or impairment. There was a clear preference for the term condition from both Disabled and non-Disabled respondents.



Recommendation

Both impairment and condition are contested terms, and there is currently no universally agreed alternative. **While the choice between these terms depends on the specific context and intended audience, the research suggests condition is the preferred term overall.** It is plainer than impairment and allows for a much wider range of associations to be attached to it – positive, negative and neutral. **However, openness to both terms is crucial for respectful and inclusive communications.**

Barriers

Barriers is the term used to describe the different ways that Disabled people are excluded or disadvantaged. For example, by physical barriers like stairs; information and communication barriers, like information being only available in small print; and attitudinal barriers, like people thinking Disabled people are child-like or need to be pitied.



Recommendation

It's important to be explicit about the different barriers that exist, for example attitudinal, communication and information barriers, so people don't automatically just think of physical barriers. **And to focus on removing barriers or designing them out** rather than overcoming them as that makes it clear it's a societal not individual responsibility.

Ableism, disablism

The public research found that these terms aren't generally known or understood, and that they create a significant unnecessary barrier to public understanding and support.



Recommendation

Spell out what you mean instead of using these terms. For example say 'discrimination or prejudice against Disabled people', or 'favouring non-Disabled people'.

‘Dos and don’ts’ for talking about disability

Below are some ‘dos and don’ts’ for talking about disability, based on the research insights, the key ingredients of strategic communications outlined in part one, and communications good practice more generally. The ‘what this looks like in practice’ column uses a mixture of first and third person examples. The point of view can be changed according to the author/speaker and audience.

Do	Don’t	What good practice looks like: suggested examples
<p>Do keep your messages simple and relatable by bringing to mind everyday people, places and experiences that are easy to visualise.</p>	<p>Don’t use complex messages and talk in generalisations that are hard to visualise and grasp.</p>	<p>‘There are Disabled lawyers, teachers, shop assistants, politicians and baristas.’</p> <p>Or</p> <p>‘Disabled people are in every cafe, every workplace, on every football terrace and in every park.’</p>
<p>Do lead with empowering values of freedom, control and independence to communicate equal value and competence, and community and interdependence to communicate how the whole of society benefits from equality and inclusivity.</p> <p>Where possible, use values of equality and social justice (rights) alongside freedom, control and independence. This is because it’s simply not possible for most Disabled people to live full lives of their choosing in a society that discriminates against them.</p>	<p>Don’t rely on facts and statistics alone – our hearts dictate our heads, not the other way around.</p> <p>This doesn’t mean we don’t use facts or statistics – we just never lead with them.</p>	<p>‘Most of us want to have as much control as possible over our own lives and an equal chance to thrive.</p> <p>But Disabled people are often left out of decisions about how we live our lives. And other people’s harmful attitudes and the way society is set up and run make it really hard to do the things we can and want to do.’</p> <p>Or</p> <p>‘Most of us want to live in a community that includes us and where we look out for one another, and in a society that values us.</p> <p>But because of people’s unease and outdated attitudes about what we can or can’t do, Disabled people are often excluded from everyday life.’</p>

Do	Don't	What good practice looks like: suggested examples
<p>Do tell a different, positive, story about Disabled people.</p>	<p>Don't negate (and therefore repeat) an untruth about Disabled people as that just reinforces it in people's minds.</p>	<p>'Disabled people run organisations and businesses.'</p> <p>Instead of</p> <p>'It's not the case that Disabled people can't run organisations and businesses.'</p>
<p>Do say what you're for, rather than what you're against. Focus on your vision for a better world that people will want to get behind – hope is a much greater motivator than fear.</p>	<p>Don't use crisis messaging or focus exclusively on righting wrongs, as this can lead to despondency and fatalism rather than motivation and action.</p> <p>And be careful about 'fighting' language: anger absolutely has a place but it's important to balance it with hope.</p>	<p>'Our vision is a world where all Disabled people can choose how to live our lives, in a community that includes us, and a society that values us'</p> <p>Instead of</p> <p>'Our vision is a world where Disabled people no longer experience ableism and abuse.'</p>
<p>Do focus on how the way people think about Disabled people, and the way society is designed and run, often disables people more than the impairment/condition itself.</p> <p>But it's important to acknowledge that having an impairment/condition can be tough for some Disabled people, as this makes your message more credible.</p>	<p>Don't focus on individual stories, especially exceptional ones: 'triumph over adversity' stories just reinforce the idea that disability is an adversity, and a person's circumstances are down to their choices and actions alone, rather than the way society is designed and run.</p> <p>But be careful to avoid leaving the reader feeling personally blamed and responsible for all of society's failings – the research showed that this could turn them off your message.</p>	<p>'While having an impairment or long-term health condition can be tough at times, the toughest part of being a Disabled person is often other people's ideas about what we can and can't do, and how things are designed and run.</p> <p>This makes it harder for us to look after our families, work, go out, live independently, have fun, play a part in our communities and all the other things most people want in their lives.'</p>

Do	Don't	What good practice looks like: suggested examples
<p>Do bring the Social Model of Disability to life by using concrete, relatable and positive examples of actual changes that have already happened for Disabled people, and changes that can and need to happen in the future, naming the agent(s) of those changes.¹</p> <p>This makes the Social Model easier to grasp, and further change seem both realistic and achievable. And this encourages people to get behind it.</p>	<p>Don't talk about the Social Model of Disability in the abstract – concepts like 'systems' and 'structures' are difficult to visualise and understand without real-life examples of them.</p>	<p>'We know that society can be more inclusive and that employers can and do have an important role in making it so. For example, remote working used to be rare, but in some jobs it's now a fact of life that has made it easier for lots of Disabled people who want to work at home.</p> <p>But real inclusivity means Disabled people having the same choices about whether to work at home or not as non-disabled people. And that needs things like accessible public transport to get to work, and employers providing flexible start and finish times, the right equipment, and inclusive training opportunities.'</p>
<p>Do make it clear that Disabled people are part of life – are 'us'.</p> <p>This widens people's idea of 'us', promoting inclusivity. You can do this by talking about the number of Disabled people and the wide range of different conditions/impairment.</p> <p>And by using 'we' instead of 'their'.</p>	<p>Don't use 'us and them' framing – talking about Disabled people as separate or different to 'everyone else'.</p>	<p>'Disabled people have always been part of life. So many of us have conditions or impairment, such as multiple sclerosis, autism, deafness, bipolar, or arthritis. You often won't know if someone is Disabled or not.'</p> <p>Or</p> <p>'Disabled people are in every workplace, every cafe, on every football terrace and in every park. Disabled people are us.'</p>
<p>Do expand ideas of what it means to be a valued and capable member of society.</p>	<p>Don't focus exclusively on Disabled people's ability to work – or use the economic argument for change – as this risks equating a person's worth to economic productivity.</p>	<p>'Disabled people can and do live full lives. They are the friends, partners and parents who we live, socialise and work with.'</p>

¹ Inclusion London has produced a [timeline](#) of the Disabled people's rights movement in the UK.

Structuring your messages

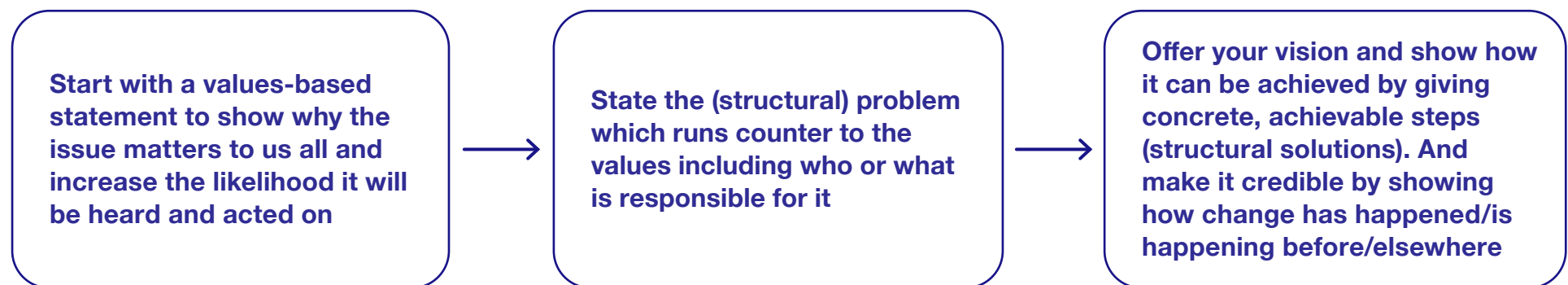
As described in part one of this guide, when we frame an issue with intrinsic values, like freedom, control and independence, community and interdependence, and equality and social justice, it shows how the issue we are raising runs counter to those values. And that increases the likelihood our audience will be open to hearing about and engaging with it; it opens a door to the issue.

And when we describe the problems we're seeking to solve, we need to choose one or two problems to focus on; if we list everything, our brains simply can't absorb all that information – we feel overwhelmed and switch off. And it's important to say how that problem came about. To state who or what is

responsible. When we do that our audience better understands that change is possible: the problem was designed in and so can be designed out.

And, finally, we need to talk about our vision – the hope and change we can rally around. But if we do that without showing how that change can be achieved, it won't seem realistic or credible to our audience and they may switch off. So we need to give the concrete steps to achieving it and to name the agents of that change. And showing how positive change has happened on our issue before or in another country also demonstrates that the change we seek is desirable and possible.

Here it is as a recommended basic messaging formula:



Here's an example of this messaging formula in action:

““ *Most people want to live in a community that includes us and be part of a society that values us.*

Disabled people want that too – we are parents, successful employees and trusted friends. But society often excludes us, and our skills, ambitions and worth are not recognised or are ignored.

Laws in the UK have helped make some progress, but there's still a huge gap between what we all want to happen and what actually happens. This means that everyday things like shopping, working, traveling, and socialising that other people take for granted can be needlessly difficult, stressful and time-consuming for Disabled people.

Service providers and employers need to implement the solutions that already exist to include everyone. For example, access to public spaces with guide dogs, playgrounds that Disabled children can use, flexible working hours, and building lifetime homes that continue to be accessible as we get older.

””

Example messages to use and adapt



Below are some example messages to use and adapt in your communications according to the audience and the context. They were tested in the research and had a positive impact on how people understood and thought about disability. They have been refined where needed based on what the research told us about what does and doesn't work well.

These are core messages: it wasn't possible or necessary to test messages covering all aspects of the alternative narrative and for all audiences. The research insights and the strategic communications good practice outlined in this guide can be applied to all messaging on disability.

Message: 'Choice and control'

Everyone wants to have as much control as possible over our own lives, the power to make decisions, and to have a say in the things that matter to us. That's a basic human right which most of us take for granted.

But for Disabled people, decisions that affect us are often taken out of our hands.

Disabled people can and do socialise, work and live a full life. We understand better than anyone else what we need. Most of us have the capacity to make choices and decisions about our lives.

It's right that Disabled people should have as much control as possible over decisions that affect our lives.

Message: 'Work'

There are Disabled people in every type of workplace, even if we don't know it. There are Disabled lawyers, teachers, shop assistants, politicians and baristas. Disabled people run organisations and businesses.

But for lots of Disabled people, fear of being stigmatised or undermined stops them from being open about who they are at work. Many are worried about colleagues' reactions, or their skills and commitment being questioned if they tell people they are disabled.

The more that employers understand conditions/impairment are part of life and work, the more it is possible for Disabled people to be their whole self at work, and the better workplaces will be - for everyone.

What this message is for

This rights-based message leads with values of choice and control to position Disabled people as active agents in their own lives, and uses equality and social justice to make the case for change.

In the testing, this message also worked well among Disabled respondents to increase acceptance of the Social Model of Disability, and to communicate that Disabled people are just part of life.

What this message is for

This message foregrounds Disabled people's agency and competence, and makes the case for inclusivity.

Message: 'Part of life'

Disabled people are part of life and society. So many of us have conditions/impairment, such as multiple sclerosis, autism, deafness, bipolar, or arthritis. You often won't know if someone is disabled or not.

In fact, a quarter of us in England live with a loved one or family member who is disabled, and any one of us could become disabled at some point in our lives.

Disabled people are in every café, every workplace, on every football terrace and in every park. Disabled people are us.

Message: 'Equal worth'

Most people want to live in a community that includes us and be part of a society that values us.

Disabled people want that too – we are parents, successful employees and trusted friends. But society often excludes us, and our skills, ambitions and worth are not recognised or are ignored.

Laws in the UK have helped make some progress, but there's still a huge gap between what we all want to happen and what actually happens. This means that everyday things like shopping, working, traveling and socialising that other people take for granted can be needlessly difficult, stressful and time-consuming for Disabled people.

Service providers and employers need to implement the solutions that already exist to include everyone. For example, access to public spaces with guide dogs, playgrounds that Disabled children can use, flexible working hours, and building lifetime homes that continue to be accessible as we get older.

What this message is for

This message communicates that Disabled people are just part of life, and are equal in worth to non-Disabled people.

In the testing, this message also increased acceptance of the Social Model of Disability across all respondents.

What this message is for

This message leads with values of equality and social justice to make it clear that Disabled people are of equal worth to non-disabled people. And shows that much more needs to be changed to make equality a reality for Disabled people.

Message: 'Social Model' (short)

Disabled people's lives are very varied. For some Disabled people their impairment/condition itself can be tough, for some it's less so.

But for all Disabled people, other people's ideas about what we can and can't do, and how things are designed and run can be the most disabling thing. They stop us from living our lives.

As a country, there are lots of examples of solving the problems that hold us back. We need to continue to build on these changes so that Disabled people can be fully included in society.

Message: 'Social Model' (long)

Disabled people's lives are very varied. For some Disabled people their impairment/condition itself can be tough, for some it's less so.

But for all Disabled people, other people's ideas about what we can and can't do, and how things are designed and run can be the most disabling thing in our lives. For example, being left out of conversations and decisions about our lives, and not having access to vital health information or a decent education.

Disabled people can and do want to go out, live independently, work, have fun, look after our families, play a part in our communities and all the other things most people want in their lives.

As a country, we know we can solve the problems that hold us back – the outdated attitudes and systems that don't work – because we've done it before. For example, public transport is becoming more accessible, we're designing homes that people can stay in as they get older, we have a law that says Disabled people should get information in a way they can access and understand, and there are more Disabled people and actors in our TV shows and newspapers now.

We need to continue to build on these changes so that Disabled people can be fully included in society.

What this message is for

This message expands understanding of what we mean by the Social Model of Disability – a concept that can be difficult to explain and to grasp.

It was designed to be used as a standard Social Model descriptor for DDPOs.

Message: 'Change'

We all want an equal chance to thrive. For Disabled people, how people think about us and how the country is designed and run, often restricts us from doing that.

We know it's possible to change this because we've changed how we thought about and solved so many things before. Think about road safety. Drivers' licences, road signs, the Highway Code, seatbelt legislation, airbags – all these innovations and laws didn't once exist but are now common sense and help us all go about our daily lives.

Similarly, making changes to improve Disabled people's lives is a matter of choice and will. Government, local councils and other services all have the power to consider Disabled people's needs, and to make life more open and accessible to us all.

What this message is for

This message leads with the value of equality, and demonstrates that structural change is realistic and achievable.

Because it's a hopeful message and offers a very concrete example of how a successful change has been made in the past, it also led to a significant increase in support for the Social Model among Disabled respondents in the testing.

A final word

We hope that this guide has inspired you to think about the way we talk about disability, and given you some helpful tools to try out something new to help shift public perceptions, influence policy and, ultimately, foster a more equitable society for Disabled people.

We welcome any feedback on the guide, including ways we can make it more accessible to more people.

You can get in touch with us at
info@inclusionlondon.org.uk

