

**Briefing for ICS
strategies:
Accessible
Information**

Why is there a renewed focus on this issue?

Under the Accessible Information Standard (AIS), all publicly funded health and social care providers are required by law to ensure people are given information about their health and care in accessible ways.

However, over the last year, a growing body of evidence from Healthwatch and others has suggested that health and care services are consistently failing to meet the standard and the issue was a particular challenge during the pandemic.

In response, NHS England (NHSE) has been formally reviewing progress and is due to conclude its review in the autumn. We expect NHSE to develop a revised version of the standard ready for implementation from April 2023.

The CQC is also in the process of developing how it will assess integrated care systems (ICSs). CQC will base this on the new single assessment framework being used across all its regulatory activity. This new framework includes an increased emphasis on patient experience with specific reference to whether information and communications are taking account of people's additional needs.

These two national changes, combined with broader expectations on the NHS to address health inequalities, mean that ICSs will need to give significantly more attention to the AIS over the next 12 to 18 months.

What should ICSs focus on?

In the 2022/23 Mandate, the Government set out a number of ways in which the Health and Care Act 2022 ICS reforms would ensure effective NHS leadership, culture and use of organisational resources. One of the key areas identified was delivery of the AIS, ensuring everyone is given healthcare in the way they need it.

From the autumn onwards, we expect ICSs to be given clear instructions about what this means in practice, including requiring them to:

- review policies to make sure the AIS focuses on people's needs rather than being dictated by a diagnosis of a condition;

- step up training for staff/providers on awareness of the AIS and how to ensure services are compliant;
- update computer systems to make it easier and more consistent to record people’s communication support needs.

The CQC assessment framework will also be rolled out from Q3 onwards. This will be looking for evidence of compliance with the AIS and support for translation and interpretation services more broadly. You can read [Single assessment framework - Care Quality Commission \(cqc.org.uk\)](https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications-and-reports/single-assessment-framework)

There is therefore an opportunity for you to raise questions early, as part of the ICP strategy process, about how your system intends to address these requirements and how it will ensure it is delivering for local people who have communication support needs.

What does our evidence tell us?

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, feedback from people who weren’t getting the support they needed to communicate with the health service went up.

In late 2021, we reviewed the stories that 6,200 people shared with us between April 2019 and September 2021 to determine how well the NHS is delivering the Accessible Information Standard.

[We found](#) that people who are not given information in a format they can understand struggle at every stage of their healthcare journey. Their needs are often overlooked, the right support is not always put in place by services, and people are often forced to rely on family, friends or carers, taking away their control over their own health.

We also submitted Freedom of Information (FoI) Act requests to NHS trusts asking how well they are meeting the AIS. Of the 139 Trusts that responded, just over a third (35%) [told us](#) they are fully compliant with the AIS.

A [survey](#) we conducted between March and May 2022 found that more than one in four respondents (28%) said they had been refused help when requesting support to understand information about their healthcare.

Our partners [have also surveyed](#) more than 900 disabled people and NHS staff, highlighting how people’s information and communication needs are not being met.

Where Healthwatch can offer help

Through the [Your Care, Your Way](#) campaign we have been calling for:

1. Health and care services to be made accountable for fully delivering the standard
2. Every health and care service to have an accessibility champion

3. Better IT systems so that patients can easily update services with their communication needs
4. Involving people with communication needs in designing better services
5. Mandatory training on accessible information for all health and care staff.

You can read about our recommendations in detail [here](#).

Whilst we remain optimistic that these recommendations will all be picked up by the NHSE review, they can form the basis of your conversations with your ICS.

To support, you could:

- Offer to carry out audits of local processes / mystery shop local services to assess levels of current compliance
- Carry out further interviews or surveys with local people who require additional communication support to generate specific local evidence base.
- Deliver campaigns locally to help raise awareness of the AIS, people's rights and the support available.
- When offering to carry out any of the above, it is worth asking if resource is available from the ICS to fund the work, as this will be a priority for them in the near future.



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