

**THE COMMUNICATIONS FORUM**

*Creating a powerful voice*

**A DRAFT DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

**January, 2006.**

## OUR PURPOSE

*The Forum exists to improve the lives of people living with communication impairments<sup>1</sup> by harnessing and focussing the resources and energies of its constituent organisations.*

We believe that government, statutory agencies and the general public are less aware of and less well informed about the needs and aspirations of people living with communication impairment than other more immediately obvious types of disability such as being a wheel-chair user. A powerful voice is needed to redress this imbalance.

## OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Forum is a **network** of constituent organisations rather than a conventional organisation. It follows, therefore that:

- the Forum should facilitate collaborative work amongst constituent organisations.
- the work of the Forum must always add value to the work of its constituent organisations.
- the Forum must be transparent and honest in its relationship with constituent organisations.

The Forum will always act in accordance with the highest ethical principles in all aspects of its work.

The Forum will seek to act as an exemplar of good practice in its own communication.

The Forum will maintain its independence from government and from any commercial or other influences which might undermine the trust of constituent organisations or of people living with communication impairments.

## WHY THE FORUM IS NEEDED

- some member organisations have a focus upon particular diseases or disorders, the effects of which may **include** communication impairment.
- some member organisations have a focus upon disability as a whole with disability associated with communication impairment only being **part** of their field of interest.
- some member organisations focus upon a **particular** aspect of communication impairment or a particular age group.

The Forum exists to find and focus upon the **common ground** amongst these three sorts of member organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> It is recognised that the language used to talk about impairment, disability and so on is disputed. It may be that an early task of the Forum is to commission a research project to try to get a better fix on the language to use in particular situations.

## **GOVERNANCE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS FORUM**

The Communications Forum is designed to be an active network which encourages and facilitates communication and collaboration amongst its constituent organisations. Our arrangements for governance are designed to be inclusive and to foster active participation both by constituent organisations and by individuals with an interest in communication impairments.

As a Registered Charity, the Communications Forum is required to have a Board of Trustees consisting of a Chair, a Secretary and a Treasurer plus such other members<sup>2</sup> as we may decide to have. As a separate activity, the Constitution of the Forum is being reviewed to ensure that it enables us to work effectively as a collaborative network.

We suggest that it would be appropriate for the Communications Forum to have a co-ordinating team which would include the Trustees of the Charity. The Co-ordinating Team would be accountable to the membership for the good governance of the organisation including:

- Achievement of agreed objectives.
- Compliance with the guiding principles of the Forum.
- Ethical and professional behaviour in all aspects of the Forum's work.
- Effective and transparent use of funding.

Subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission, the co-ordinating group should have the power to co-opt other members (to agreed limits) to cope with the workload or to contribute specialist expertise. Such co-opted members would not necessarily need to be Trustees.

In providing leadership to the Forum, the Co-ordinating Team would be mindful that it is trying to create and sustain a highly participative network rather than a formal bureaucratic organisation. The development of policy and decision-making would be an inclusive and participative experience making maximum use of information technology rather than formal meetings.

The Co-ordinating Team would also have the power to establish time-limited task forces to undertake particular pieces of work on behalf of the Forum.

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<sup>2</sup> If the Forum has both corporate and individual members, it may wish to have some Trustees elected by individual members and others by corporate members.

## **INDICATIVE CONCRETE OBJECTIVES TO BE ACHIEVED OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS**

1. Establish a secure funding base<sup>3</sup> which is sufficient to enable the Forum to grow and develop and to achieve the objectives which it sets for itself.
2. Re-design and re-launch a website which will serve as a portal or gateway both for individuals affected by communications impairments and for organisations involved in the field of communication impairment. (see Appendix A).
3. Develop and launch a Communications Charter (see Appendix B) which spells out the rights of people living with communication impairments in terms of access to:
  - Health and social services to meet their needs.
  - Education.
  - Employment including self-employment.
  - Normal day to day living activities such as shopping, transport and leisure.
  - Citizenship including the right to influence public bodies such as Health Authorities and Local Councils.
4. Bring into membership 80% of voluntary organisations actively involved in working with or for people living with communications impairments in the UK<sup>4</sup>.
5. Ensure that the Forum is routinely consulted by central and local government and their agencies on issues to do with people living with communication impairments.

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<sup>3</sup> We believe that annual funding in the region of £40-£50 thousand pounds would be sufficient to maintain and develop the Forum as an effective network. Additional project-specific funding would then be sought from commercial and other sponsors for specific pieces of work such as the Communications Charter.

<sup>4</sup> Where effective umbrella organisations exist (as in Scotland), they would usually take the lead role with support, if appropriate, from the Forum.

## **SOURCES OF FUNDING AND PROPOSED SUBSCRIPTION ARRANGEMENTS**

We suggest a normal annual subscription of £300 for participating organisations. This could be reduced to £100 for organisations with an annual income below £10,000. Group arrangements could be made for multi-site bodies such as Speech and Language Therapy Departments.

We will also encourage active participation by individuals with an interest in the field of communication impairments. The question of subscription and voting rights to be taken up through the constitution and governance discussions.

We should aim to have a sufficiently large membership that the income from subscriptions covers our basic running costs. In the short to medium term, we are likely to need some level of sponsorship to contribute towards basic running costs.

Sponsorship should be sought from interested commercial organisations for particular projects such as the development and maintenance of the website, the development and maintenance of the Communications Charter and for Conferences and Workshops. It would be appropriate to acknowledge the sponsorship which has been received on the sponsored activities and in the literature associated with them; this should be done in a way which does not compromise the independence of the Forum.

The Forum should also seek grants and awards from government and from independent funding bodies such as the Health Foundation provided that bidding for such grants and awards does not place the Forum in competition with any of its constituent organisations and does not compromise the independence of the Forum.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

As indicated above, we consider it inequitable to make payment by individuals a condition of membership. We should, however, encourage active membership by individuals with an interest in the field of communication impairments and enable them to contribute fully to the work and governance of the Forum.

It is proposed, therefore, that we should have three forms of membership:

Corporate – for organisations of any kind with an interest in the field of communication impairment.

Individual – for individuals with an interest in the field of communication impairment.

Honorary Life Membership – for individuals who have made a distinguished contribution to the work of the Forum and/or to the field of communication impairment and whom the Forum wishes to honour.

## **ARRANGEMENTS FOR CO-ORDINATING THE WORK OF THE FORUM**

As the Forum is a network rather than a bureaucracy, we would favour “buying in” the services we need rather than employing staff and occupying offices. We believe this approach would provide considerably more flexibility and give much more control over the cost-effectiveness of the Forum.

The services which we would need to buy in include:

### **Routine**

Leadership – through participation in the Co-ordinating Team contributing to the leadership of the Forum.

Liaison with constituent organisations.

Servicing the Board of Trustees/Coordinating team.

Developing and maintaining such policies and procedures as the Forum may need for its own governance.

Developing and maintaining the website.

Dealing with telephone/postal/email enquiries both from organisations and from individuals.

Managing budgets and (with the Treasurer) ensuring all statutory returns are made accurately and promptly.

Project management of work programmes – (large pieces of work may have separate project management arrangements and costs built in).

Production of a twice yearly Newsletter/E-Bulletin.

Liaison with actual and potential sponsors.

Identifying opportunities to bid for grants etc. and preparing agreed bids.

Organising conferences and workshops.

Administrative support such as maintaining records, documentation etc.

### **Specialist (if and when needed).**

Parliamentary liaison/lobbying.

Public relations.

Accountancy/audit.

Research/Project management.

Fund raising.

## **KEY BUSINESS PROCESSES**

### **Strategy development and objective setting.**

A key responsibility of the Co-ordinating Team – probably carried out through an electronic trawl for issues and ideas followed by an electronic consultation on a series of drafts. Strategy should set out a number of measurable and achievable objectives.

### **Contributing to policy.**

A network of sources of expertise (individuals or organisations) who are on hand to draft responses to and/or comment on policy announcements and proposals from central and local government and their agencies or from the media. People with expertise may also be needed to represent the Forum on national and local government bodies and task forces.

Where time permits, the response formulated by “experts” should have been subject to wide internal consultation within the Forum.

### **Campaign planning and implementation.**

A specialised form of project management to design and implement such campaigns as may have been agreed as part of the Forum’s objective setting process.

### **Member liaison.**

Keeping constituent organisations up to date with the work of the Forum, answering questions from constituent organisations and maintaining up to date information about constituent organisations.

### **Website maintenance.**

Initial re-design and re-launch of the website. Adding new information to maintain currency and dealing with requests for information submitted through the website. This process may extend to moderating forums and discussion groups on the website.

### **Marketing.**

Ensuring that interested parties are aware of the work of the Forum and regard it as a respected source of authoritative information and comment in the field of communication impairment. Specific objectives in recruiting new constituent organisations and in communicating about the Forum to potential sponsors.

### **Financial planning and control.**

Setting and managing budgets, preparing accounts and other statutory returns and managing debtors, creditors and cash flow.

## **KEY BUSINESS PROCESSES (Continued)**

### **Information to individuals.**

Providing individuals affected by communications impairments with information which is prompt, helpful and authoritative. Requests for information could arrive by telephone, email, post or via the web-site. Often responses will involve referring to an appropriate constituent organisation.

### **Project management.**

Specifying the scope and outcomes of projects, drawing up a project plan, securing the necessary resources and managing activities to ensure that the desired objectives are achieved within budget and time-scale.

### **Executive reporting.**

Ensuring that the Coordinating Team and Trustees have accurate and timely information about all aspects of the Forum's work both in the form of routine reporting and in response to *ad hoc* requests for information.

**PROJECT PLAN**

Ref	Activity	Start	Finish	Responsibility
1	Consider and comment on draft development plan	Jan 2006	Feb 2006	Trustees
2	Prepare agreed development plan.	Feb 2006	March 2006	Trustees
3	Prepare specification for bought in services.	Feb 2006	Feb 2006	Trustees
4	AGREE DEVELOPMENT PLAN	March 2006	March 2006	MEMBERSHIP
5	Seek and evaluate tenders for service	March 2006	March 2006	Trustees
6	Award contracts for services	March 2006	April 2006	Membership
7	Elect new Trustees if necessary	April 2006	May 2006	Trustees
8	Submit Constitution to the Charity Commission	May 2006	May2006	Trustees
9	Re-launch website	June 2006	June 2006	Service provider
10	Development of Communications Charter	June 2006	Dec 2006	Trustees/Service Provider
11	Marketing campaign to attract new member organisations.	May 2006	Dec 2006	Trustees/Service Provider
12	Marketing campaign to inform individuals about Forum.	May 2006	Dec 2006	Trustees/Service Provider
13	Campaign to attract new sponsors.	May 2006	Dec 2006	Trustees/Service Provider
14	Publicise Forum to Government Departments and Agencies	June 2006	March 2007	Trustees/Service Provider
15	Plan National Forum Conference	May 2006	March 2007	Trustees/Service Provider
16	NATIONAL CONFERENCE to launch Communications Charter.	April 2007.	April 2007	Trustees/Service Provider

## APPENDIX A

### ENABLING ACCESS TO INFORMATION

#### The website

One of the Forum's most successful activities has been the provision of a website to provide a single point of access to authoritative information about communication impairment and we should seek to build upon this success.

The principle behind the website is that it directs users to appropriate sources of information rather than the Forum trying to be a primary provider of information in its own right. The website is a **gateway** to information rather than being a source of information.

To sustain and develop the website, we need to:

Ensure that we have reliable funding in place to support and develop the website.

Ensure that it is designed for use by people with different communication impairments – it should be a model of best practice.

Ensure that it signposts all relevant sources of information and that it is always up to date.

Make it more interactive by:

Providing facilities for on-line discussion.

Providing facilities for requesting information and sharing experiences.

Using it for consultation with organisations and individuals.

Encouraging individuals and organisations to suggest sources which should be included.

Having a regular email bulletin which draws attention to new information and to items of interest to those concerned with communication impairment. Constituent organisations could encourage their members to register to receive the email bulletin.

Publicise the existence of the website through our constituent organisations and through other channels.

#### Improving access to the Internet.

It is estimated that about half of households in the UK have access to the Internet. Potentially, the Internet can be of particular benefit to people living with communication impairment. We should, therefore, investigate ways of working with government and possibly with suppliers to support people with communication impairment in gaining access. Improving access would also increase the value of the Forum's own website.

**Information line**

Our website-based service is only of value to people with Internet access. We should, therefore, be seeking to develop a telephone-based and a postal enquiry service through which we could provide access to the same sort of information as would be available through the website. Ideally, we would do this with a "freephone" number for which we should seek commercial and/or statutory funding.

## APPENDIX B

### RAISING AWARENESS

Until society as a whole and national and local government and their agencies recognise the extent and impact of communicative impairment in the UK, we will all struggle to bring about worthwhile improvements in the lives of people living with communicative impairments.

We propose, therefore to lead a concerted and high profile awareness raising campaign built around the idea of a Charter of Rights - ***The Communication Charter*** - for people living with communication impairments. The Charter would serve as a focus and a unifying theme for an awareness raising campaign sustained over a number of years.

The Communication Charter should be as short and simple as possible but should spell out the rights of people living with communication impairment in terms of access to:

Health and social services to meet their needs.

Education.

Employment including self-employment.

Normal day-to-day activities such as shopping, transport and leisure.

Citizenship including the right to influence public bodies such as Health Authorities and Local Councils.

The impact of the Communication Charter can be enhanced by measures such as:

The award of Communication Charter marks to organisations which make appropriate provision for people with communication impairments.

Special awards for organisations which demonstrate exemplary good practice in meeting the needs of people with communication impairments. These would provide opportunities to publicise “good news” stories about how communication impairments need not be social handicaps.

Special awards for individuals living with communication impairments who have been outstandingly successful in overcoming the potential handicapping effects of their impairments. Again, these provide opportunities for publicising “good news” stories.

Providing checklists and audit tools for specific sectors such as schools, hospitals and employers to assess their own measures in relation to communication impairment.

In implementing the Communication Charter we should:

Seek endorsement from relevant government ministers.

Seek endorsement from leading companies and organisations.

Seek financial sponsorship for awards and for checklist/audit/information packs.

Seek financial sponsorship from relevant government departments for checklist/audit/information packs targeted at specific sectors such as schools, employers, shops, hospitals and so on.

### **Complementary activities**

Conferences, seminars and workshops have proved successful in raising awareness of particular issues in relation to communication impairment and we should continue to make use of this sort of vehicle.

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**Our very grateful thanks are due to Dr Michael Faulkner: Organisation Development Advisor for both facilitating the production of this document and writing the first drafts in consultation with the Trustees and members of the Steering Group.**