

# ACS | best practice

## Supporting vulnerable customers

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Everyday activities like shopping can present challenges for vulnerable customers. This guidance outlines some of the ways in which you can accommodate the needs of vulnerable customers in-store.

An ACS advice guide for retailers [www.acs.org.uk](http://www.acs.org.uk)

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## Introduction

**There are many small actions you can take to make your stores more accessible for everyone.**

For example, clear, easy to read signs benefit every customer. A doorway or ramp that makes it easy for someone with a mobility impairment will also be useful for a parent with a pram or buggy.

Try to ensure that vulnerable customers can access your services in the same way or as close as possible to the same way as customers without a vulnerability.

If you are unable to provide a vulnerable customer with exactly the same service, be prepared to offer them a reasonable alternative. This may mean providing the service by a different method.

Making adjustments in your store can benefit your customers and colleagues, ensuring that your store is accessible to everyone now and in the future.

### General Principles

- Treat a vulnerable person in the same manner and with the same **respect** and **courtesy** you would anyone else.
- Providing **good customer service** to vulnerable customers will sometimes mean doing things differently.
- Try to think **flexibly** and **creatively** about the way you serve customers in order to meet their needs.
- Do not make assumptions about the existence or absence of a vulnerability/disability; many people have vulnerabilities that are not visible or immediately apparent.
- A vulnerable individual/customer may not introduce a personal assistant or an interpreter. Take your lead from the person using the services.
- People who use guide or assistance dogs may have a visual, hearing or mobility impairment, or they might have epilepsy. These dogs are working dogs and should not be treated as pets.
- Don't worry if you ever feel embarrassed because you aren't sure what to do. We can all feel anxious about doing the wrong thing on occasions, and this may be the first time you have met anyone with your customer's particular vulnerability/disability.
- Be **confident**; **relax** and **ask** your customer how you can help.
- Some people need a little more time than usual for everyday tasks such as finding items or paying. **Always be patient** and give extra help if it's needed.

## Words and phrases

Certain words and phrases may cause offence, but preferences vary, so be prepared to ask the individual. Although there are no concrete rules about the "right" and "wrong" thing to say to people, increased importance is being put upon ensuring language around disability does not reinforce negative stereotypes.

If in doubt, ask yourself how you would want to be treated and always be willing to adapt to a person's individual preference. Common sense and common courtesy will help you to know what to do and say. The one universal rule is never to assume you know what assistance, if any, a vulnerable/disabled person requires. Ask if, and what, assistance they need.

### Communicating with vulnerable customers:

Here are some general tips on what to say and what not to say.

| ✓ Use...   | ✗ Instead of...  |
|--|--|
| Disabled people or people with disabilities.   | The Disabled.  |
| A person with a mental health condition.   | Mental, mental patient, schizophrenic, lunatic, psycho, etc. |
| Disabled person, or person with a disability or, if appropriate, a person with a mobility impairment.                    | Cripple, or invalid.   |
| A person who is deaf without speech or a deaf person. Note that British Sign Language is a recognised language.          | Deaf and dumb, or deaf-mute.                                 |
| A person of short stature, or a person of restricted growth. (Although some individuals do prefer to be called a dwarf.) | Midget, or dwarf.  |
| Seizures.  | Fits, spells, attacks.                                       |
| A person with a learning disability or difficulty.   | Mentally handicapped, subnormal.                             |
| A wheelchair user.   | Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair.                  |

## Dementia

Dementia is classed as a disability and under the Equality Act 2010, reasonable adjustments should be made for both employees and customers to ensure fair and equal treatment.

### Customers living with dementia

**2/3** of people with dementia still live in their own homes in the community

Source: Alzheimer's Society (2012)

Less than **Half** of people with dementia say they feel part of the community

Source: Alzheimer's Society (2013)

### What you should know about dementia



There are currently around **850,000 people** in the UK with dementia

Source: Care Policy and Evaluation Centre 2019

While it mostly affects people over the age of 65, it can affect younger people too. This means you are likely to have numerous colleagues and customers either living with or caring for someone with dementia, and we want to support you to support them.

The word 'dementia' describes a set of symptoms that may include memory loss. However, dementia is not just about losing your memory. It can have an impact on any part of the brain and affect:

|  |                                     |  |
|--|-------------------------------------|--|
|  | <b>Language</b>                     | Difficulties following a conversation or finding the right word for something. |
|  | <b>Perception</b>                   | Thinking that a black mat in front of a door is a hole.                        |
|  | <b>Orientation</b>                  | Losing track of the day or date or becoming confused about where they are.     |
|  | <b>Mobility</b>                     | Difficulties with balance and motor skills.                                    |
|  | <b>Changes in mood or behaviour</b> | Becoming frustrated or irritable.  |

Although dementia can create challenges, it is possible to live well with dementia. By becoming a Dementia Friend, improving customer service standards or the physical environment you will be supporting people with, and affected by dementia, to continue living independent lives and visiting your store.

## Dementia (continued)

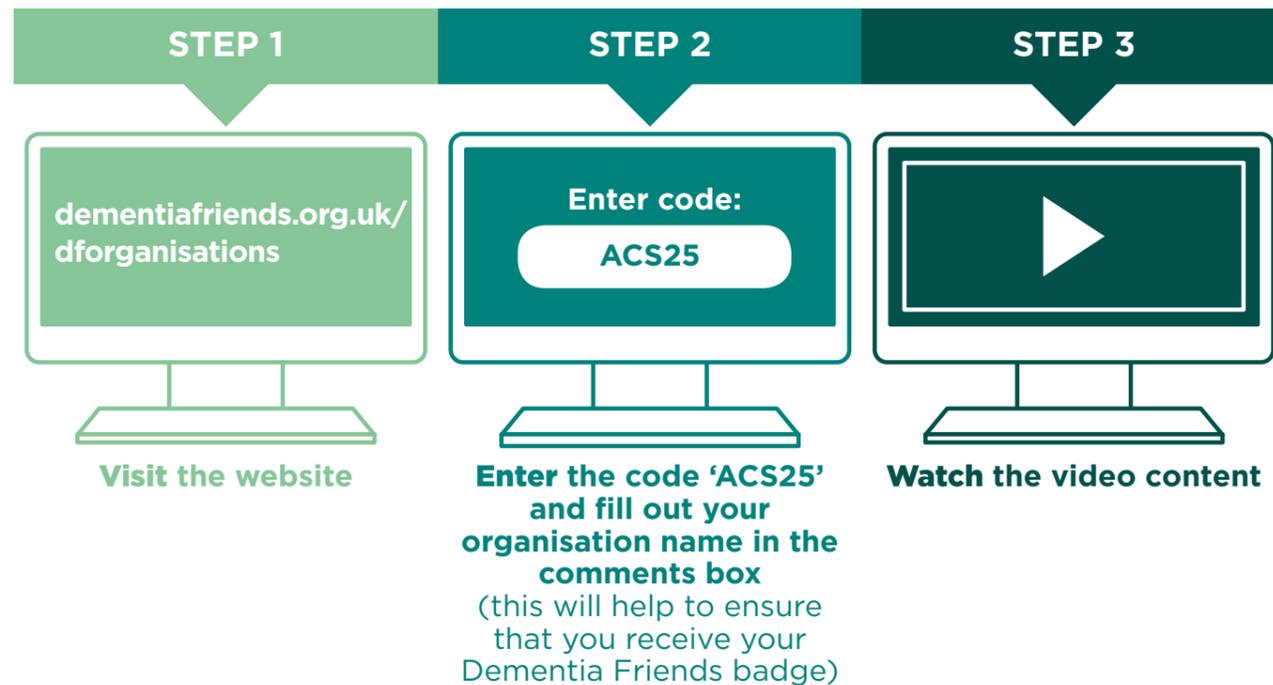
### Become a Dementia Friend

To understand more about dementia and how you can support those affected, you and your colleagues could become Dementia Friends.

Dementia Friends is an Alzheimer's Society initiative changing the way people think, act and talk about dementia. A Dementia Friend is someone who has understood the five key messages and commits to taking a positive action.

### How it works

■ Become a Dementia Friend in under ten minutes by following these steps:



■ Understand the five key messages of Dementia Friends which are:

- 1 Dementia is not a natural part of ageing.
- 2 Dementia is caused by diseases of the brain.
- 3 Dementia is not just about losing your memory.
- 4 It is possible to live well with dementia.
- 5 There is more to the person than the dementia.

### ■ Take action

To become a Dementia Friend you also have to commit to taking an action to support people affected by dementia. These top tips are some examples:

### Top tips

- ✓ If a customer seems confused, reassure them that you're there to help.
- ✓ Take your time to explain instructions, actively listen to their answers, acknowledging what you have and haven't understood.
- ✓ Speak calmly and slowly, using short, simple sentences.
- ✓ Make sure you use positive body language and your facial expressions are welcoming.
- ✓ Using non-verbal communication, like pointing in a certain direction, can be helpful.
- ✓ Visual aids, such as pictures or instruction manuals may be useful.
- ✓ Avoid flashing lights and loud music in your store which can be disorientating.
- ✓ Allow the customer to sit somewhere quiet.
- ✓ If the customer doesn't know where they are or how to get home, ask if they have a phone number of someone you can call to help them. Contact the police if you can't find someone to help them.
- ✗ Don't treat people with dementia as if they're not there or as if they are a child. People living with dementia deserve our respect.
- ✗ Avoid using the term 'person suffering with dementia' because this is negative. Instead use 'person living with dementia' or 'person affected by dementia'.

Once you have become a Dementia Friend you will be able to receive a Dementia Friends action card and badge. Wear the badge on your uniform to encourage customers living with dementia to approach you if they need your assistance. Encourage your colleagues, friends and family to become Dementia Friends too.



Accommodating the needs of vulnerable customers does not necessarily need to be an expensive process. While accessibility and induction loops are important, many of the tips outlined in this guide do not require any investment but can still have a huge impact in improving your customers' experience.

This illustration sets out some of the main areas that a convenience store could address to support and communicate with vulnerable customers. Which of these can you implement in your own store? Remember that it is not a definitive list and additional information will be available online.

You can download a larger version of this store map here: [acs.org.uk/advice](https://acs.org.uk/advice)



## Lighting

Ensure entrances are well-lit and that lighting throughout the store is consistent and natural where possible. Minimise shadows, glares and pools of light and avoid excessive lighting which can cause sensory overload. This will reduce the challenges for people who have challenges with perception, such as people living with dementia.

## Move to the front of high counters

If you need to speak with someone in a wheelchair for more than a few moments, it is advisable to move to the front of any high counters in-store.

## Lower counters

Lower counters will allow you to serve customers using wheelchairs more easily.

## Making payment simple

- Tell the customer clearly how much their items cost and ask the customer how they want to pay.
- Remember to tell the customers about any offers or special promotions.
- If a customer seems to be struggling to count out their money, you can help them by counting their change out with them. It can also be helpful to have a coin recognition chart next to the till.
- Have card machines that the customer can pick up so that if necessary they can hold it close to see the numbers as they enter their PIN.
- Some customers may struggle to remember their PIN. You can help by offering payment by chip and signature or providing a contactless payment option. Make sure your customers know you have these options.

## Seating

People who use walking aids may find it hard to use their hands when standing up, for example to count out money. Offer a seat if you can and offer to open doors. If a customer has difficulty walking be prepared to offer a more personalised service. Find a place for the customer to sit down and bring goods directly to them. Some customers with hidden conditions, such as dementia or anxiety, may also appreciate having seating available to give them a moment to rest.

## Quiet spaces

Think about providing a quiet space in the store with a chair where people can take time to rest if they need to. If your store has a Post Office or more than one checkout, consider making one more relaxed for those that might need more time.

## Mirrors

Changes in perception mean that some people with dementia can be confused or disorientated by mirrors, so think about their size and position in the store.

## Open heavy doors

Offer to open heavy doors for customers who use sticks, crutches, walking frames or wheelchairs.

## Guide dogs / assistance dogs

The customer may have a guide or assistance dog. Remember these are working dogs and should not be treated as a pet. Speak to the customer rather than making a fuss of the dog.

## Remove obstructions

Try to keep aisles free from obstacles and ensure furniture does not restrict access for people with mobility impairments or visual impairments. This will aid customers' navigation in-store, such as those using wheelchairs or scooters and people who have difficulty walking.

## Toilets

For some people, it can be important to plan outings around where they can access toilets. Ensure your toilets are clearly signed and without restricted access to save embarrassment. Toilet seats that are of a contrasting colour to the rest of the toilet are easier to see if someone has visual or perception difficulties.

## Signage

Clear signage will help all your customers navigate around your store but can make a big difference to people who have issues with navigation, such as people with dementia. Ensure clear signage to and from store facilities, including toilets, exits and payment points. Make sure there is a good contrast between the words and the background and consider using images which could help if someone forgets what an object is called.

## Dementia / confusion

Customers may become confused or distressed and not know where they are or why, for example those with dementia. Reassure them and allow them to sit down somewhere quiet. Tell the customer where they are and ask if they know what they want. People with dyslexia or autism, may also require guidance.

## Assisting blind or visually impaired customers

- Ask the customer how you can help.
- Remember to talk and speak clearly.
- Offer an arm to guide the customer to their requested location in-store.

## Helping wheelchair users

- Avoid leaning on a wheelchair. This is the equivalent of leaning or hanging onto a person.
- Remember to speak to the wheelchair user, not their companion unless instructed otherwise.
- A wheelchair is a user's personal space. Never push a wheelchair without the user's consent, or move crutches, canes or walking frames without the user's consent.

## Flooring

Changes in floor surfaces can cause some confusion for people with perceptual problems. Where possible avoid reflective flooring, which can look like water, and patterned flooring, which may be perceived as obstacles. Black mats in front of a door can resemble a hole which can cause distress so avoid using where possible or ensure the mat is the same colour as the rest of the floor. When the floor is black, a coloured rug/runner can be helpful.

## Noise

Think about the right volume for music you are playing, and whether to vary this at different times to reflect different customer profiles during the day.

## Accessibility / ramps

Your store should be fully accessible for people who use a wheelchair or scooter. Try to make your premises step free or accessible by using permanent or portable ramps. Deep-pile carpets or rugs can also be barriers to access.

Other ways in which to serve customers who cannot get into your shop include:

- Serving the customer outside if it is a small item.
- Shop for the customer and bring goods out to them.
- Regular customers could call you with a list of what they want and have their shopping ready for them to pick up later.

## Customers who are blind or who have visual impairments

Some blind people can see nothing at all. Most have some sight, but it may be blurred, distorted or limited.

Always speak to a blind customer when you approach them. Say clearly who you are (but don't shout) and ask how you can help. If the person asks for help going somewhere ask, "May I offer you an arm?" and then guide them there but remember to mention steps in advance, saying if they're up or down. Don't leave the customer talking to an empty space. Tell them before you move away.

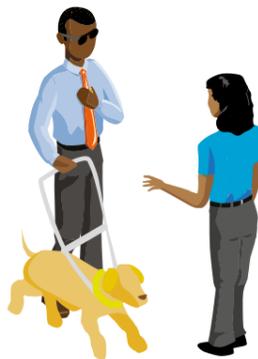


If you provide written materials for customers you may need to supply them in a suitable alternative format such as electronic large print, audio or Braille.

Try to keep aisles free from obstacles and ensure furniture does not restrict access for people with mobility impairments or visual impairments.

### Guide / assistance dogs

The customer may have a guide or assistance dog. Remember these are working dogs and should not be treated as a pet. Speak to the customer rather than making a fuss of the dog.



### Customers with visual impairments

- ✓ Remember to talk - the customer may not be able to see where you are pointing, or if you are nodding your head. Answer questions clearly, and if necessary, show customers where things are by guiding them to their location.
- ✓ Tell the customer how much the item costs and if there are any special offers, as they may not be able to read the signs or displays.
- ✓ If the customer pays in cash and has change, count out the change coin by coin in the customer's hand.
- ✓ Check that the customer has picked up all their possessions before they leave.
- ✓ Card machines can be difficult for customers with visual impairments. Allow the customer to pick up the machine to enter their pin if they need to.

## Customers who are deaf or have a hearing impairment

There are many different degrees and types of deafness and different ways for deaf people, or those who have a hearing impairment, to communicate. You won't immediately know that someone is deaf or has a hearing impairment. It may only become apparent when they speak or fail to hear you when you speak to them. Some deaf people use Sign Language and may have an interpreter with them but many will rely on lip reading and hearing aids.

Make sure your customer is looking at you before you begin to speak. If necessary, attract the customer's attention with a light touch on the shoulder. Always ask how you can best help; don't guess. Don't shout. If the customer can't hear what you say, write it down. You can use hand gestures to help convey what you mean but don't over-exaggerate them.

If they're using a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the customer, not to the interpreter. Induction loops and infrared induction systems can help with communication. They enable people with hearing impairments to tune-in their hearing aids directly to speakers and minimise background noise.



### Top tips

- ✓ Look directly at the person you are speaking to.
- ✓ Speak clearly and at an even pace, but do not distort or exaggerate your lip movements.
- ✓ If you must turn away from the customer, stop talking.
- ✗ Do not speak with your back to a light source as this will put your lips in shadow and try to make sure you are in good lighting when talking.
- ✗ Do not use exaggerated gestures.
- ✗ Do not block your mouth when talking.

## Customers with learning disabilities

### Top tips

- ✓ Many people with learning disabilities lead independent lives. Begin by assuming the person will understand you and speak to the person as you would anyone else.
- ✓ Be patient and encouraging but keep things simple.
- ✓ Be prepared to offer extra assistance for customers unfamiliar with technology like chip and PIN.
- ✓ Accept written signatures or signature stamps as an alternative payment.
- ✓ Do not assume you can predict from your initial impression what the person will or will not understand.
- ✗ However you must never take payment if you think the person seems unsure, worried or confused about what they are buying.



## Customers with mental health conditions

### Top tips

**Often the most significant disability people with mental health conditions experience is created by the attitudes of others.**

- ✓ Be patient and non-judgmental.
- ✓ Give the person time to make decisions.
- ✗ Remove any sources of stress and confusion such as noise or flashing lights if you can.

## Customers who use wheelchairs and scooters

Wherever reasonably possible, buildings which offer a service to the public should be fully accessible for people who use a wheelchair or scooter.

If you cannot reasonably make your premises step free or accessible by using portable ramps you will need to think about other ways in which to serve customers who cannot get into your shop. This could include serving the customer outside if it is a small item that they want to purchase or doing their shopping for them and bringing it out to them. You could even offer regular customers the option of calling you with a list of what they want and having their shopping ready for them to pick up later.



### Top tips

- ✓ Keep aisles and floor space free from obstacles in order to aid navigation for people who use wheelchairs or scooters and people who have difficulty walking.
- ✓ Always speak directly to the wheelchair user and not to their assistant or companion. Come round to their side of high counters. Offer help with heavy doors.
- ✗ Do not assume ramps solve everything. Even if there is step free access heavy doors and deep-pile carpets or rugs can also be barriers to access.
- ✗ A person's wheelchair is an extension of a person's personal space and should not be leant on. Don't hang items on a person's wheelchair.

## Customers who use sticks or walking frames

- ✓ People who use walking aids may find it hard to use their hands when standing up, for example to count out money. Offer a seat if you can and offer to open doors.
- ✓ If a customer has difficulty walking be prepared to offer a more personalised service. Find a place for the customer to sit down and bring goods directly to them.
- ✓ Having seating available can encourage customers to visit your store if they know they'll need a rest.
- ✗ Never touch or move crutches, canes or walking frames without the user's consent.



## Customers with a facial disfigurement

Some people are born with a disfigurement and others acquire it through accident or illness. Largely as a result of social attitudes, living with a disfigurement can be a major challenge for a person and their family. If you focus on the individual person and what they are saying, you will find that you soon overcome any feelings of awkwardness.

### Top tips

- ✓ Make contact as you would with any other customer.
- ✓ Remember that a person's 'looks' may be different, but that doesn't mean they are different in any other way.
- ✓ Concentrate on what they are saying and respond accordingly.
- ✗ Don't be put off by someone's different appearance.
- ✗ Don't turn away in the hope that someone else will help the customer.
- ✗ Be careful not to stare.
- ✗ If you feel uncomfortable, try not to let this make your customer feel uncomfortable too.

## Customers who ask for help

If a customer asks for help ask them what they need from you and try to provide it even if it seems simple or obvious such as for an item that is clearly in view.

Remember that not all vulnerabilities are visible. For example, you may not know that someone has a visual impairment which means they can't see the item. Other people with disabilities like dementia or autism may become confused if you have changed the layout or your layout is different to how they usually shop.



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## About this guide

This guidance has been produced in consultation with Alzheimer's Society and following advice on accessible formatting provided by the Business Disability Forum (BDF). It was last updated in December 2019. If you would like more information on how to produce accessible materials, please visit [www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk](http://www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk)

## ACS Best Practice

ACS best practice guides have been developed by ACS and other stakeholders to provide industry leading information on a range of issues for convenience retailers. The information within these guides is meant as best practice only, and has not been assured as part of the Primary Authority partnership between ACS and Surrey County Council. More information about all of ACS' advice guides is available online at [www.acs.org.uk/advice](http://www.acs.org.uk/advice)

## Contact

For more details on this guidance, contact a member of the ACS team on 01252 515001.

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