

Deaf Action

# Speaking up



access to public services for hard of hearing people



## Contents

Background	01
Previous Research	02
Overview	03
Survey Findings	04
- Barriers to Communication	04
- Attitudes towards hard of hearing people	05
- Specialist equipment	06
- Induction Loop Systems	
- Visual Displays	
- Telephones	
Action Points for Service Providers	08
For more information	10



## Background

Deaf Action, a major provider of services for deaf\* people in Scotland, has significant experience of providing Information, Advice and Guidance to hard of hearing people. As part of a project funded by the Department for Work and Pensions, we delivered an Information, Advice and Guidance service to over 1,000 hard of hearing people in Edinburgh and Lothian between 2005 and 2007. Throughout the lifetime of the project, we completed 570 benefits checks and delivered one-to-one advice to 630 hard of hearing people.

As part of this work, we carried out a survey of the views of hard of hearing people in the area on access to public services. We posted 200 written questionnaires to hard of hearing people in Edinburgh and Lothian, seeking their views on experiences of using public services including doctors' surgeries, dentists, banks and council services. We received 119 responses, a remarkable 60%, and this report sets out some of the main findings.

\* "deaf" is used to denote all those with a hearing loss including British Sign Language users, deafened, deafblind and hard of hearing people.

## Previous research

Research suggests that in Lothian alone there are 105,500 people with a hearing loss, representing 17% of the population <sup>(1)</sup>, and for those who are over 70 years of age, the proportion of people with a hearing loss rises to 70% <sup>(2)</sup>.

A decade ago, the extent of the barriers experienced by hard of hearing people were illustrated in research carried out by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People <sup>(3)</sup>:

**More than seven out of ten deaf people said they felt isolated because of their hearing loss**

**More than a third avoid meeting new people**

**91% said they have difficulty coping**

In 2005, the Scottish Executive Social Research Department commissioned an "Investigation of Access to Public Services in Scotland using British Sign Language" (BSL) <sup>(4)</sup>. Although there are differences between the access requirements of Deaf people who use BSL and hard of hearing people, who tend to use spoken English, lipreading and residual hearing to communicate, there are many barriers in common, particularly in relation to visual display systems and voice operated intercoms. The 2005 research on access for Deaf BSL users found:

*"Deaf people considered there was a lack of Deaf Awareness amongst public service employees. The lack of a visual display system in waiting areas caused Deaf people particular difficulties and often led to missed appointments.*

*"Deaf people disliked automated machines because if anything went wrong they were often expected to use voice intercoms to obtain help.*

*"Deaf people used words such as 'frustrated', 'annoyed' and 'embarrassed' to describe their feelings about attempting to access public services. A significant problem was the lack of visual display systems in waiting areas and the failure of staff to alert the Deaf person that it was their turn."*

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 places a duty on service providers to make 'reasonable adjustments' to allow disabled people, including those with a hearing loss, to access services, and the Disability Equality Duty of 2006 obliges providers of public services to take the needs of deaf and disabled people into account. In recent years, there have undoubtedly been some improvements in public services for hard of hearing people. New technologies, legislation and campaigning have been designed to help people with a hearing loss move closer to equal access to services and a higher quality of life. However, both the RNID's 1998 research, and the Scottish Executive's 2005 Social Research, point to severe short-comings in the level of service that people with a hearing loss experience.

<sup>(1)</sup> A Davis 1995 and population estimates

<sup>(2)</sup> Kyle, Jones and Wood 1985.

<sup>(3)</sup> Royal National Institute for Deaf People 1998

<sup>(4)</sup> Jim Kyle, Anna Marie Reilly, Lorna Allsop, Monica Clark, Alexy Dury, Deaf Studies Trust

## Overview

Our survey presents a mixed picture of access to public services for hard of hearing people. While there are some providers who exercise good practice, such as responsiveness to the expressed needs of hard of hearing people and appropriate use of Specialist Equipment including loop systems, there is wide variation among providers, and hard of hearing people still clearly experience difficulties and discrimination as users of public services.

The perceived shortcomings of public services in terms of access for hard of hearing people are varied, but broadly fall into three categories;

**Barriers to communication**

**Attitudes towards hard of hearing people**

**Specialist equipment**

Our survey also reveals that hard of hearing people themselves hold many of the solutions to overcoming barriers of access. We have developed their solutions in the Action Points section, and use them as the basis for recommendations for service providers to ensure that hard of hearing people have the same access to services as the general population.



## Survey Findings

### Barriers to Communication

Communication is the single biggest hurdle faced by hard of hearing people in everyday life. Hard of hearing people usually communicate using speech. Their difficulties, of course, lie in trying to understand what other people say. To do this, they tend to use all the tools at their disposal - residual hearing, hearing aids, specialist equipment, lipreading skills, concentration and sometimes a degree of guesswork.

Our survey reveals that hard of hearing people continue to struggle with communication as a result of poor deaf awareness and communication tactics on the part of service providers.

*“My doctor keeps forgetting I have a hearing loss. He talks and doesn’t move his lips.”*

*“(They) tend to speak slowly to begin and then go off at a rate. I usually end up agreeing with them – it’s easier.”*

*“I tell my dentist I have to lip read but he still talks to me with his mask on. I can hear a sound but I don’t know what he is saying. It makes me quite cross.”*

*“Health, especially hospitals (are) very poor communicators.”*

Experiences such as these can have a major, negative impact on confidence and independence, and can lead to a process of withdrawal. Furthermore, poor communication can impact on effective access to health care and other essential services.



## Attitudes towards hard of hearing people

As well as practical issues of access, we found that the attitude of service provision staff can have a major, negative impact on the hard of hearing individual.

*“Most people are impatient (and) turn away their faces... When I say I am deaf, they don't know what to do. Only deaf people seem to understand what to do.”*

*“People don't understand how they make me feel.”*

*“I don't think anyone understands unless they wear a hearing aid too.”*

*“I have been made to feel in a lower class.”*

*“(I) could not hear or lip read (the) doctor. He got very angry with me – (I) walked out on him.”*

*“In my library the girl shouts and talks to me as if I'm stupid and everyone looks at me. Its very upsetting. Young people sometimes laugh as well.”*

*“I find when going to shops and other places people look at you as if you're daft not deaf.”*

Experiences such as these will inevitably impact on the ability of hard of hearing people to maintain the quality of life enjoyed by others, and can lead to loss of confidence, isolation and depression. The following responses highlight the extent to which this is felt by some of those we surveyed.

*“Doctors (are) not willing to communicate, only through your partner/spouse. This action leaves one with a very low level of self esteem.”*

*“Doctors have a loop of sorts at reception but none in the consulting room. I don't go to the doctor and would resist hospital at all costs because of this. Hospitals also lose and damage expensive hearing aids. It is better just to suffer pain.”*

*“I avoid public services as much as possible.”*

## Specialist Equipment

In Edinburgh and Lothian, and in most other areas, specialist equipment is available on free loan from local authorities for deaf and hard of hearing people to use in their own homes. (See back cover for more information.) Similarly, there is a range of specialist equipment which service providers can install and use to improve access for hard of hearing people. However, our research shows that;

**equipment is not always available**

**if available, equipment is not always working**

**if available, staff are not always aware of how to use it**



## Induction Loop Systems

Induction loop systems enable hard of hearing people, with their hearing aid switched to the 'T' position, to hear the message directly via their aid. Loops are effective in reducing background noise and provide much more clarity for the individual. They can be used in a variety of settings including one-to-one consultations, larger meetings, at reception desks (e.g. banks, surgeries, ticket offices) and in the home to access TV or radio.

*"I used to enjoy going to church. I don't go now because the loop doesn't seem to work."*

*"As a recent user of a hearing aid [I] entered a bank and asked about a loop. The teller said they had it but had never used it as no-one asked. [I was] left to find it, unpacked it and tried (unsuccessfully) to set it up."*

*"Staff in many public places have no knowledge of (the) loop system, even when it has been installed."*

*"The loop system (was) not kept charged and (there was) no suitably placed socket for use."*

*"Loops are often not switched on, and staff often do not know what these loops are for nor how to use them."*

*"I attended a meeting for hard of hearing people at (a local hospital) with 30 in the room. There was no loop system which meant people at the back of the room could not hear what was being said."*

Despite being cost effective and straight-forward to use, our survey shows that many hard of hearing people have poor experiences in trying to use loop systems.



## Visual Displays

In many public settings, such as railway stations and doctors' surgeries, loudspeakers, public address systems and spoken announcements are used to communicate with large numbers of people. Our survey shows that, for a large proportion of hard of hearing people, these messages are simply unintelligible, or unheard altogether.

*“Airport and station announcements are hopeless – also (announcements) on planes.”*

*“At the railway station – you cannot make out the loudspeaker eg. platform change or reason for a train delay.”*

*“You tell reception (at hospital or surgery) that you are unlikely to hear your name called and could they make sure that you know when you are needed – you are ignored – they still call your name and wonder why you do not respond.”*

Visual alerting systems such as information screens and scrolling displays can overcome these difficulties and ensure that hard of hearing people have the same level of access to information as those without a hearing loss.

## Telephones

It's clear from our survey that phones are a major barrier and source of frustration for hard of hearing people. Despite the availability of adapted phone systems such as amplified phones, those that use induction loop technology and textphones, hard of hearing people still find telephone systems difficult and sometimes impossible to use. Automated phone systems that require the caller to select from a series of options present a particular problem because there is no mechanism for identifying the caller as hard of hearing, and therefore no possibility of adapting the service to their needs.

*If (the) bank or others leave (a) message on (my) answering machine, I have great difficulty in understanding their message or who is calling.*

*When I call a service and it is automated I just abandon the call because... certain words are lost to me.*

*The service I always have a bad experience of is audiology... Every time I phone it is an answering machine which I think is an insult to deaf people and I am very much against it.*

*Call centres... speak too fast... – they think you are stupid and get angry with you*

We found that 55% of those who responded to our survey said they feel anxious about contacting services using the telephone. It's clear that those services that do nothing to adapt their telephone communications for hard of hearing people are letting down a large proportion of their customers, as well as jeopardising their own business.

## Action Points for Service Providers

**Our survey shows that hard of hearing people themselves hold many of the solutions to the difficulties highlighted in this report. In this section we have highlighted a series of action points for service providers, drawn from the responses we received from hard of hearing people.**

### Action Point 1

Service providers must make it easier for customers to contact them in a variety of ways including letter, email and mobile phone text messaging.

Service providers must take account of the communication needs of all their customers, and for the one in seven people who have a hearing loss, phones, and particularly automated systems, present a significant barrier:

*“Surely it should be a deaf person’s human right to write to utilities, banks, insurance companies rather than phone and this should be made easy to do.”*

*“Because of (my) hearing loss, I get fed up on the phone and find it hard to hear what the other person says. (I) get confused (and) pick up the wrong words. I find since learning to text it is easier.”*

### Action Point 2

Service providers must have functioning specialist equipment available, and know how to use it.

One respondent highlighted an area of good practice at her local medical centre:

*“(At the) doctor’s surgery – they use a vibrating pager to let you know when (you are) called. Also (there is a) loop system available.”*

### Action Point 3

Health service providers should have a system for identifying hard of hearing patients.

This will alert health providers to the particular needs of hard of hearing people, including the need to be alerted to medical appointments, use of clear speech and induction loop systems.

*“I gave “I am deaf” stickers to put on my medical records.”*

## Action Point 4

Services that use public announcements must ensure that information is also provided visually.

*“Train stations could have an information point for hard of hearing travellers and announcements scripted on screens rather than just spoken over tannoy’s.”*

## Action Point 5

Opportunities should be made available for hard of hearing people to meet together in “deaf friendly” environments, to build confidence and assertiveness skills.

*“You have to be assertive at all times.”*

*“I have taught myself to be confident. If someone shouts at me I tell them it doesn’t help. If they carry on shouting, I shout back to see how they like it.”*

*“Attending a lip reading class makes you a lot more confident in any situation.”*

## Action Point 6

Deaf Awareness training, focusing on communication tactics, specialist equipment and the specific needs of hard of hearing people should be mandatory for front-line public service staff.

*“Loops which have been installed do not work and staff are not trained to use them.”*

*“Many health professionals need training in facing all patients and speaking clearly.”*

## For More Information

### Deaf Action

Provides a range of services across Edinburgh and Lothian, and further afield including:

Advice and information  
Adult Learning  
Communication support (Lipspeakers, Note-takers, Deafblind Communicators, Speech to Text Reporters, British Sign Language / English Interpreters)  
Specialist equipment  
Social work  
Supported accommodation  
Outreach / visiting support services  
British Sign Language courses  
Deaf Awareness and other specialist training  
Community development  
Social and leisure activities

**Deaf Action, Head Office,  
49 Albany Street, Edinburgh EH1 3QY**

**Telephone** 0131 556 3128  
**Text phone** 0131 557 0419  
**Email** admin@deafaction.org  
**Fax** 0131 557 8283  
**SMS** 07775 620757  
**Videophone** 82.71.100.121  
**Website** www.deafaction.org

### Hearing Concern LINK

Provides support and information to people with a hearing loss and their families. (Formerly Hearing Concern and the LINK Centre for deafened people). The organisation's vision is "to achieve the best quality of life for all adults affected by acquired hearing loss whose main method of communication is speech."

**Hearing Concern LINK Scotland, The Eric Liddell Centre, 15 Morningside Road, EH10 4DP**

**Telephone** 0131 447 9420 (voice and text)  
**Email** Scotland@hearingconcernlink.org  
**Website** www.hearingconcernlink.org

### Scottish Council on Deafness

A national organisation that provides information to Deaf British Sign Language users, deafened, deafblind and hard of hearing people, raises awareness of their needs and lobbies on their behalf.

**Scottish Council on Deafness,  
Central Chambers Suite 62 (1st Floor),  
93 Hope Street, Glasgow G2 6LD**

**Telephone** 0141 248 2474  
**Textphone** 0141 248 2477 and 1854  
**Email** admin@scod.org.uk  
**Fax** 0141 248 2479  
**Website** www.scod.org.uk

### RNID Scotland

Provide a wide range of services to make an impact on the lives of deaf and hard of hearing people.

**Empire House, 131 West Nile Street,  
Glasgow, G1 2RX**

**Telephone** 0141 341 5330  
**Textphone** 0141 341 5347  
**Email** rnidscotland@rnid.org.uk  
**Fax** 0141 354 0176  
**Website** www.rnid.org.uk

### Lipreading classes

Available in some local authority areas. Contact your local Community Education department. Courses may include:

Lipreading practice  
Basic information about hearing aids  
Equipment for hearing aid users  
Speakers from related organisations  
Discussion about coping strategies

In Edinburgh, contact

**Lipreading Coordinator, South Bridge Resource Centre, Infirmary Street, Edinburgh EH1 1LT**

**Telephone** 0131 558 3545 or 0131 558 8222  
(textphone users can use the  
RNID Typetalk prefix 18001)  
**Fax** 0131 558 9355

### Edinburgh and South East Scotland Tinnitus Group

Organises regular meetings for people with tinnitus:

Speak to people who understand the problem  
Find out how to manage your tinnitus  
Get information on helpful equipment

**Telephone** 0131 447 6492  
(textphone users can use the  
RNID Typetalk prefix 18001)

### Edinburgh Hard of Hearing Club

Organises regular meetings for people who are hard of hearing, including a programme of events with invited speakers and regular lipreading classes.

**The Secretary, Edinburgh Hard of Hearing Club  
Deaf Action, Head Office,  
49 Albany Street, Edinburgh EH1 3QY**

**Telephone** 0131 556 3128  
**Text phone** 0131 557 0419  
**Fax** 0131 557 8283  
**SMS** 07775 620757