

# Disability Insight

Take a look around you

## Focus on Deafness and Hearing Loss during COVID-19

14<sup>th</sup> January 2021

### Key facts you need to know about deafness and hearing loss

- 1 in 5 adults in the UK are deaf or have hearing loss, and 1 in 8 have tinnitus.
- 20,000 people in NI are severely or profoundly deaf.
- At least 10% of people of working age have hearing loss. The majority of these individuals have acquired hearing loss and have no (or little) sign language. They rely mainly on listening for communication, aid by hearing aids, lip reading and some text transcription.

There is strong evidence to show that a person with moderate hearing loss is:

- **five** times more likely to get severe hearing loss,
- **three** times more likely to develop **dementia**, and
- **three** times more likely to experience **depression**.

For information on causes, treatment and prevention of hearing loss see [Disability Insight Issue 4](#). This issue will focus on the impact of COVID-19 on people with deafness and hearing loss.

### Difficulties during COVID-19 for People with Deafness and Hearing Loss

[Life in Lockdown](#) In this video six Deaf people in very different situations tell us about life during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. (You may need to turn on closed captions to view subtitles). This shows how three of the main efforts to combat coronavirus have had unintended consequences for people with deafness and hearing loss.

#### 1) Face coverings:

- prevent people from lip reading or using mouth patterns to help them communicate. This has led to many people feeling anxious about going out.
- hide facial expression from those who use British or Irish Sign Language which is a large part of the language.

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- For those who have some residual hearing, the physical barrier muffles sound, reducing the quality and clarity of speech.
- Face covering exemptions are not understood widely by the general public – if you are assisting someone who is deaf or has hearing loss you are exempt from wearing a face covering. You can temporarily remove the face covering at a safe distance to aid communication.

## 2) Physical distancing of 1 or 2 metres:

- can put people out of range of hearing aids and other hearing devices, especially if there is also a plastic screen in place and/or the speaker is wearing a face covering.
- creates difficulties for those who are quietly spoken and unable to raise their voices.
- affects confidentiality when voices have to be raised to assist someone with hearing loss.
- raising of voices can be seen as aggressive.

## 3) More reliance on phone and video calls:

- excludes or adds a burden to those not able to hear well on the phone.
- excludes or creates anxiety for those unsure how or unable to, access subtitles, captions or remote sign language interpreting on video calls.
- requires challenges caused by internet speeds and IT to be managed.

Access to Public Health information and benefits has also been an issue. At the start of the pandemic sign language users couldn't access NHS 111 and key public health messages – this has been addressed by providing a video relay service for NHS 111 and providing BSL and ISL interpreters at daily briefings.

Isolation is another important issue faced by many people with deafness and hearing loss, and this exacerbated by the difficulties with communication outlined above. 70% of people over 70 have hearing loss, many of whom were shielding during the pandemic. Hearing aids need regular maintenance and many people were unable to access this due to suspended services or fear of going out or being unsure what support was available – which causes further isolation.

Two of our colleagues who are deaf have told us about their experiences of working during COVID-19. Visit our [Staff Disability Network Tapestry website](#) read about Hazel and Siobhan's experiences.

**Below are a few tips to support a colleague or service user with deafness and hearing loss, while also keeping them and yourself safe from COVID-19**

**1. Be alert for signs and behaviour indicating the face mask is a problem.** Raise awareness in your team that some people will find face masks to be a barrier to effective communication.

**2. Use a clear visor** if a regular face mask is causing communication difficulties – contact the Equality Unit for more support on this. You can also remove face mask to help with lip-reading if at a safe distance.

**3. Check if the person uses British or Irish sign language** – if they do, you must use an interpreter – this can be done online. To book an interpreter for **staff meetings**, contact the Equality Unit at [equality.unit@hscni.net](mailto:equality.unit@hscni.net) . For non-emergency **service provision** during the COVID-19-19 pandemic, the Health and Social Care Board have facilitated a free remote British and Irish Sign language interpreting service <https://interpreternow.co.uk/hscni>

**4. Make Video Calls accessible** for as many people with deafness and hearing loss as possible by having good quality sound. Ensure your microphone picks up your voice well, and use a plug-in microphone or headset if you need to.

Keep your camera on if speaking. Light up your face - it needs to be seen clearly and easily. Also, keep the background simple as people with deafness and hearing loss must concentrate on the speaker's face. If there is a busy, bright or moving background, it will distract attention.

**5. Offer Other Methods of Communication** - It's important to ask your colleague or service user which form of communication they prefer, (e.g. email, text/SMS messaging, Relay UK or accessible formats). Relay UK is the new name for the national text relay service. It no longer requires a special textphone to access this service and can be accessed on a computer, laptop, tablet or mobile phone. It involves a third party joining the call to listen and type up what's said so the listener can read it.

Written communication can be helpful for many people with hearing loss, however check with the individual what is most helpful for them. Don't assume that somebody with deafness or hearing loss can easily understand written information. While this may be true for some people, others have a lower proficiency in English. This is because British and Irish Sign Language are structured in a completely different way to English and have their own grammar.

**6. Consider using an induction loop system** or a portable induction loop.

## If you experience hearing loss

- If you experience hearing problems you should visit your GP. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID – formally known as Action on Hearing Loss) offers information and support services for people with deafness and hearing loss. You will find contact details on their website.
- If you live with hearing loss, you should consider telling your manager so that they can discuss with you what adjustments could be made to support you in the workplace.
- The HSCB commissions the British Deaf Association (Northern Ireland branch: <https://bda.org.uk/belfast-office/>) to deliver a regional Advocacy Service for Deaf Adults, supporting and improving access to HSC services. The Advocacy team publishes a regular vlog on the BDA Northern Ireland Facebook page.

## If you care for a person with deafness and hearing loss

You can find information specifically for people who care for somebody with deafness and hearing loss on the [Very Well Health website](#) the [National Deaf Children's Society website](#). Visit the websites for contact details.

## Further reading and sources of information:

Making Communication Accessible for All: A Guide for Health and Social Care Staff Available at: <https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/about/publications/making-communication-accessible>

[NHS Choices](#)

[Sign Health](#)

[Hearing Link](#)

[RNID](#)

[Sense](#)

[Ideas for Ears](#)

