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How to be more accessible for **people who are deaf or hard of hearing**

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How to be more accessible for people who are deaf or hard of hearing

One in 6 people are deaf or hard of hearing and that number is rising. This is partly because the older we are the more likely it is we will have hearing loss and we're an aging population. There are different causes and types of hearing loss that will affect people differently. The most common type is Sensorineural. This is when the tiny hair-like cells in the inner ear or the auditory nerve are damaged. This type of hearing loss is permanent and can often result in difficulty understanding sounds and speech, even if they are loud enough to hear. Sensorineural hearing loss cannot be cured. Some people may benefit from wearing hearing aids or cochlear implants. These cannot restore 'normal' hearing, but they can be helpful.

The term deaf describes anyone with **any level of hearing loss**, but many people don't identify with this and may choose other terms. If someone identifies themselves as Deaf with an uppercase D, it indicates they are part of the **Deaf community** and use British Sign Language (BSL). Some people use the term **hearing impaired**; others use **hard of hearing**. If someone was born deaf and suddenly lost their hearing, they may describe themselves as **deafened**. The key is to listen to how someone describes themselves and respect that.

People will have **different communication methods** depending on their levels of deafness and their preferences. Some people will be able to **lip-read**, others won't. Some use **BSL**. It's important to understand that BSL is very different from spoken English. It has its own grammar. This can make **reading** written English tricky for people who use BSL as their first language.

Positive communication

Effective and clear communication is essential when speaking with people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Gain attention before you speak or sign

You can use simple gestures like waving. If needed, gently touch the top of their arm.

Face them

Many people rely on lipreading and need to see your lips.

Speak clearly

Don't speak too slowly or shout. This makes lipreading harder.

Rephrase

If needed, you can rephrase what you have said. Some words are easier to understand than others.

Use Gestures

Body language and visual aids can be helpful too.

Be patient

Persevere and avoid saying it doesn't matter as this can be upsetting.

Give the context

Let someone know what you want to talk to them about. Also, make it clear if you change the topic.

Write it down

If needed, you can write things down. It's best to keep it short and the language simple.

Be flexible

Some of the adjustments that people who are deaf or hard of hearing may need, just rely on you being a little more flexible on how you do things. **Simple things** can make a big difference. Examples are:

- ❖ Allowing someone to let you know they are sick or need to cancel an appointment via **text message or an email** rather than having to call a designated person.
- ❖ Offering someone a **choice** of how best to communicate with them.
- ❖ Scheduling meetings or appointments when **interpreters are available**, or at times of the day when they are less fatigued.
- ❖ Offering additional breaks and allowing **extra time** for appointments or assessments if required.

The physical Environment

Many of the requirements of the physical environment are the same as for people with communication impairments These include:

- ❖ Reducing sound in an environment
- ❖ Reducing visual distractions
- ❖ Considering lighting
- ❖ Thinking about the layout of furniture

Assistive technology

People who are deaf or hard of hearing can use many types of assistive technologies. These include:

- ❖ Loop systems – An assistive listening device that helps your venue welcome people with hearing loss. They transmit **audio directly to hearing aids** and cochlear implants and reduce background noise.

- ❖ Alerting devices for emergencies or notifications – These alert people to sounds in the environment using either **visual** (flashing lights) **tactile** (vibrating or shaking) or auditory (increased amplification) methods. Examples of important alerting devices in public spaces and the workplace are adapted smoke, fire and carbon monoxide alarms and adapted telephones which flash when they ring.

- ❖ Radio aids – Some people at work benefit from having their own radio aid systems. They work with hearing aids and cochlear implants. They consist of two parts – a **transmitter** and a **receiver**. The transmitter contains a microphone which picks up sounds and transmits them directly to the receiver. The receiver is attached to the hearing aid or cochlear implant.

- ❖ Various apps and software - These include transcription apps, for example Otter.ai and apps to assist people using the telephone such as Relay UK.

Digital Accessibility

To ensure digital accessibility for people who are deaf and hard of hearing, some things to think about are:

- ❖ Closed captions: Accurate, synchronised captions that include non-speech elements and ideally identify who is speaking. Be cautious with automatically generated captions because there are often mistakes which can be confusing.

- ❖ British Sign Language: Webpages and videos translated into BSL.

- ❖ Don't use autoplay: Autoplay doesn't give viewers time to set up assistive technology (AT).

- ❖ Provide multiple contact options: Allow people to contact you to find out more information in a way that suits them. The more options the better.

- ❖ Avoid jargon: If jargon is needed, provide explanations either in the text or via links. You can also offer a glossary.