



# Breaking the sound barrier

A guide to recruiting and supporting deaf colleagues

Our vision is a world  
without barriers for  
every deaf child.

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It's written with young people aged 16 to 25 in mind but the content is relevant to deaf employees of all ages.

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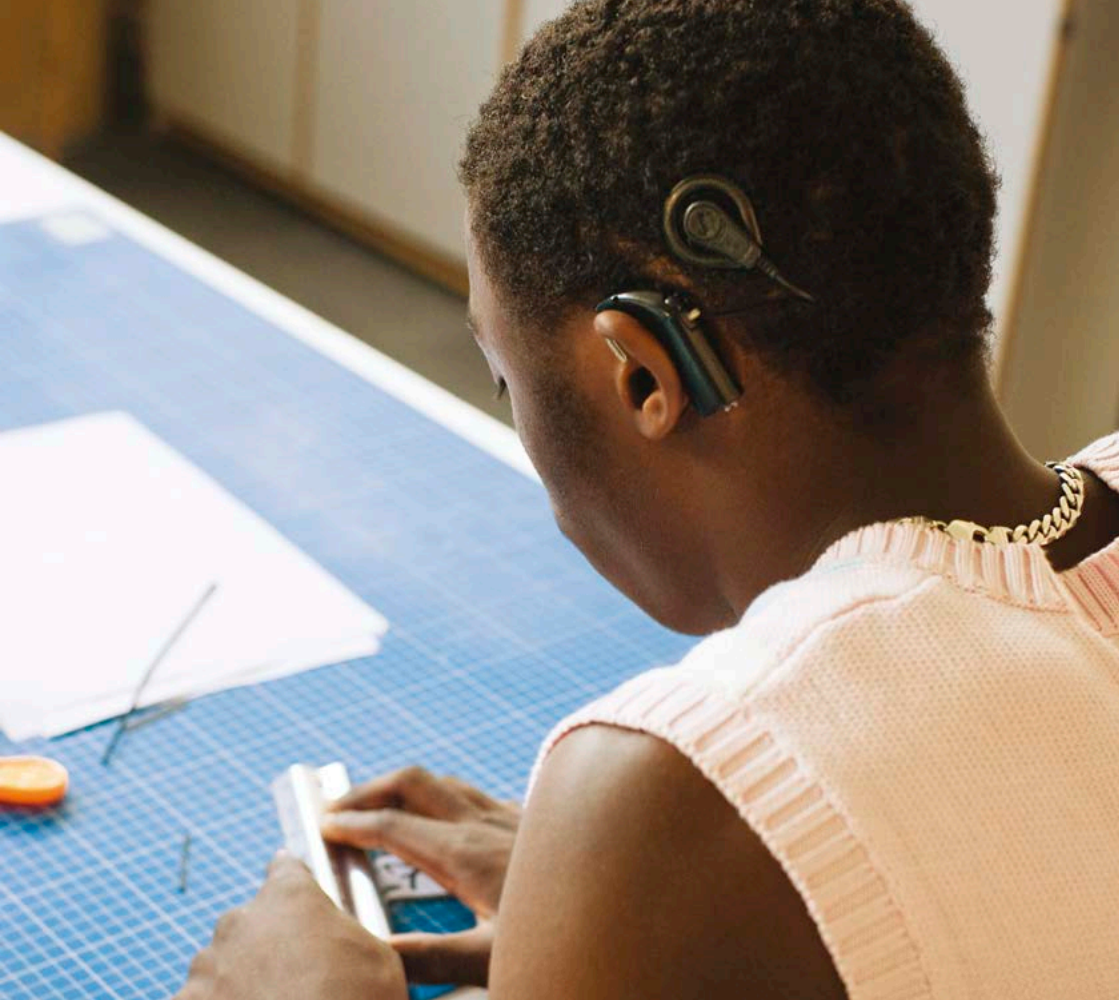
## General information on deafness

Throughout this guide we use the term ‘deaf’ to refer to **all types of hearing loss or impairment from mild to profound**. This includes deafness in one ear or temporary deafness such as glue ear. Not everyone who’s deaf will describe themselves in this way. Some will prefer to use terms such as ‘partially deaf’, ‘hearing impaired’ or ‘hard of hearing’. If you’re not sure how your colleague describes themselves, ask.

All deaf people have their own communication preferences. Some will prefer speech and lip-reading, while others will use British Sign Language (BSL), or a mixture of sign and speech. The reasons for these communication choices are complex and are affected by family and culture, education and age of diagnosis rather than being based solely on how much a person can hear.

Deafness is not a learning disability and with the right support at home and in education/work deaf people (including those who are profoundly deaf) can excel and enjoy successful careers in fields as varied as marine biology, social work, engineering and law.

Technology such as hearing aids and cochlear implants has improved over the years, but it has its limitations. Technology can’t cure deafness. For example, speech heard through a hearing aid or cochlear implant may not be clear enough to understand without lip-reading as well.



Many deaf people embrace their deafness and don't see it as a problem or disability. As long as the people around them communicate well deaf people should experience few barriers in everyday life. They may be offended if someone talks about their deafness in a negative way or expresses sympathy/pity for them.

If you're employing someone who's deaf don't make assumptions about how they will communicate, what technology they'll use or what impact deafness has on their lives. **Every deaf person is different.**

# Case study

## **Greg, senior risk analyst**

*I work in financial services at Shop Direct. My job involves using maths and data programming to extract and manipulate data into reports and recommendations.*

*I took a four-year degree course which included a one-year work placement at Shop Direct. The company offered me a permanent job after I graduated. I've been profoundly deaf since birth and use British Sign Language (BSL). Shop Direct has no other profoundly deaf employees but my colleagues are understanding of my needs and support me by basic signing or writing [things] down/emailing. I sometimes feel left out when people talk but my colleagues share their conversations with me. I use interpreters to support me at one-to-ones, meetings, presentations and training courses.*

*I have a fire pager [to alert me if the fire alarm sounds] and use a textphone for phone conversations.*

# Communication tips

Some or all of the following tips may be useful when communicating with a deaf colleague.

- 1 To get their attention it's perfectly acceptable to tap them lightly on the shoulder or wave.
- 2 Make sure your face is visible at all times so that you can be lip-read.
- 3 Speak at an average pace. Speaking too quickly can make it harder for you to be lip-read and speaking too slowly can distort your lip patterns.
- 4 Speaking a bit louder can sometimes help but **don't shout**. This distorts your lip patterns and is aggressive.
- 5 Don't give up! If your colleague doesn't understand you try rephrasing what you said or write it down.
- 6 If they're using communication support, speak directly to your colleague not the support worker.
- 7 Avoid holding meetings in noisy environments.
- 8 Remember, group conversations are much harder for a deaf person to follow. Speak one at a time and make sure the subject of the conversation is clear.

# Reasonable adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 states that employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of disabled employees or job applicants. Remember, every deaf person is different and will need different adjustments.

What is reasonable to provide may vary depending on the size of your organisation, the cost and practicality of making the adjustment and the impact it'll have on the employee and organisation as a whole. Most reasonable adjustments can be made at little or no cost.

## Examples

### Using the phone

Some deaf people can understand speech over the phone. However, they may need a phone that amplifies sound or a headset that works with their hearing aids.

**Reasonable adjustment: provide appropriate equipment.**

Partial funding for equipment needed in the workplace can be applied for from Access to Work (see page 14).

People who can't hear speech clearly over the phone may use a free service called 'Next Generation Text' (sometimes called Text-Relay or Tynetalk) where they speak into a mobile or computer and an operator types out what's being said on the other side.

**Reasonable adjustment: make sure your organisation's phone network is compatible with the Next Generation Text service or provide your employee with a smartphone which they can use to make Next Generation Text calls.**

Deaf people often prefer to communicate by email or text message rather than phone.

**Reasonable adjustment: text a deaf colleague if you have an urgent message rather than calling them.**



## Physical environment

Background noise can be challenging for deaf people who use hearing aids or cochlear implants, so they may prefer to work in the quietest area of the workplace.

**Reasonable adjustment: discuss with your colleague where they would prefer to base themselves when they are working.**

Good lighting is important for people who rely on lip-reading. If you're talking to a deaf colleague with the light behind you, your face may not be clearly visible.

**Reasonable adjustment: avoid talking to a deaf colleague with a window or bright light behind you.**

## Meetings

A deaf person can find it difficult to follow what's said during group discussions as they can only lip-read one person at a time.

**Reasonable adjustment: make sure people speak one at a time.**

Shortages of communication support professionals can mean they're difficult to book at short notice.

**Reasonable adjustment: arrange meetings far enough in advance so that communication support can be booked.**

## Social/networking opportunities

Opportunities to socialise with colleagues can be important in developing a sense of belonging to an organisation.

**Reasonable adjustment: make sure a deaf colleague knows about these opportunities and that they are accessible.**

# Communication support

## British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters

Highly trained people who interpret what's being said from English into BSL and vice versa. If they're required to sign for more than an hour without a break, two interpreters may be needed. You should only book qualified interpreters who are registered with one of the following professional bodies:

- National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People, [www.nrcpd.org.uk](http://www.nrcpd.org.uk)
- Regulatory Body for Sign Language Interpreters and Translators, [www.rbsli.org](http://www.rbsli.org)
- Visual Language Professionals, [www.vlp.org.uk](http://www.vlp.org.uk).

## Speech-to-text reporters/palantypists

Type a word-for-word account of what's being said at a meeting or event, with the information appearing on screen in real time for the deaf person to read. This service can also be provided remotely at lower cost. Only suitable for people who can read at pace.

## Communication support workers

Offer BSL interpretation in situations where a fully qualified interpreter might not be needed, such as straightforward phone calls or everyday interactions with colleagues. Not appropriate for interpreting more high-level dialogue that might include specialist terms or jargon. Should be qualified to a minimum of BSL Level 3 standard.

## Lipspeakers

Relay what's being said to deaf people through clear lip patterns, cutting out redundant information. Only qualified lipspeakers registered with a professional body should be booked.

## Notetakers

Produce a set of notes for a deaf person who can't make their own because they're lip-reading/watching an interpreter.

### **If your deaf colleague uses communication support:**

- arrange meetings with as much advance notice as possible to allow time to book the required support
- send materials such as agendas or slides to communication support professionals before a meeting or training session so that they can be as well prepared as possible
- speak directly to the deaf person and not to the communication support professional. Not talking directly to the deaf person is considered very rude by many deaf people.

## Technology

Below are examples of technology that a deaf person might use in the workplace as well as hearing aids or cochlear implants. Not all types of technology will be suitable for all deaf people. Access to Work funding is available to help towards the cost of any new equipment that needs to be purchased.

### **Amplified phones/headsets**

Allow a deaf person who can hear speech clearly enough without lip-reading to increase the volume on a phone or headset.

### **Paging system/Deaf Alerter**

Alerts a deaf person to a fire alarm or other things happening around them.

### **Personal listener**

Small, personal amplifiers that help make conversations and meetings easier to follow.

### **Radio aids/streamers**

Relay sounds from a microphone to a deaf person's hearing aids or cochlear implant through radio waves or Bluetooth, making sure sounds are louder and clearer.

### **Textphones**

For deaf people who can't hear speech on the phone. They allow the user to type to another textphone or to someone using a standard phone through the Next Generation Text service. Textphones are gradually being replaced by smartphone and computer software.

### **BSL video relay**

Some BSL users prefer to communicate through their first language (BSL) rather than in written English so will choose a video relay service to make calls through their computer/tablet via a sign language interpreter.

### **Video/instant messaging**

Some deaf people use video messaging software such as Skype or Facetime. Also, instant messaging technology such as WhatsApp and Skype can be a useful alternative to the phone.



# Recruitment

By law, disabled people aren't required to disclose a disability when applying for a job. However, knowing an applicant's access needs will help you to make sure that the interview process is fair. It's good practice to give all applicants the opportunity to explain any access needs before an interview.

If a deaf applicant needs communication support at interview it's an employer's responsibility to check that communication support is in place. Access to Work funding is available for interview costs. Liaise with the applicant to make sure that the communication support is booked and the cost is claimed back from Access to Work.

Some deaf people have low literacy skills because of language delay and educational barriers. This can make completing a job application form challenging. If a job doesn't need a high standard of written English it would be a reasonable adjustment to overlook minor grammatical and spelling errors within an application.

## Disability Confident

The Disability Confident (previously known as Two Ticks) scheme encourages employers to become more confident about employing and retaining disabled people. It also aims to increase employers' understanding of disability and the benefits of employing and retaining disabled people.



Signing up to the scheme and displaying the Disability Confident logo on job adverts can mean deaf people are more confident about applying for a job with you.

You can find more information about Disability Confident at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/disability-confident-campaign](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/disability-confident-campaign).

## Access to Work

This is a government-funded scheme to help cover the costs of equipment or support disabled people may need to attend an interview or carry out a job.

A deaf employee will make the application to Access to Work themselves, but they should be fully supported by their employer (for example, given some help with the extra admin work involved), who will need to sign off all claims to Access to Work.

Generally, employers pay communication support and equipment invoices and then claim the cost back from Access to Work.

Access to Work is a lifeline for many deaf people in employment. However, there are restrictions to the funding:

- it's not available for unpaid work experience
- it's capped at 1.5 times the national average income (£40,800 in 2016)
- only partial funding is available for equipment, with employers expected to make a contribution
- applicants have to make a strong case for the support they're requesting.

If a deaf person receives Access to Work funding it doesn't mean that you don't need to make any further reasonable adjustments. Access to Work funding doesn't affect the duties of employers under the Equality Act.

For deaf young people applying to Access to Work for the first time, the process can be challenging as they're required to predict what and how much support they will need over the course of a year. For some, low literacy skills can make it difficult to complete the required forms and they may need help with this from their manager.

## Health and safety

Deaf people are sometimes turned down for certain jobs on the grounds of health and safety, but if reasonable adjustments can be made to make sure that a deaf employee is as safe as their colleagues, this treatment would be both unnecessary and unlawful.

The Health and Safety Executive states that health and safety legislation should not stop disabled people staying in employment. It advises that while hazardous conditions can't always be eliminated, they can be substantially reduced at little cost.

### Fire alarms

Many deaf people can hear fire alarms through their hearing aids or cochlear implants. For those that can't there are technological solutions such as pager systems. For more information contact a specialist technology shop such as Connevans: [www.connevans.info/page/fire](http://www.connevans.info/page/fire).

An alternative could be to pair a deaf employee with a 'buddy' who will tell them when the fire alarm goes off.

### Other alerts

Machinery with safety alarms can be adapted to produce accompanying flashing lights.

Text messaging offers an alternative to radio/telephone emergency alert systems.

### Instructions

Make sure that a deaf employee is able to access fire drill/health and safety guidance or training. For example, an interpreter could translate written English into BSL.

# Case study

## **Deborah, environment manager**

*I'm responsible for improving the council's environmental performance, and looking at new ways of working, such as installing LED lighting, solar panels and biomass boilers. My managers have always given me great support and tried to assist me with new technology.*

*At 25 I experienced overnight hearing loss. I struggled to cope and was embarrassed. When I was finally brave enough to ask for support, it opened up a whole new world and meant less stress and frustration.*

*I'm now severely to profoundly deaf and can't understand speech without lip-reading. I rely on text messages or email, and in large meetings I use a speech-to-text reporter. I currently co-chair my council's disabled staff group, tackling barriers to inclusive access.*



# Personal profiles

We've developed a template personal profile that deaf people can download and complete to give employers information about reasonable adjustments they might need in the workplace.

\_\_\_[insert your name]\_\_\_: personal profile  
\_\_\_[insert contact details]\_\_\_  
\_\_\_[insert job title or role applied for]\_\_\_

This document outlines my access needs in the workplace because I am [insert your preferred term here e.g. deaf, hearing impaired etc.]. If you are not sure about anything please feel free to ask me for more information.

**About my deafness**

Give as much detail as possible, such as:

- your level of deafness
- what you can hear – if anything – and how clear it is
- what you can't hear
- the impact your surroundings have on your hearing
- how you communicate (e.g. lip-reading and/or sign language).

**Communication tips**

Suggest five things your employer and colleagues can do to help them communicate well with you (e.g. don't speak too quickly, speak at a normal volume.)

**My technology**

Explain what technology you may use (e.g. hearing aids, cochlear implants, Next Generation Text, radios aids, amplified phones, video relay) and how it helps you. Also mention the limitations of technology (e.g. hearing aids help you hear some sounds but you still need to lip-read as voices aren't clear enough).

If you're not sure what technology might be available visit [www.ndcs.org.uk/technology](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/technology) for suggestions.

**My communication support needs**

If you use any communication support (e.g. BSL interpreters, speech-to-text, note-takers) list it here and state when you use it (e.g. in meetings with more than three people).

If you have Access to Work\* (AWW) funding, or will be applying for it, to cover the costs of your communication support, give details here. This is really important as many employers have not heard of AWW.

\*Access to Work is not usually available for unpaid work experience, but it is worth checking with them to see what support you might be able to get.

**Other adjustments that would help me**

List things your employer can do to help you access the workplace (e.g. advance notice of meetings so that you can book communication support).

**Health and safety**

Explain whether you can usually hear fire alarms. If not, suggest what your employer can do to make sure that you're alerted in the event of a fire (e.g. ensure the fire marshals are aware of your deafness).

If you are going to be working in places such as construction sites or with heavy machinery you may want to say whether there are any adjustments your employer needs to make.

**Situations I find challenging at work**

List situations you find difficult at work, such as:

- communicating with more than one person
- lots of background noise
- meetings called at short notice so there's no time to find communication support.

If you're not sure what you might find difficult, look at your job description and think about the tasks that might be involved.

**Additional information**

Use this space to tell your employer anything else you would like them to know about your deafness or any additional needs you have. This is a good place to say something positive such as 'Being deaf helps me ignore all the background noises in the office and focus on my work more'.

**Useful resources**

List resources here that your employer might find useful, such as:

- our resource, *Breaking the sound barrier: A guide to recruiting and supporting deaf colleagues*
- YouTube videos on deaf awareness- [www.youtube.com/user/ndcswelsham](http://www.youtube.com/user/ndcswelsham)
- Access to Work information- [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)
- products and equipment available- [www.ndcs.org.uk/technologynetwork](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/technologynetwork)

ndcs  
National Deaf Council  
10000 Research Parkway 2014

The template includes the following sections, but can be personalised to suit each individual's needs.

- About my deafness
- Communication tips
- My technology
- My communication support needs
- Other adjustments that would help me
- Health and safety
- Situations I find challenging at work
- Additional information
- Useful resources

The template can be downloaded from [www.ndcs.org.uk/employment](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/employment).

## More information

**Short videos on deaf young people and employment:**  
[www.ndcs.org.uk/employment](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/employment).

**Health and Safety Executive's *Guidance for Employers*:**  
[www.hse.gov.uk/disability/employers.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/disability/employers.htm).

**Information on Access to Work:**  
[www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview)  
[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/access-to-work/i-am-an-employer-how-can-i-ensure-equal-access.aspx](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/access-to-work/i-am-an-employer-how-can-i-ensure-equal-access.aspx).

**Technology in the workplace:**  
[www.ndcs.org.uk/technologyatwork](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/technologyatwork).

***ACAS's Equality and Discrimination, Understand the basics:***  
[www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/d/8/Equality-and-discrimination-understand-the-basics.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/d/8/Equality-and-discrimination-understand-the-basics.pdf).

**Communication tips:**  
[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/your-hearing/ways-of-communicating/communication-tips/are-you-deaf-aware.aspx](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/your-hearing/ways-of-communicating/communication-tips/are-you-deaf-aware.aspx).



**The National Deaf Children's Society is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people.**

Freephone Helpline:  
**0808 800 8880** (voice and text)

**helpline@ndcs.org.uk**  
**www.ndcs.org.uk/livechat**

**www.ndcs.org.uk**

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**This resource can be requested  
in large print or as a text file.**

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