deafscotland is the user-led, membership organisation for the deaf sector in Scotland. As such it takes a person-centred, rights-based approach to all its work and recognises the importance of monitoring and evaluation in project/partnership development.

We use the term **the four key pillars of deafness** to describe Deaf BSL users, Deafblind, Deafened and Hard of Hearing, as people experience different barriers that require different solutions.

deafscotland.org

Background

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The lockdown for the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the level of barriers people affected by deafness in Scotland face on a day-to-day basis. deafscotland understands that population safety is the number one priority for the Scottish Government and that a number of measures taken to protect healthcare and other professionals and the public are necessary. But some of these measures have increased the fear and anxiety of people affected by deafness at a time when there are few services to offer them accessible and inclusive support and solutions to their isolation and mental ill-health.

As it became clear that the lockdown would continue for more than a few weeks, deafscotland received more and more emails and phone calls asking where deaf people could get information, advice and support to help them cope with the additional isolation and separation they were having to deal with through social distancing, self-isolation and the number of people covering their faces with masks.
deafscotland put together surveys to gather evidence directly from deaf people (across the four pillars of deafness) that would explain exactly what they experience and feel and have to deal with on a day-to-day basis during this lockdown. We are also reporting on the qualitative information from our membership - organisations across the Private, Public and Third sectors - and from the enquiries we have had from people affected by deafness and their relatives during the crisis as they cannot access the services and support they would normally have access to.
Now is the time to start planning measures that will make the recovery better and less isolating for the 1,000,000 people in Scotland who are affected by deafness.

Learning for the pandemic response

There is a degree of learning that both the UK and Scottish Governments should take on board from this pandemic. People affected by deafness in Scotland who are usually separated from society by their level of hearing loss and the ability of others round about them to be inclusive in their communication have been particularly badly hit during this crisis. The safety measures of self-isolation and social distancing as well as the wearing of face masks and visors have all made the isolation of those affected by deafness much greater than that of people who are hearing. There has been a marked increase in anxiety and fearfulness about how they will manage to access information, food, exercise, communication with others and “the road to recovery”. Now is the time to start planning the “just in case” measures that can make the recovery better and any further crisis more inclusive and less isolating for the 1,000,000 people in Scotland affected by deafness.
From our survey responses and the emails/phone calls we have received during the last 11 weeks, there are several themes becoming apparent. These are:

• people cannot use the **telephone** and so are excluded from accessing support and help during self-isolation;

• **hearing aids** are breaking and the person doesn’t know how to get them fixed as they would normally go to their library or community hall. This means that the person loses their means of communication;

• **care packages** have been slashed and people are being left completely isolated with no way to contact the outside world to get shopping, medication and someone to talk to;

• self-isolation and social distancing is leaving people affected by deafness more isolated than is usual and they are becoming **mentally unwell without access to support**, including GP support. Most GPs are doing consultations on the telephone.

• **people with a dual sensory loss** – Deafblindness – are even more vulnerable as they need **tactile communication** in order to know what is going on around them. Support has been cut and family do not want to risk their relatives but are worried about their health and their mental health. And

• **access to accurate, accessible information** on TV, online or for those who are self-employed/own a company in the private sector.

There have also been a number of specific issues – some of which referred to the UK Government and others to the Scottish Government.
UK Government should make sure:

- **BSL interpretation is available** on the TV during the Prime Minister's Statements and Question/Answer sessions.

- **All** information videos have **subtitles** and **BSL interpretation**.

- **Accessible information is available** for those in employment especially those who are self-employed or are only directors of small companies at the same time as everyone else.

- **Delays in action** for those who are self-employed or are directors of very small companies had a disproportionate impact for those working in the deaf sector and should, in the future, be kept to a minimum.

- People who are affected by deafness who are working can access financial support to help them with remote working, for example, **Access to Work or PIP** to support online meetings – Electronic Notetakers or speech to text software. This is a short term measure to cover communication until “normal service” is resumed.
Scottish Government:

It was hoped that the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 would not only promote BSL as a language but also raise awareness of the needs of deaf people across Scotland - what deafscotland calls “BSL plus”. This does not seem to have been the case and so much of what is positive about the government’s response to the pandemic has had a negative effect on the lives of the people affected by deafness in Scotland.

- Funding going to telephone helplines that are not accessible to people affected by deafness who do not use BSL. For example, most people affected by deafness do not use text phones any more, and yet the National Helpline was developed with a textphone number. Even people with hearing aids and some degree of hearing become anxious when using the telephone as they feel they cannot keep asking the person on the other end to repeat what they are saying, to speak up and to speak more clearly. As with other people, they do not want to be “a nuisance” and so are more reluctant to use these helplines, missing out on the services and support on offer.

- The increased use of technology and online information services - too many older people affected by deafness have no access to online services and the place they normally go for information and support is closed - libraries.
• While it is admirable that 9000 people in Scotland were being helped to get online, what about the rest who did not qualify as they are not known to any services except Audiology, lip reading classes and hearing aid support services? All closed during the pandemic.

The government announced on 10 June that there would be “an investment of £9 million to provide 25,000 laptops to assist pupils learning at home…” as part of the “£50 million to improve attainment” for school children, click here to go to the story on gov.scot.

A similar investment is needed for access to communication for people affected by deafness who are older, who are unemployed/underemployed and who cannot afford the technology needed to access support and online services. It could be part of a rehabilitation package for people affected by deafness.

• There has been an increase in the use of technology in care homes – tablets, laptops, virtual assistants. This is a great improvement for many people affected by deafness who live in these homes, but why did it take this crisis to make this possible?
There is no register of people affected by deafness in Scotland and so there is no actual figures for people across the four pillars of deafness. deafscotland has campaigned for a change to the Census question so that it would gather some meaningful data on where people are, their ages and the level of hearing loss they have, but the question in the 2021 Census remains the same as that of 2011. In order to plan service provision and communication support, the Scottish Government needs to know where people affected by deafness live, their age and more importantly, their level of deafness as the barriers faced by people across the four pillars of deafness are different.

Deafblind people who use tactile communication are particularly vulnerable as their ability to communicate with others has diminished substantially and while they want to stay safe and make sure their communication support workers stay safe, they are being left for long periods of time with no-one to talk to, which in turn increases their anxiety levels and makes them more susceptible to mental ill-health.
• **Care service packages** have been decreased to people affected by deafness and additional disabilities, including people who are Deafblind or for older adults. Without other means of communication, these people are substantially more isolated and vulnerable than people with disabilities who have no communication support needs. Deafblind Scotland and local deaf organisations have, where possible, been picking up some of the slack but more planning needs to be done to ensure these people are not left for long periods of time with nobody to talk to and little means of engaging with people outside their homes.

• **Day care packages** which many deaf people rely on for company, exercise, activities and a hot meal have been cancelled. People are stuck at home with little access to alternative services as most of the support that has been put in place is accessed through the telephone.

• **Audiology services** being closed as not an “essential service”. Communication is a basic human right without which the rights holder cannot enjoy the rest of their rights. For a person affected by deafness, access to hearing tests, hearing aid adjustments and hearing aid repairs are an **essential** part of their lives and helps to keep them involved with society. Without this service, many people are becoming more isolated, suffering from increasing mental ill-health and feel that they are not listened to or cared about by government/Scotland.

• **Access to hearing aid packs** has been a lifeline for a number of people at a local level. A few local deaf organisations, for example, S.I.S.G in the Ayrshires, have received funding to provide packs of tubing, batteries, cleaner and a magnifier to people affected by deafness in their local area, including those in care homes. Before Covid-19, these organisations provided hearing aid services in libraries, community halls and GP surgeries. Without their hearing aids, people affected by deafness lose the ability to hear on their telephone, the TV, and what people around them are saying. Add in the fact that more people are wearing masks, and their ability to be a part of their community is reduced more than is normal.
deafscotland accepts that **PPE and social distancing** keeps people safe, but it makes people affected by deafness feel even more isolated, anxious and fearful than usual as they cannot lip read what people are saying to them. Social distancing means that they cannot hear with their hearing aids as the aids have a working distance of 1 metre.

**Children and young people** – Teachers of the Deaf and Support Workers in some local authority areas are not allowed to have online/face-to-face contact with the deaf children/young people they have been working with. There is a real fear that these children/young people will start to lose their BSL. There is also a fear that some children who are living in dangerous circumstances – houses where there is domestic abuse – are not being monitored as there is little or no face-to-face contact with them.

A number of deaf children/young people are not engaging with online classes and the Teachers of the Deaf/Support Workers do not know why not or what the circumstances are.

There is also concern for parents of newborn babies who have just been told their baby is deaf and who may not be getting the support they need in all areas of Scotland.
Overall, people affected by deafness have found themselves more isolated and left out of society due to the Covid-19 crisis. Some of this isolation cannot be helped as it is about keeping people safe. But the majority of decisions taken by governments, with proper planning and Equality/Human Rights Impact Assessments that include “Communication For All”, could have been more inclusive of the needs of the 1,000,000 people in Scotland who are deaf.

There are a number of things the UK and Scottish Governments could do to ensure any such future health pandemic does not impact people affected by deafness in the way this one has and which ensures their human rights remain intact throughout the crisis while keeping them safe. For example:
UK Government:

• Making sure every broadcast on TV from the Prime Minister and their advisers includes BSL Interpretation and subtitles.

• All information about the crisis on the TV is fully accessible to the citizens in the UK.

• Every online information video from government includes BSL and subtitles.

• Information for all those working is accessible and includes people who are self-employed or run their own businesses; and

• That information is timely so that people are not left wondering how they will manage.
Scottish Government:

- Only funding telephone helplines that come with SMS/email/webchat contact so that everyone can access the support they offer;

- Looking at economies of scale and tying it into rehabilitation of people affected by deafness - national procurement of basic smartphones so that everyone can be online and have access to either contactSCOTLAND-BSL or Relay UK and a speech to text app. This could be funded out of PIP and Attendance Allowance payments for language/communication support for individuals. If the person wants something “bigger and better” they fund that themselves.

- Face masks are designed and produced that are clinically safe but have a “viewing” window over the mouth so that people can still lip read.

- App designers are encouraged to come up with a cheap app that translates speech to text for UK accents.

- Planning for all care/health/mental health support/support services include an impact assessment on communication so that people affected by deafness are not left more isolated, anxious and with decreasing mental wellbeing due to the lack of inclusive, accessible support.

- Support services for the most vulnerable, including those whose only means of communication is tactile, are impact assessed and these people are prioritised for support.

- National deaf awareness training programme so that people are aware of the needs of people who cannot hear in a hearing world. If 40% of 40 years olds and 75% of everyone aged over 70 is deaf, a lot of people are affected. People might be keener to look after their hearing if they know what could be round the corner.

What is needed is a real commitment from the Scottish Government to a Communication For All Strategy for the 21st Century, part of which will be to work with the UK Government on reserved issues that affect people affected by deafness.
Consultancy and Evaluation

What can deafscotland do to support your organisation?

We can:
• Carry out affordable, deaf health checks and support your organisation to become more deaf aware across the four pillars of deafness.

• Evaluate your plans or service(s) with input from service users, their families and carers;

• Support your organisation to become a “Communication For All” organisation;

• Support your organisation to become more involved in local and national issues across government and across the four pillars of deafness.

• Advise, support and provide participatory activity.

For more information, click here
Are you Committed to Communication?

Join us in supporting Scotland to become the first inclusive communication nation – accessible to everyone!

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