



**deafscotland**  
equality & integration through communication for all

## **Impact of COVID-19 on those affected by deafness in Scotland Submission to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee**

### **Case examples**

One of our staff wears a hearing aid in one ear. Their hearing has diminished, and they were waiting for an audiology appointment to get their hearing checked and their hearing aid adjusted. Lockdown happened before they got an appointment. They cannot hear online. We don't have a budget for communication support. They don't qualify for Access to Work and cannot claim PIP. How do we keep together as a team?

My manager needs information on how he and all my colleagues make their phone and video calls accessible to me. It's really hard to follow some of them. It is not feasible to have an Electronic Notetaker on each call because they cannot always be planned. People sometimes remember to do things that help me but mostly don't. It feels like token gestures are being made but that's the same as when I am working in the office. It is embarrassing and hard work to keep having to interrupt and distracts focus from my competency to do my job.

### **Introduction**

deafscotland welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee about the 1 million people in Scotland who are affected by deafness and the impact of this sensory loss. deafscotland is pleased that the Committee is focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on 'the rural economy and connectivity in Scotland' as there is an opportunity to use this health emergency to change standard practice so that Scotland builds, delivers and maintains an inclusive communication infrastructure for all. As a result, there is an opportunity for enterprise and employment creation to be delivered by and within the rural economy.

deafscotland has dealt with an increased number of enquiries during this crisis. Enquiries have gone up by 160% since the start of lockdown – by telephone and email – this and survey work has informed our submission.

## Overview of the issues

Our attempt to be brief was possible in order to answer the 11 questions separately. We have sought to be brief and offer an integrated response which identifies the problems, evidences the extent of the issues and proposes remedies.

Delivery of and access to inclusive communication will help to define how Scotland can recover better but there is not yet a strategy in place to consistently deliver it. Furthermore the problems with broadband and cost in rural areas as well as access to the right equipment/technology means that many people in rural communities who have hearing loss are disproportionately isolated and disempowered with the consequent negative impact on health, wellbeing and connectivity to economic, social and cultural opportunities.

Covid-19 **physical distancing** affects social engagement, increases loneliness, wellbeing and reduces physical activity. Strategies to ameliorate effects may exclude many precisely because of their hearing loss and the measures needed to be put in place to help them hear, understand, communicate and be heard are also exclusionary. For example many people are being consulted and offered help just now but the strategies are overwhelmingly dependent on people being able to hear well and having the technology in place which is reliable so their opinions count and influence major decisions for the present and the future. Of course, if we are to recover better we need to understand what happened in the past and what needs to improve but again that whole body of opinion and experience will be overlooked as there is no mechanism to capture it. By delivering inclusive communication the situation can be promptly addressed for now and the longer term.

## Population in Scotland

There are 1 million people in Scotland who are affected by deafness. They are individuals will families, friends, have a network of colleagues if they are employed, volunteer or are active in their communities if they can. Communication is fundamental to being included but as there are heaps of barriers in their way they are excluded from what many of us regard as routine from employment, from career development, from jury service, from volunteering, opinion polls and from many public services. For example before March 2020, 23% of disabled people say they are quite or very lonely on a typical day.<sup>1</sup> People with hearing loss can be

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Doing Digital Inclusion: disability handbook' pub by The Good Things Foundation  
[https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/disability\\_handbook-with\\_links-final.pdf](https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/research-publications/disability_handbook-with_links-final.pdf)

lonely in a busy room as they can hear nothing, and their voice is not heard either.

Creating opportunities for learning, education, training, and jobs is the key to mitigating the long-term consequences of an economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Understanding the extent and impact of the spectrum deafness is key:

- Deaf/Deaf Sign Language users (12,500);
- Deafened (355,000);
- Deafblind (4,000); and
- Hard of Hearing (700,000).

We all know someone who is affected by deafness and so often it is accepted as a sign of growing older, but it is a problem that can be addressed and lead to more people fulfilling their economic, social and cultural potential. Also, deafness happens at any age and the cause are many including illness, accidents and the result of treatment. Whatever age it strikes deafscotland wants people' lives to continue to flourish.

### **Economic Exclusion**

For too many people affected by deafness, they are not part of the economy as they are prevented from being employed in the first place. Discrimination also plays a large part in the working lives of deaf people and many are forced to reduce their responsibilities or quit their jobs because of it. A survey created by totaljobs in partnership with five deaf charities, reveals that the majority (56%) of deaf or hard of hearing employees have experienced discrimination during their career. This has led to one in four (25%) deaf people leaving a job because of a difficult environment.

- 72% of deaf people have received no support because of being deaf in finding a job
- 65% believe developments in technology have made it easier to be deaf in the workplace
- 56% have experienced discrimination in the workplace due to being deaf or hard of hearing
  - 62% from colleagues
  - 53% from management
  - 37% during a job interview
- 25% have left a job due to discrimination
- 19% have not told their employer they are deaf or have experienced hearing loss

While the vast majority (74%) of deaf people feel confident they have the right skills to look for work, almost the same number (72%) has received no support because of being deaf in finding a job. Furthermore, only 13% believe there is enough support available to help deaf people to look for work.

1 in 4 (25%) workers state there is no provision for deaf employees at their workplace and nearly half (47%) said that they did not receive support and guidance from their employer for issues related to being deaf. Moreover, almost one in five (19%) people have not told their employer they are deaf or have experienced hearing loss.

These figures are fuelled by an absence of understanding across UK businesses with one third (34%) of deaf people claiming lack of deaf awareness as the biggest challenge facing deaf people in the workplace.<sup>2</sup>

Economic recovery requires business and government to do better on inclusion and enabling equality and diversity obligations to be met.

### **Member issues during COVID-19**

deafscotland believes those affected by deafness have been particularly badly hit by the actions taken to mitigate Covid-19<sup>3</sup>. The issues which arise have simply amplified existing problems, which should have been addressed before. The ripple effect of failure to communicate effectively is significant. For example, there are currently approximately 140,000 staff who work across 14 territorial NHS Boards, seven Special NHS Boards and one public health body.<sup>4</sup> Their joint partnership working is a catalyst for better communication but conversely if they do not have the awareness, training, skills and resources to communicate effectively then the integrated services suffer as do the individuals whom they serve.

From member's feedback deafscotland has gathered first person experiences such as a person's hearing aid breaks but they can't get it fixed because the audiology repair service has been shut down by their NHS which considers it to be a non-essential service; the spare batteries on a person's hearing aid have run out during the 7-week lockdown, as they need to be replaced weekly, and they can't access any more.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/1-4-deaf-people-quit-job-due-discrimination/>

<sup>3</sup> UN Development Programme regards this pandemic as much more than a health crisis <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/coronavirus.html>

<sup>4</sup> See NHS Scotland at <https://www.scot.nhs.uk/about-nhs-scotland/>

Surveys have also raised other matters which impact on people's ability to be economically and socially active:

- The lack of accessible information for those in employment especially those who are self-employed or are only directors of small companies.
- People who have a hearing loss who are working cannot 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 would have been a short-term application which will no longer be needed when “normal service” is resumed.

Although there is law, policy and strategy in place, there is a disconnect with decisions, actions, impact and outcomes in respect of the Scottish Government:

- Funding going to telephone helplines that are not accessible to people with a hearing loss who do not use BSL. For example, most people with a hearing loss do not use text phones anymore, and yet the National Helpline was developed with a textphone number.
- The increased use of technology and online information services – too many people with a hearing loss in rural communities have no reliable access to online services.
- While it is admirable that 9000 people in Scotland were being helped to get online, many do not qualify as they are not known to any services except Audiology, lip reading classes and hearing aid support services. All are closed during the pandemic.

Health protection strategies need to factor in inclusive communication:

- deafscotland accepts that PPE and social distancing keeps people safe, but it makes people with a hearing loss feel even more isolated 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 and will be less able to seize economic opportunities.
- 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. Again, this will impact on options for education and training for employment longer term.

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 with a hearing loss.

### **Equality and Diversity Strategies in the Rural Economy**

Scottish Ministers have a statutory duty to advance equality and non-discrimination. There are also specific economic strategies for delivery such as the 'Fairer Scotland Duty' and Part 1 of the Equality Act 2010, came into force in Scotland from April 2018. It places a legal responsibility on public bodies in Scotland to actively consider how they can reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage, when making strategic decisions.<sup>5</sup>

Strategic decisions on dealing with COVID-19 to promote equality and non-discrimination are insufficiently funded and focused on factoring in the distinct needs of the 1 million people who are deaf and hard of hearing. Strategies need to be inclusive to deliver equal outcomes socially and economically and the two are interlinked: if through social isolation people's confidence deteriorates as does their wellbeing then they are less able to achieve their economic potential.

### **Legal Duties on Inclusive Communication**

MSPs have already agreed that the law should recognise the importance of inclusive communication:

- Section 6 of the Coronavirus (Scotland) No 2 Act 2020<sup>6</sup>.
- In Section 6 (7)(b) of the Consumer (Scotland) Act 2020<sup>7</sup>
- Section 4(2) of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018<sup>8</sup>.

'Communicating in an inclusive way' is defined as communicating in a way that ensures individuals who have difficulty communicating (in relation to speech, language or otherwise) can receive information and express themselves in ways that best meet each individual's needs.

---

<sup>5</sup> At <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fairer-scotland-duty-interim-guidance-public-bodies/pages/2/>

<sup>6</sup> At <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2020/10/contents/enacted>

<sup>7</sup> Available at <https://beta.parliament.scot/-/media/files/legislation/bills/current-bills/consumer-scotland-bill/stage-3/bill-as-passed-consumer-scotland-bill.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Available at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2018/9/section/4/enacted>

By establishing a body of law that promotes the duty to communicate inclusively, Scotland can rightly declare itself as the first ‘inclusive communication nation’ in the world. However, compliance with the legal duties cannot be a ‘tick box’ exercise. It needs to be funded, delivered, monitored and evaluated. Scottish Ministers clearly want to see action as at the COVID-19 Committee session on 19<sup>th</sup> May, the Minister said:

‘The Government agrees that, with the public being asked to do extraordinary and difficult things, it has never been more vital to communicate in an inclusive way about what is being asked and what is changing.’<sup>9</sup>

### **International Standards**

Scotland willingly seeks to comply with human rights treaties ratified at the United Nations’ as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is important that the focus and road map they provide are not abandoned when generating economic growth and influencing the future structure of the economy. deafscotland supports delivery of the April 2020 Joint Statement on ‘Persons with Disabilities and COVID-19’ by the Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, on behalf of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility which states:

“By implementing their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and fulfilling the commitments in the Sustainable Development Agenda, States will be able to safeguard the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. In doing so, States should consider the diversity among persons with disabilities, with a focus on gender and age, and the situation of persons with disabilities facing deprivation and hardship. (para 4)

We call upon States to ensure that priority be given to address situations of poverty, and deprivation of persons with disabilities in their crisis management plans. States should ensure that economic hardship during the crisis is addressed also with respect to persons with disabilities who may face the loss of jobs and additional barriers to meet basic essential needs. (Para 10)<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Official Report 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020 at

<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12646>

<sup>10</sup> UN website at

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25765&LangID=E>

In Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament have already agreed that special measures and interventions are essential if disabled people are to be socially and economically included and if they are to enjoy equal outcomes from opportunities in Scotland. Specifically 'A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People' is the Scottish Government's delivery plan for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) It covers the period 2016-2021 and aims to make equality of opportunity, access to services and independent living a reality for all disabled people in Scotland. The plan has five ambitions:

1. support services that meet people's needs and promote independent living – inclusive communication is essential to make this a reality
2. decent incomes and fairer working lives – inclusive communication is essential to make this a reality
3. places that are accessible to everyone – inclusive communication is essential to make this a reality
4. protected rights – inclusive communication is essential to make this a reality
5. active participation – inclusive communication is essential to make this a reality

The Scottish Government also funds tools to help realise inclusive communication such as the Inclusive Communication Hub at <https://inclusivecommunication.scot/>

## **Conclusion**

Inclusive communication is a gateway to social and economic recovery for people of all ages:

- Rural areas can establish and grow enterprises to deliver inclusive communication from repairing hearing aids, replacing and servicing hearing and communication tools and building acoustic ballers - 'sound boxes' for public spaces to make hearing less difficult.
- Connects people to families, social networks and employers, potential and actual.
- Enables people to express their views, their choices and their needs during this health emergency and for them to be heard by publicly funded services.
- Improves people's well-being and mental health as they are included in every aspect of society's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic especially on social and economic matters.

- Capitalises on the willingness of the public, private and third sectors to work differently and invest the new funding available to set up an infrastructure on communication that yields positive results for decades to come.
- Establishes inclusive communication as a right, not a privilege, the everyday experience and not the exception.

Inclusive communication across all publicly funded services that are dealing with the health emergency and delivered by the public, Third and private sectors all need to adopt an approach that makes inclusive communication mainstream rather than exceptional.

### **About deafscotland**

deafscotland is Scotland's national specialist organisation promoting equality, access and citizenship for those affected by deafness. Established in 1927, we support the social model of disability and promote a right's based, person-centred approach.

deafscotland would be pleased to give oral evidence to the Committee.

**For further info please contact:** Janis McDonald, Chief Officer  
[chiefofficer@deafscotland.org](mailto:chiefofficer@deafscotland.org)