

## Making Virtual Assistants Accessible

### 1. Overview of Virtual Assistant Devices

deafscotland is the user led, membership organisation for the deaf sector in Scotland. For more information, visit the deafscotland website by clicking [here](#).

The current UK-wide COVID-19 pandemic has brought the impact and understanding of social isolation into the mainstream and raised awareness of the devastating effects isolation can have. We have seen a recent increase in the use of virtual communication technology which is allowing people to stay connected. Virtual Assistant devices are being used more regularly to bridge the communication gap.

This factsheet gives an overview of some of the Virtual Assistant technology available at the moment.

#### 1. Amazon Echo:

The Amazon Echo is a Smart speaker. A Smart speaker is wireless and has in-built technology that makes it able to respond to spoken commands. Amazon Echo is available in a range of products. Some of these products have an in-built visual screen, for example Echo Show and Echo Spot.

The Echo Show is available with either a 5 or 8-inch screen. An earlier version of Echo (second generation) that has a 10-inch screen is still available, however, it is more expensive than the current, smaller screen models.

It is possible to use Echo to Video Call. A video call is one that is done over an internet connect and allows callers to see each other on screen. In addition, the 'Tap to Alexa' feature allows you to interact with Alexa without the need for speech. Using this facility it is possible to speak rather than type any questions or instructions you have for Alexa. Both Echo Show and Dot can display Alexa's Captioning (the responses Alexa provides to verbal requests) on their in-built screens. There is also an option for Closed Captioning that can be used to make films and videos accessible.

## 2. Ring Video Doorbell:

This device alerts you when someone rings your doorbell or if motion is detected at your property. Warnings that someone is at your door or on your property are sent to your phone, tablet or PC so that you can see who is there. You can speak to that person from wherever you are – in the office, in the garden, or on the train, for example.

Any Ring doorbell or security camera can be set up for two way communication. This two way audio/video communication can be supported on various devices including Amazon Echo Dot, Echo Spot and Echo Show. When linked, announcements will be heard through the device when anyone presses the doorbell or triggers the motion sensors.

## 3. Facetime:

Facetime is a video-calling app. from Apple and can be used with Apple products: the iPhone, iPad, and Mac.

## 4. Portal from Facebook:

There are four products in this range: Portal, Portal Mini, Portal TV and Portal+.

The Portal delivers smart video calling and can be used with mobile phones and tablets. It includes a main smart camera that has added technology, allowing it to track and capture things that are moving.

The Portal Mini's smart camera automatically moves and focuses to keep up with the action and the added 'Smart Sound' feature makes the speaker's voice clearer, louder and with less background noise.

Portal can be connected to Alexa and Portal TV can be used with any television.

The Portal+ has a screen size of 15.6 inch, the same size as most laptops.

Text size and font can be changed to suit and Closed Captions (CC) are available.

## 5. Skype:

Skype is a free video calling platform from Microsoft. Users can make free video and voice calls, and take part in group calls. It can also be used for instant messaging.

Automatic captions are available.

## 6. Google Meet:

Google Meet is a video call app.

You can start or join a meeting from any modern browser on your desktop or laptop. There is no need for any additional software in order to install Google Meet. It can be used with Google Calendar to keep track of meeting dates.

Automatic captions are available with this app. Other features include an adjustable layout and screen settings function, so that settings can be suited for the user's needs.

Also it has a preview function to ensure that settings can be tested before the start of meetings.

## 7. Whats App:

WhatsApp is a text and voice messaging app from Facebook. It can be used with all Google, Android and iPhone models.

You can have a group call for up to 4 people for free. The video call option is available via WhatsApp mobile app. The app needs to be downloaded, but once this is done it is relatively easy to use. You can video call and send texts by WiFi.

WhatsApp can be used by other types of virtual technology such as the Portal and Apple products and can be used with Talkback and Voice Over (both of which provide spoken feedback so that it is not necessary to look at the screen, giving greater accessibility).

## **We welcome your feedback**

To ensure best practice and best use of Virtual Assistants and related technology we invite users to share their experiences both positive and

negative. Contact us at [admin@deafscotland.org](mailto:admin@deafscotland.org) so that we can keep our factsheets up to date.