

# Calling from the Doorway: Healthcare and Hearing Loss in Bucks

July 2017

## What was the project about?

We wanted to look at the experiences of people with hearing loss<sup>1</sup> when they are accessing GP surgeries or hearing aid maintenance. We wanted to learn more about what works and what issues make it more difficult for people with hearing loss to access these services.

## Why did we do the project?

We identified primary care, especially GP and dental services, as a strategic priority for 2016-17. We have also had feedback about difficulties accessing services for those with disabilities including those with hearing loss.

**Action on Hearing Loss is the largest UK charity which helps people with hearing loss to live the life they choose. At a local level, Action on Hearing Loss in Buckinghamshire has excellent links across the county with those living with hearing loss.**

This project is also set within the context of the Accessible Information Standard (AIS). From 1st August 2016 onwards, all organisations that provide NHS care or adult social care are legally required to follow the AIS. The Standard aims to make sure that people who have a disability, impairment or sensory loss are provided with information that they can easily read and understand, and also with support so they can communicate effectively with health and social care services. People who use hearing aids may need support to get the most out of them - for example, research shows that after being fitted with hearing aids, two-thirds of people have trouble using them.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term 'people with hearing loss' relates to people who are profoundly deaf, deafened or hard of hearing

## What did we do?

Healthwatch Bucks and Action on Hearing Loss in Buckinghamshire created a questionnaire to ask people with hearing loss about their experiences of accessing GP or hearing aid maintenance services.

From 1st February to 31st March 2017, the team at Action on Hearing Loss received 41 completed questionnaires. These 41 participants are people with varying degrees of hearing loss (see Appendix 1 for detail) and were collected in a variety of settings including:

- home assessment visits
- two drop in sessions at Buckingham Library and Haddenham Health Centre
- Aylesbury's Deaf Coffee Morning by holding a session at the Healthy Living Session (session supported by British Sign Language interpreters)

Action on Hearing Loss also worked with a specialist care worker for the deaf based at the County Council, to ensure that we reached profoundly deaf people not attending any of the above.

## What did we discover?

Our findings can be broken down into five categories (see Appendices 2 and 3 for details)

### Surgery Accessibility

56% of participants said they find it difficult to make an appointment to see their GP with particular difficulties around communication methods. Many depend on family or carer support to help them do this. Opportunities for receptionists to further support this process were also raised.

“Over the phone is OK. If I am making an appointment in the surgery, it is usually noisy and I often cannot hear the receptionist who can get a bit cross with repeating things”

“I walk to the GP surgery and ask for an appointment. I write it down using text on my mobile to show the receptionist”

“Husband drives and tries to communicate via written. Finds it very stressful. Daughter sometimes helps. Sometimes delay due to getting an interpreter.”

17% reported no problem with making an appointment and mention methods which have made this process easier for them including:

- Patient access or similar online services
- Use of Type Talk or relay service to make an appointment
- Using mobile/texting to make an appointment

“At first, I had to use Type talk to make an appointment to see the GP - it does take a while to do this. Then the receptionist suggested doing this online and gave me log in details and I will register on line.”

“I usually book appointments using 'patient access' online service - this is very easy”

## Booking Communication Support

90% of participants reported that they had not been asked about their communication needs.

They highlighted the issue of surgeries not booking British Sign Language interpreters or communication support workers. 61% of participants said that their surgery does not book these for their appointment. Responses also indicated that booking interpreters causes delays in appointments.

“On file from years ago but Receptionists don't know.”

“I think it's on file that I'm deaf. I took my iPad to communicate by typing. It was an emergency. Not sure if they would provide an interpreter. Never have before and I've never asked. If you book an interpreter, it always delays things but I would prefer one.”

Respondents suggested:

- Alert on file or receptionists' screen to flag up communication needs
- More routine booking of BSL interpreters where appropriate
- Webcam/interpreting service availability

“Stickers on patient notes to alert members of staff that you have a problem, or something on the computer that comes up for the reception staff. Hospitals are hopeless!”

“Booking a BSL interpreter takes too long - 2 week wait so I make do with writing.”

“If I am ill, I can't go to the surgery or phone. I would prefer the surgery has a webcam using a BSL interpreting service phone calls.”

## Deaf Awareness

We found that many people with hearing loss rely on lip reading as a way of engaging with practice staff. However, feedback indicated a general lack of staff awareness, which could make this difficult, especially with reception staff.

“Reception are not deaf aware at all. Staff turn around, which doesn't help.”

“They are often not tolerant of hearing impaired people and are looking at computers and talking down and therefore, it is difficult to hear”

More specific problem areas were also raised:

- **Being called to an appointment slot** - 44% of people reported difficulty with this although information screens were highlighted as a real help here.

“The GP just calls from the doorway and keeps shouting. Another patient usually nudges me.”

“Doctor comes out and says my name but there is also a TV screen with your name on. I'm usually waiting to be called because I know who is next in line.”

- **Understanding information given by GPs** - 29% flagged a lack of understanding, with profoundly deaf participants whose first language is British Sign Language noting particular problems.

“Very difficult as always a different doctor”

“Sometimes, the GP writes but I don't understand what they mean. A real problem - I have to ask for help.”

- Some participants felt strongly that the **Audiology departments** were not deaf aware and needed more support in this area

Once, when the hearing aid broke, they told me to post it to them, but this would leave me with nothing. No understanding of how we rely on hearing aids

Intercom access at hospital is not good. I have to hold up a sign to the intercom to say I am deaf

## Consistency in GPs

Our feedback showed that lack of familiarity or consistency with GPs is particularly difficult patients with hearing loss.

Children need to explain sometimes. I try to get the same doctor who I understand better but some I don't

They keep changing doctors. They do not know me and I prefer to have the same doctor.

I do not know who my official GP is. I had to ask my social worker to phone when I had to complete my PIP form. They should have sent a letter informing me when my other GP left.

## Hearing aid support

61% of the participants wore hearing aids, with 51% of them confident that they can look after their hearing aids themselves. 47% were confident that they can get help when needed. And comments around Audiology Services were generally positive - although people were keen to have more accessible hearing aid maintenance for example at the GP surgery.

Just call them at the hospital for an appointment

The NHS is superb!

(It would be better) if hearing aids were maintained at the surgery instead of at the hospital

Make access easier. I live in Buckingham and have to get to SMH. Can't a service be available in the GP surgery?

## Our recommendations

### The Clinical Commissioning Group

- To provide advice, support and training to help GPs to implement the accessible information standard in as it relates to people with hearing loss
- To put in place central arrangements to understand whether improvements made to support access are having an impact from a patient perspective
- To ensure that people who have hearing loss are engaged in designing any processes designed to help them.

### To work with GP practices to:

- Provide deaf awareness training for all staff, especially those working in the front line
- Encourage and support practices in making available a range of communication systems in place to ensure accessibility for people with hearing loss - and in ensuring that patients are aware of these options
- Encourage investment in and use of screens which call people to their appointments as these were identified as an intervention that made a significant difference
- Encourage individual GP practices to ask routinely about, record and ensure their systems flag up patients' communication needs
- Encourage effective use of the current system for booking BSL interpreters and look to see if there are any improvements to it that can be made to cut down on waiting time for patients and that provision for this is made in relevant budgets.

### Bucks Healthcare Trust:

- Let staff know how much their services are valued and appreciated by many of those with hearing loss
- Work with the audiology department and others to deliver a programme of deaf awareness training for all frontline staff
- Work with others to make hearing loss maintenance services available more widely across the county.

## What are we doing to ensure these are achieved?

We will be sending these recommendations to the Clinical Commissioning Group and Bucks Healthcare Trust and ask for a response as to how they are being taken forward. Action on Hearing Loss and Healthwatch Bucks are happy to support the development of any action plans aimed at implementing these recommendations.

### In addition:

- Action for Hearing Loss will promote the Accessible Information Standards to practices, the CCG and Bucks Healthcare Trust to encourage the discussion, recording and flagging of communication needs and can work with the CCG to develop further guidance
- Action for Hearing Loss will work with practices to encourage them to access their free deaf awareness training for all front line staff.

Many of the findings in this report are echoed in the Action on Hearing Loss report 'Access all Areas' which looked at the experiences of people with hearing loss accessing healthcare services. Issues around difficulties contacting GP surgeries, lack of deaf awareness, booking communication support and understanding fully the content of the consultation or information given were highlighted in the report which can be accessed below:

[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/accessallareas](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/accessallareas)

## Appendix 1: Breakdown of participants

Hearing impairment	Percentage of participants
Hard of hearing	42%
Deaf	58%
Deafened	0%

Ethnicity	Percentage of participants
White British	92%
African	2.5%
White Eastern European	2.5%
Asian Other	2.5 %

Age range	Percentage of participants
20-25	2%
26-34	12%
35-44	7%
45-54	12%
55-64	11%
65+	56%

Gender	Percentage of participants
Male	29%
Female	71%

Consider themselves to have a disability	Percentage of participants
Yes	70.5%
No	27%
Not applicable	2.5%



## Appendix 2: Key responses - GP Surgeries

How easy/difficult is it for you to make an appointment to see your GP?	Percentage of participants
Easy	17%
Difficult	56%
Possible with family/carer assistance	27%

Has your GP surgery/staff...	Yes	No	Some times	N/A	No answer
Asked about your communication needs	10%	90%	-	-	-
Allowed more time for the consultation	34%	56%	2.5%	5%	2.5%
Come and get you for your appointment, not call your name	32%	44%	-	10%	14%
Offered to speak in a quiet area rather than in a busy reception	2.5%	63%	-	17%	17%
Faced you when speaking so you can lip read	59%	24%	7%	7%	3%
Booked a BSL interpreter/ Communication Support Worker	15%	61%	-	19.5%	4.5%

Do you feel?	Yes	No	Sometimes	No answer
Able to ask your GP questions about your treatment	71%	19%	5%	5%
Able to understand any written information from your GP	56%	29%	5%	10%
Able to understand what will happen next	66%	22%	12%	-

### Appendix 3: Key responses - Hearing aid support

Question	Yes	No	N/A	No answer
Do you wear hearing aids	61%	32%	-	7%
Are you able to look after them yourself	51%	12%	17%	20%
Are you able to get help with looking after our hearing aids	47%	11%	22%	20%

If you require this report in an alternative format, please contact us.

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