

Helping people hear you -and your meetings

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There are nearly nine million deaf and hard of hearing adults in the UK. Of these, 640,000 are profoundly or severely deaf. Here are some simple suggestions on how you can help them take part in council meetings when physical meetings resume.

As people grow older the chances of becoming deaf increase. 70% of people over the age of seventy will have some noticeable hearing loss.

Loss of hearing is far more than an inconvenience. There is no proven direct link between hearing loss and dementia, but mental decline can happen faster if someone is isolated and lonely. People with hearing difficulties often feel this way because they are excluded from conversations. They may misunderstand subtle nuances and speech patterns or 'fill in' what they don't hear with wrong interpretations. They are not able to share a joke. Some will find the effort to interpret what is being said so great that they will effectively give up and switch off.



How sound works

Sound is energy disturbing the air around us. The energy from the person or thing making the sound compresses the air. Each bit of air pushes the next bit until it reaches our ears where the energy is focused onto the ear drum and converted into electric impulses which are sent to the brain.

Sound reaches our ears along two different routes. Direct sound travels straight from the source to us. Indirect sound bounces off surfaces on the way, so travels further and reaches our ears after the direct sound. We hear this as echo.

The indirect sound gives context so we can tell where the source of the sound is, and how far away, and whether we are in a small room, a large hall, or outdoors. Having two ears helps us do this, just as having two eyes provides us with similar visual range-finding abilities.

The compression and decompression of the air creates waves. The higher the pitch, the faster the wave. The lower the pitch, the slower the wave.

Long waves need more energy to move them than short waves. Short waves are easily deflected. Long waves spill round an object placed in their way.

Generally speaking, human hearing declines from the top end of frequencies first, though this is not always the case.

Hearing loss caused by specific activities can happen at specific frequencies.

Modern deaf aids are sophisticated and do more than simply amplify the sound. They can be adjusted to suit the type of hearing loss of the wearer and they can reduce the background sound; but they are not perfect.

Controlling the indirect sound is important for helping people who have deafness. Reverberation is how sounds bounce off things. Absorption is the opposite. If you drop a metal spoon in your kitchen the sound is quite different from if you dropped it in your lounge. People often sing in the bath because the shiny surfaces of the bathroom allow the sound to reverberate making the singing sound better than it really is! We have all noticed the change in the way a room 'sounds' when we remove the furniture, carpets and curtains prior to decorating. The furniture and fittings absorb sound.

We can use these everyday observations to improve the audibility of council meetings. The underlying principle is to reduce the indirect sound. In other words, lessen the reverberation.

Room size and characteristics

If you have a choice of rooms, avoid those with shiny floors such as in school sports halls or dining rooms. Choose a room with carpet or carpet tiles. Choose the smallest room to fit the size of your meeting. If possible, choose a room with a low ceiling.

Curtains

The simplest and easiest way to reduce reverberation in a room is to pull the curtains. This changes the highly-reflective glass of the windows into the highly-absorbent soft texture of the curtain fabric.

Furniture layout

The traditional 'board room' layout is not helpful because some councillors will always have their backs to the public. People with hearing difficulties can interpret more easily what is being said if they can see the facial expressions of the speaker. Aim for a semi-circle so that all councillors and officers can see each other and the public. If yours is a small council with a small public attendance, invite the public to sit closer. Use one end of a large room.

Meeting etiquette

Talk only through the chairman. One voice at a time. Speak up, address the entire meeting. Don't mutter comments to your neighbour!

PA systems

In the context of a council meeting, PA systems are of limited help. Inside a room, what we call a public address system is really a sound reinforcement system. PA systems are best left to race courses, railway stations and football grounds.



However, if you are holding a meeting in a hall, with the speakers standing or sitting on a stage or podium, then a simple PA system can be helpful. In this situation, the greater the audience, the less reverberation. People absorb sound! Clarity is always more important than loudness. Just turning up the volume

seldom helps, especially in a resonant room. If the amplifier has equalisation controls, turn down the bass, and turn up the mid-range and treble.

Induction loops

These are loops of wire which run round the perimeter of a room and are connected to a special amplifier. The changes in the electrical current in the wire can be received by deaf aids which have either a 'T' or 'MT' setting. The same principle is used by the wires embedded in road surfaces which monitor traffic movement or control traffic lights and electric gates. However, they are expensive to install, and their effectiveness still depends on how microphones are used and how the amplifier is set up.

In specific situations, such as in banks or libraries, they can be helpful, providing the staff know how they work, and signage is available to inform deaf aid users of their presence.

Many induction loops don't work because no-one checks them. Just like other council services, they need to be maintained. Induction loop monitors are available for this purpose. Portable loops are available but very cumbersome.

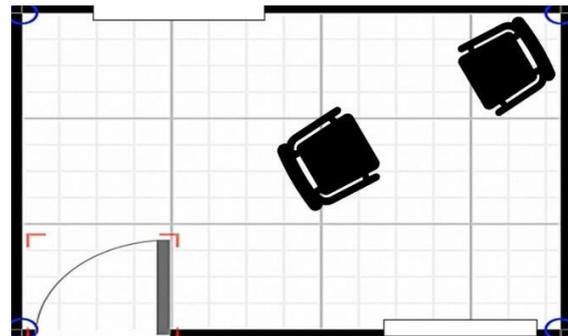
British Sign Language

It is well worth considering providing BSL training for council officers who deal with the public on a regular basis. Even a minimal knowledge is helpful.

One-to-one meetings

As well as the usual protocols to bear in mind when holding a one-to-one meeting, the basic principles outlined above can help if you have a meeting with someone with hearing loss.

Choose a room which has minimal reverberation: a library rather than a café. A quiet office, not a large meeting room. If you meet someone in their own home, offer to pull the curtains. Draw a chair up closer to theirs but respecting personal and social distancing. Face them, and if possible, sit at a diagonal to the room.



Talk clearly and at an even pace. Don't mumble, but NEVER shout. Shouting distorts your facial expression. Try not to use complex sentence structures. Never talk over someone. Always let them finish and then pause before continuing the conversation.

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