



## BRIEFING SHEET

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# Working with learners who are hearing impaired or deaf

## Introduction

This briefing sheet is one of a series that were developed by NIACE on behalf of the DIUS to support work-based learning practitioners when they are working with learners who have a learning difficulty or disability. The other briefing sheets may be found at:

[www.niace.org.uk/research/workplacelearning/Publications.htm](http://www.niace.org.uk/research/workplacelearning/Publications.htm)

Each briefing sheet is designed to offer a brief explanation of a learning difficulty or disability, indicate how it may affect learning in the workplace, and offer some practical suggestions for practitioners about how they may support learners alongside a case study.

In every instance we advocate using a person-centred approach, where the learner and their particular strengths and interests are placed at the centre of the learning and assessment process. More information about using a person-centred approach may be downloaded at:

<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/pdf/Person-centred%20approaches%20and%20adults%20with%20learning%20%20%20%20%20%20difficulties.pdf>

## What is a Hearing Impairment or Deafness?

“Hearing Impairment” is a generic term used to describe all hearing loss. The two terms most used by trained teachers of the deaf to describe hearing impairment are the **type** and **degree** of loss. The main types of hearing loss are:

- mon aura –hearing loss in one ear only;
- conductive loss – the sound waves are impeded from reaching the nerve endings of the ear e.g glue ear in children;
- sensory loss caused by permanent damage to the nerves of the ear.

The degree of hearing loss ranges from:

- Mild – a learner can hear nearly all speech;
- Moderate –a learner will have great difficulty in hearing anyone speaking who is not close by, without a hearing aid;
- Severe – a learner will not be able to cope without a hearing aid and even with one will need visual clues such as lip reading and body language to gain information;
- Profound – a learner will use a hearing aid but will heavily rely on visual cues and/or British Sign language to communicate.

There is an important difference between people who are pre-lingually deaf, that is becoming deaf before learning to speak, and those who become deaf later in life. Many deaf or partially hearing people have speech that can be difficult to understand. This in no way equates with their individual ability in language or their intelligence.

People may use speech, lip-reading, sign, a hearing aid or a mixture of these in day-to- day communication. BSL (British Sign Language) is a language in its own right with its own grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Learners who use sign language may need help with both vocabulary and grammar. They may produce written work that may appear ungrammatical but are likely to be following BSL structure.

## How does it affect work-based learning?

One of the most important factors in any successful work-based learning opportunity is linking the learner to a truly supportive supervisor. They may require training themselves or awareness- raising on hearing impaired issues as a lot of initial reluctance and uncertainty is based on fear of the unknown. Contact with an organisation such as the RNID (see sources of information) will put staff in touch with people who can help.

Many hearing impaired and deaf people find the experience of working in a hearing setting isolating because of the difficulties communication poses. This can be distressing. It can lead to a loss of confidence, lack of self-esteem and affect personal and social relationships. The learner may be perceived as detached and off hand by other people.

In order to maximise the learner’s potential staff need to be clear about the learner’s profile of abilities and needs particularly in the following areas:

- Linguistics and the form of communication used; what level of language and speech does the learner actually have and is there any resource used to help the learner communicate?
- Is there a trained sign language interpreter, communicator or note taker allocated to the learner? For how many hours per week?
- What type of additional practical support is required e.g. technical support for assistive technology?
- Cognitive level- what is the capability of the learner and their likely range of knowledge and learning?

*N.B. The term interpreter is used when a trained person interprets the speech of others into a sign language familiar to the learner. They have been trained to a high level in sign language. A communication-support worker interprets the speech of others also but may not include signing, this could be in the form of note taking or helping the learner to develop lip-reading skills.*

## What can I do to help?

- establish an effective method of communication in whatever format is appropriate for the learner. Familiarise yourself with whatever communication system is in use;
- check whether speech therapist services are available for learners who are hearing impaired and provide a communicator at an appropriate level for learners with a profound loss;
- provide handouts and notes to interpreters/communicators prior to a meeting so that the appropriate support can be prepared;
- the learner will use visual signs and cues; do not exaggerate these but use them as an aid to speech;
- organise meeting space effectively so that light is clear and on the trainer or assessor's face;
- look in the direction of the learner when speaking;
- do not stand with your back to the light;
- make sure that lighting is adequate to allow the learner to see facial expressions clearly;
- speak clearly and at a moderate pace; do not shout;
- avoid blocking the learner's visual access to your face. It is harder to communicate with a person who has a beard or wears glasses, as these can mask facial expression;
- check regularly for understanding;
- remember to apply to the relevant awarding body for appropriate assessment arrangements, like extra time and a communicator, where applicable.

There is a useful section in *Access for All* (pages 14-19) that gives more advice. (see Sources of Further Information)

## Case Study

Barbara is aged 32 and has a profound hearing loss with very limited speech. She is able to lip read quite well and can read and write short sentences. Her level of comprehension is high and she is able to follow instructions with practical demonstration. Her hearing impairment had made her an isolated but determined young woman. She always greets people with a smile and has a very engaging personality.

Barbara attended a mainstream school which had an on-site hearing impaired support unit. She attended selected mainstream lessons in key skills and these were later reinforced and consolidated back in the support unit. Barbara does not use British Sign Language (BSL) but a form of Makaton sign language. From school Barbara transferred to an FE college to attend a mainstream Work Preparation course with a vocational option in hospitality and catering. Her personal tutor was carefully selected from the learning support team and had prior knowledge of hearing impaired issues. The tutor was able to give some deaf awareness training to the whole staff team involved with Barbara and there was extensive liaison between vocational staff, key skills staff and the personal tutor.

The college work coordinator interviewed Barbara with her personal tutor to explore the possibility of a work placement in a local delicatessen and café. The café was owned by a husband and wife couple who employed ten staff to cook for the deli and serve in the café. They had never employed anyone with a disability before and were apprehensive but determined to give Barbara a work experience opportunity. They visited Barbara at college to observe her at work and the work coordinator visited the café to identify the kind of tasks that Barbara would be able to complete. A two week placement was then set up. Barbara was able to work effectively on her own and complete her allocated tasks effectively. The placement proved to be so successful that she was offered a full-time post and six years later she is still there.

## Assistive Technology

Technology can enhance hearing impaired people's access to language. This can include:

- E-mail and text messaging on mobile phones or a minicom, which is a text telephone.
- Hearing aids. These work by amplifying sounds which means that all sounds are amplified so that background noise can be a real problem. New digital hearing aids are now proving quite popular and reduce background noise.
- Radio hearing aids that require the tutor/supervisor to wear a transmitter and microphone that link directly to the learner.
- Loops which can either be a permanent fixture in a room, or be a portable loop which can be set up in any room and worn round the neck.

## DDA

Many learners who have a learning difficulty or disability are protected by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and subsequent legislation. They may be protected as both employees and as learners. In every case, a learner's disability or learning difficulty must meet the criteria described in the Act:

*“Subject to the provisions of Schedule 1, a person has a disability for the purposes of this Act if he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”*

**(DDA, 1995)**

Further information about disability legislation and its application in the workplace or in learning may be found at: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx>

## **Sources of Further Information and Support.**

Royal Institute for the Deaf (RNID)

19-23 Featherstone St.

London EC1Y 8SL

Tel: 0808 808 0123

British Deaf Association (BDA)

1-3 Worship St.

London EC2A 2AB

Defeating Deafness (Hearing Research Trust)

330-332 Gray's Inn Road

London WC1X 8EE

Makaton Signed Language UK

[www.signedlanguage.co.uk/makaton](http://www.signedlanguage.co.uk/makaton)

British Sign Language (BSL)

[www.british-sign.co.uk](http://www.british-sign.co.uk)

*New Rights to Learn: A tutor guide to teaching adults after The Disability Discrimination Act Part 4: NIACE 2003.*

*Access for All-Guidance on Making the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curricula Accessible: London; DfES 2001*

*Skills for Working; Supporting the development of literacy, language and numeracy skills for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities in a vocational context. Skills for Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills: DfES 2006*