



Phone & video calls: essential things for service providers to know about hearing access during Covid-19

Notes to accompany the Ideas for Ears information video: [Health, Care & Befriender Services: Phone & Video Calls](#)

The video is for managers, staff and volunteers who are providing support services primarily to older people as they self-isolate during the coronavirus pandemic. It identifies hidden barriers that can block or restrict access to services, support and help when it is provided by phone or video call. Here is a summary of the content of the 43-minute video.

Part 1: Why it matters (4 minutes)

Social distancing has required many services to switch from being delivered in person to being delivered remotely, often by telephone or video call. This introduces a range of new challenges, one of which is hearing access.

Hearing access is about how well and easily people can hear and follow the spoken word and other audible information.

A great many people have hearing loss, especially among the older age groups. It is essential to ensure that people are able to hear and follow phone and video calls sufficiently well to access health, care and befriender support.

People with hearing loss are at greater risk of isolation, depression and dementia. Social distancing, and the switch to phone and video calls risks making them more vulnerable still.

We need to protect and promote use of phone and video calls to as many people as possible to help reduce risk of isolation and loneliness. This can be done – but requires the right actions and adjustments to be taken.

The Equality Act 2010 and various duties and codes of conduct for health and care services make it important to ensure people can adequately hear and follow health and care-related dialogue and information.

NOTE: In the context of this information sheet (and the video it accompanies), the term 'hearing loss' refers to people with any level of deafness, who might otherwise be referred to as a hard of hearing, deafened or deaf. The content does not relate to older people who are primarily sign language users.

Part 2: The challenges being faced (14 minutes)

People with hearing loss regularly and widely have difficulties in hearing and following what's said. Here's what is learnt in this section of the video:

1. Reliance on phone calls and video calls for service delivery is far greater than ever before and this is unlikely to change for some time to come
2. Most older people have hearing loss – a lot also have tinnitus. This can make hearing clearly and well on phone or video calls hard. For some it is very hard indeed and for a smaller number it is impossible.
3. Many older people live alone and cannot rely on anyone else to make or receive phone or video calls on their behalf.
4. People with hearing loss are more likely to feel isolated and to be diagnosed with depression or dementia.
5. It can take practice and knowledge to spot when people are not hearing well because the clues and signs can be subtle and people will not always choose to say.
6. Some words, pitches and sounds are harder than others for people to hear and this varies depending on what their hearing is like.
7. Background noise makes it much harder for people to hear and understand what is being said.
8. It can be hard to use the phone well with hearing aids.
9. Reduced opportunity to receive support to manage and maintain hearing aids and to address wax build-up issues will affect how well people hear.
10. Video calls are easier to hear than mobile or landline calls. However, old hardware or sluggish internet can disrupt the quality of the audio visual service.

Part 3: What you can do to reduce or remove the challenges (25 minutes)

This part of the video looks at:

- Things that relate to you
- Things that relate to your service users
- Things that relate to technology & support

Things that relate to you:

The video will have helped you become more aware of the variation in hearing challenges and experiences that people have. Here is a summary of actions you can take to respond:

- a) **Flip your assumptions** – rather than anticipate that everyone will hear well and easily, actively expecting that some will not.
- b) **Keep alert for clues** – listen out for trigger words and phrases that indicate that the listener is having some degree of difficulty in hearing and following you.
- c) **Level up your speech clarity** – this involves adjusting your volume, pace & diction, using pauses, taking care to repeat, rephrase and recap. Practising these skills will help you to use them confidently and well.

- d) **Protect dignity and well-being** – responsibility for ensuring the listener can hear and follow is yours, so ensure it is your ability to communicate that is under scrutiny, not their ability to hear and understand.
- e) **Be mindful that:**
 - Even if a listener is struggling to discern what you are saying on a phone or video call, they will likely to be able to hear your tone of voice and read your facial expression.
 - If the listener continues to struggle after you have levelled up your speech clarity, rather than give up on the call, ask a colleague to step in. Your tone of voice might just not suit the listener’s hearing profile.
- f) **Check your environment** – make sure your backdrop, surroundings & lighting are right. For phone calls, this includes removing background noise and ensuring you are not in an echo-y space. On video calls, as well as attending to noise and echo, you should ensure your face and mouth are visible (if possible) and take care to remove visual distractions.
- g) **Use your equipment well** – this includes ensuring your phone receiver or video microphone are in the right position for picking up your voice in the optimum way.

Things that relate to service users

The video discusses some of the issues that may cause or exacerbate difficulties on phone and video calls that are about the service user. Here is a summary:

- a) **Ability or willingness to disclose:** people can find it difficult to tell service providers when they are having trouble hearing and following what is being said, e.g. because they do not want to make a fuss, appear rude, or seem foolish. You can help by:
 - Noticing trigger words & phrases so you can spot their difficulties without waiting for them to be explicitly stated.
 - Making clear that if they cannot hear and follow you, the fault lies with you not them. This is in line with the social model of disability (which identifies that restrictions are imposed by societal barriers not by someone’s medical condition) and also helps to promote inclusive communication (which requires that communication is carried out in a manner and way that matches how an individual is best able to receive it).
- b) **Background noise:** a quiet listening environment will make phone/video calls easier – service providers should be encouraged to switch off the TV, radio etc when taking a call.
- c) **What their hearing is like:** hearing loss, auditory processing difficulties, tinnitus and sensitive hearing can all contribute to how well and easily phone and video calls are heard. However, a lot of people have only basic knowledge of their own hearing and what helps or limits how easily they are able to hear and follow speech.
- d) **Use of hearing aids:** for a range of reasons, people can experience difficulties using hearing aids on phone or video calls. You can help by suggesting they:
 - Move the phone to different positions on the ear to discover where they get the best sound pick up
 - Try different hearing aid settings to see if that makes a positive difference
 - Find a headset that doesn’t cause feedback with their hearing aids
 - Put the phone handset onto the loudspeaker setting and see if that helps

- e) **Use of other hearing devices:** although hearing aids are by far the most common hearing device used, there are some people who use other devices, most notably: cochlear implants, bone anchored hearing aids and middle ear implants.

Things that relate to technology

The video discusses some of the things to be aware of and to look out for. Here is a summary:

a) Landline phones

- Some landlines offer more volume boost than others: as a general guide, a phone that offers 18-28dB amplification is good for mild hearing loss; 30-48dB for moderate hearing loss; and 50-55dB for severe hearing loss.
- Some also offer tone control, which allows the user to adjust high, mid or low pitches to try to get a sound that better fits their hearing profile.
- Both tone control and volume amplifiers can also be acquired as separate pieces equipment that are attached to a corded telephones. Some have a headphone jack to allow you to also use a headset.
- Some well-known brands of phone for people with hearing loss are Doro, Amplicomms, Geemarc and BT.
- Some hearing aid manufacturers also make phones that are specifically designed to work well with their particularly hearing aids.

b) Mobile phones

- Many have good amplification but separate amplifiers can be obtained and paired with mobile phones to give additional volume. However, more volume can equal less clarity because sound can distort as it is amplified.
- Greater clarity on mobile phones can be achieved by using a new service called Audacious, which has been specifically created for people with hearing loss. It is a UK innovation and allows people to get personalised sound coming through their phone handset so voices are easier to hear and discern.
- Phone and video calls can be streamed directly into hearing aids. This requires the user to have hearing aids with this Bluetooth functionality, which is not yet widely available among the 80% or so hearing aid users who have NHS hearing aids.
- Streaming sound can also be done by a pairing a secondary device to the hearing aids and then pairing that device to the phone, computer or tablet. That involves the user acquiring and using a neck loop that is worn round the neck, an audio shoe, which is attached to the hearing aids, or ear hoods which are connected by cable to the phone or tablet and which slide round the ear behind the hearing aid.

c) Speech to text transcription

Providing a transcript live as the call takes place can be done in 2 ways:

- a communication professional joins the call and types up what's said as it is said
- a digital application is used to automatically provide the transcription

- i. For phone calls
 - Relay UK – the new name for the national text relay service. No longer requires a special textphone to access this service – can be accessed on a computer, laptop, table or mobile phone. Involves a third party joining the call to listen and type up what’s said so the listener can read it. It is free for people with hearing loss to use (and those with other communication challenges).
 - Digital applications – as of April 2020, there is nothing on the UK market that Ideas for Ears has tested and can recommend.

- ii. For video calls
 - Two types of communication professional provide transcription services: Electronic Notetakers and Speech To Text Reporters. This communication support is not provided free to people with hearing loss (unless arranged through Access to Work). It must be arranged and paid for by service providers.
 - Plausible options are emerging. None are perfect and require a bit of persistence to get up and running with them but you are encouraged to get up to speed with as soon as you can. Specific details of apps and how to use them can be found on the Ideas for Ears website.

Find out more

Watch the video – [see it in full or watch each part separately](#)

Learn more about subtitles for video calls - [Read Pippa Highfield’s blog about her hunt for easy, accurate and automatic subtitles](#)

About Ideas for Ears

Ideas for Ears is a fresh-thinking not-for-profit social enterprise run by people with hearing loss. We have strong community spirit and a grass roots ethos. We work with individuals and organisations to identify and fix the barriers and challenges that create poor hearing access and that prevent or restrict the participation, inclusion and enjoyment of people with hearing loss.

www.ideasforears.org.uk