



11 million people in the UK are deaf or hard of hearing. In addition, deaf people are more likely to:

- Have poor mental health - up to 50%, compared to 25% for the general population
- Be unemployed - 65% of working age deaf people are in employment, compared to 79% of the general population

There are 151,000 British Sign Language (BSL) users in the UK, just 1.4% of the number of people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Therefore, the latest Government guidance: *'You must wear a face covering at all times on public transport or when attending a hospital as a visitor or outpatient. If you can, you should also wear a face covering in other enclosed public spaces where social distancing is not possible and where you will come into contact with people you do not normally meet. This is most relevant for short periods indoors in crowded areas.'* creates even greater difficulties and additional stress for the deaf community.

Although the Department of Health has confirmed that the Regulations on whether patients should wear face masks in GP practices have not changed and is not mandatory they have said that visitors to primary care are advised to wear a face covering, on a voluntary basis, in enclosed spaces if social distancing is not possible.

Wearing face coverings during COVID-19 poses unique challenges for communicating with this group of people, as many of those with hearing loss rely on visual cues, such as lipreading and facial expression, for communication. This visual information is lost when someone is on a telephone or wearing a mask. Remote consultations on the telephone, or communicating with health professionals wearing PPE, therefore, can be difficult or impossible for people who are deaf or have hearing loss.

Accessible standards must be upheld, even in these unprecedented times, so here are some tips to help you meet communication needs when a patient who is deaf or hard of hearing arrives at the surgery and one or both of you is wearing a face covering:

- ✓ Face the patient
- ✓ Get the patient's attention before speaking
- ✓ Speak clearly – avoid shouting or speaking unnecessarily slowly
- ✓ Say things differently if they ask you to repeat or do not understand what you have said
- ✓ Use hand signals to point to signs and notices if necessary
- ✓ Reduce background noise as much as possible

- ✓ Use plain language and be straight to the point
- ✓ Where possible, provide written information
- ✓ Write things down and show the patient
- ✓ Offer a pen and piece of paper to the patient if they would prefer to write (wear gloves when handling something a patient has handed back to you, and ensure disinfection and hand hygiene is carried out)
- ✓ If requested, speak to a relative or friend
- ✓ If possible, wear a clear face mask or visor – transparent face masks would make a significant difference to deaf people's lives