



ACCESS GUIDE FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

Helpful Hints

Outline of points pertaining to hearing loss.

This guide was prepared by Hearing Matters Australia to assist local Government Councils audit and improve their facilities and services for people with hearing loss.

Hearing Matters Australia would be pleased to assist further if required.

People with hearing loss should have equal access to all local Council services, information, activities and employment as everyone else. Hearing loss can be at different levels. These levels are discussed below:

1) A person has no hearing at all but can communicate by sign language (Australian Auslan)

Auslan is in the same category as a foreign language – just a few of us can make ourselves understood in languages other than spoken English. Signing should be treated with courtesy and understanding and with every effort being made to communicate effectively. However, just as it is unreasonable under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) for every office to have someone who speaks all languages fluently, it is unreasonable to expect someone to be available to sign Auslan.

What can be done?

- Have good visual signage throughout Council premises and venues – this is of benefit to everyone including able-bodied residents and visitors.
- Have good information handouts to cover particular aspects of Councils work – again of benefit to all.
- Use common sense – a smile, and quickly offering a pencil and paper to get to the issue at hand will help create a good impression. Do not panic, do not make a fuss, do not make the person with hearing loss concerned, feel stupid or angry.

- Find out in advance whether or not any staff member can communicate via Auslan. Some hearing people can because they have a signing Deaf person in their immediate family . Inquire and if necessary, get them to translate – again without making an undue fuss. This is a good thing to do with all foreign languages – just ensure there is a list of staff with special knowledge and that staff know who to ask for assistance.

2) A person possesses some hearing and can communicate orally

Some people will tell you they have a hearing problem but some will not . If you find that they do not hear you properly and perhaps as a result, do not answer you appropriately, ensure that you again deal with them with courtesy and do not simply dismiss them.

What can be done?

- Face them directly, do not bend your head or put your hand in front of your mouth, speak clearly, do not shout and possibly rephrase the question or statement slightly differently.
- If you can see that they wear a hearing aid, ask them if they have a T-Switch and direct them to the counter or area with a hearing help sign and/or assistive listening system.

What Technical Assistance and Hearing Help Systems can a Council facility (e.g. library, etc) provide to enable staff to assist residents with hearing loss.

- **On Counters (Customer Service, Library, Cashier, etc.)** – At least one of each of these public areas should be permanently looped with an audio loop and a hearing help ear sign clearly displayed so that people with a hearing aid with a T-Switch can use that facility and hear more clearly. For people with hearing loss without a hearing aid fitted with a T-Switch, it would be useful to have an inexpensive battery-operated communicator available at all public places. The council staff speaks into the microphone which amplifies what is said for the hearing impaired person who wears simple headphones.
- **TTY Telephones** enable hearing impaired or speech impaired people to communicate by a telephone where the message is typed out on a small keyboard and displayed on special phones over a normal phone line. Another option is to have a hearing impaired person with a TTY communicate with an ordinary phone using the National Relay Service provided by the

Australian Communication Exchange (ACE). ACE is a confidential, not-for-profit, Australian organisation dedicated to empowering those who are Deaf or have a hearing, speech or communication impairment, to obtain access to the telephone and other telecommunication networks. This is a most effective means of communication for people living with hearing loss.

- **Staff Training.** Providing special service areas and technology are a waste of money and good intentions fail if all Council staff are not told what is available, where it is located and how to use it if they need to.
- **Staff** should be trained to ensure that a system is turned on and working properly. Procedures must be in place and followed to ensure that all new staff are given the necessary training. A testing device is necessary to check whether or not any audio loops are working but without a hearing aid, it is difficult to know whether or not the loop is working.

Other Relevant Aspects of Council Work

Meetings. All main meeting rooms used for Council work (from a Council Chamber to local community centre meeting rooms) should have an assistive hearing system available. This can mean a fixed audio loop or a portable FM or Infrared system. Such a facility will be required under the DDA

Before any Council funds are spent on purchasing such systems, it is a good idea to contact a consumer organisation such as Hearing Matters Australia who can provide general guidance and relevant assistive information

Assistive hearing systems will not be of benefit to the profoundly deaf who use Auslan to sign. Where required, a Council should contact the Deaf Society of NSW (Ph: 02 9893 8555 to inquire about arranging the services of a signing interpreter.

Planning Approvals At the planning and approval level, Council should be motivated by

- a genuine wish to provide equal access to all and
- by knowing what is required by the DDA and other relevant discrimination and regulatory legislation and Standards.

The best time to ask for help or comment is BEFORE anything is done to ensure that the best assistive hearing systems can be provided at the best price. Once again such items as good signage and flashing warning lights in addition to sound alarms are as important

in providing better and safer access for people with hearing loss as assistive hearing systems.

Councils need to build into their approval procedures an understanding of what can be done, a reasonable amount of flexibility to meet different situations and then provide some assistance to applicants on how to approach the issue.

Council Employment Access A new employee or a long time employee with a hearing loss expect to be treated equally, just like any other employee, The DDA has Standards which will ensure that people have legislative support for this expectation. The important issues here are that

- both Council and employee are honest about the hearing loss and
- there is a mutual understanding of what is necessary to enable the employee to manage the hearing loss at work.

There are many things which can be done to assist, such as, volume control telephones with a built-in Telecoil, flashing light phone instead of a telephone with a ringer, appropriate seating positions (e.g. away from background noise or from noisy environments), the use of assistive listening devices by the employee and most of all, an acceptance by management and fellow employees who are all communication partners. It is important for all staff to be aware of the necessity for good communication techniques.