



# Increasing confidence in employing people with hearing loss

A guide for employers



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## Foreword

Employers all around the country are missing out on the talent and skills disabled people bring to the workplace. Debunking the myths I hear time and time again about disabilities of all types is crucial in ensuring they are able to take advantage of a wealth of talent and a huge untapped resource.

That's why the work of Action on Hearing Loss and guides like this are so important. Government offers a wide range of support through programmes like Access to Work, but first employers need to have the confidence to look beyond something like hearing loss to the ability of an individual and potential employee. That's the aim of the Disability Confident scheme, and what the practical, expert advice in this guide does.

So thank you to Action on Hearing Loss for this. And to any employers out there who are thinking about taking on somebody who is deaf or has hearing loss, please make use of the support available and seize the opportunity - it might be the best thing you'll ever do for your business.



**Penny Mordaunt MP, Minister of State  
for Disabled People, Health & Work**

## Introduction – a message to employers

There are  
**11 million**  
people in the UK  
who have a hearing  
loss – and almost  
**five million** of them  
are of working age

Hearing loss has a significant impact on employment prospects – but this is largely down to a lack of understanding and some popular myths that have developed around what's involved in employing someone who is deaf or who has a hearing loss.

That's why we've produced this guide. We want to help you access a pool of millions of potential employees who are willing – and able – to work but whose hearing loss may have made you think they couldn't work for you. We realise you may have a few concerns about how you can best support a person who is deaf or has a hearing loss during the recruitment process and in the workplace, and we've

designed this guide to be simple and quick to use. We hope it will give you the confidence to employ people who have a hearing loss and to support employees who may be affected by it during their time with you.

You may be starting to think about the national issue of an ageing workforce; both in terms of the staff you already have and those you'll need to recruit in the future. Hearing loss is more prevalent the older people get, and you won't want to lose experienced colleagues, and go through the expense of recruiting and training new staff. Implementing just a few simple steps, as described in this guide, may make all the difference between retaining a dedicated and experienced member of your team – or losing them.

### How did we develop this guide?

In April 2016, Action on Hearing Loss commissioned YouGov to conduct a survey of UK businesses on their attitudes to hearing loss. The total sample size was 618 business leaders (aged 18 and above). The fieldwork was undertaken between 4–8 April 2016 and the survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all business leaders in UK businesses. We have used the results of this survey, and further conversations with both employers and with people with a hearing loss, to formulate this myth-busting guide.

The information contained in this guide is designed to support you, as an employer, when recruiting or working with people who are deaf or have a hearing loss.

Not only will the steps in this guide support you as an employer, but you may also find them useful in meeting the needs of your customers who may be deaf or have a hearing loss.



## Myth 1: “It’s too expensive to employ a person who is deaf...”

The prospect of making any kind of adjustment to the workplace can be daunting – particularly if you (understandably) assume that doing so will incur a cost. Although it’s true that, under the Equality Act 2010 (or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland), you have a responsibility as an employer to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace for employees, and prospective employees, with hearing loss, in actual fact any cost to you could be minimal.

### **Have you heard of Access to Work, the Government’s ‘best kept secret’?**

Adjustments in the workplace may not be as costly as you first thought. Access to Work is a Government scheme that provides financial support to people with a disability.

Access to Work is available to people over 16 in the UK who:

- have an interview for a job
- are about to start work
- are currently in employment
- are trying out a new job which has been sourced by Jobcentre Plus.

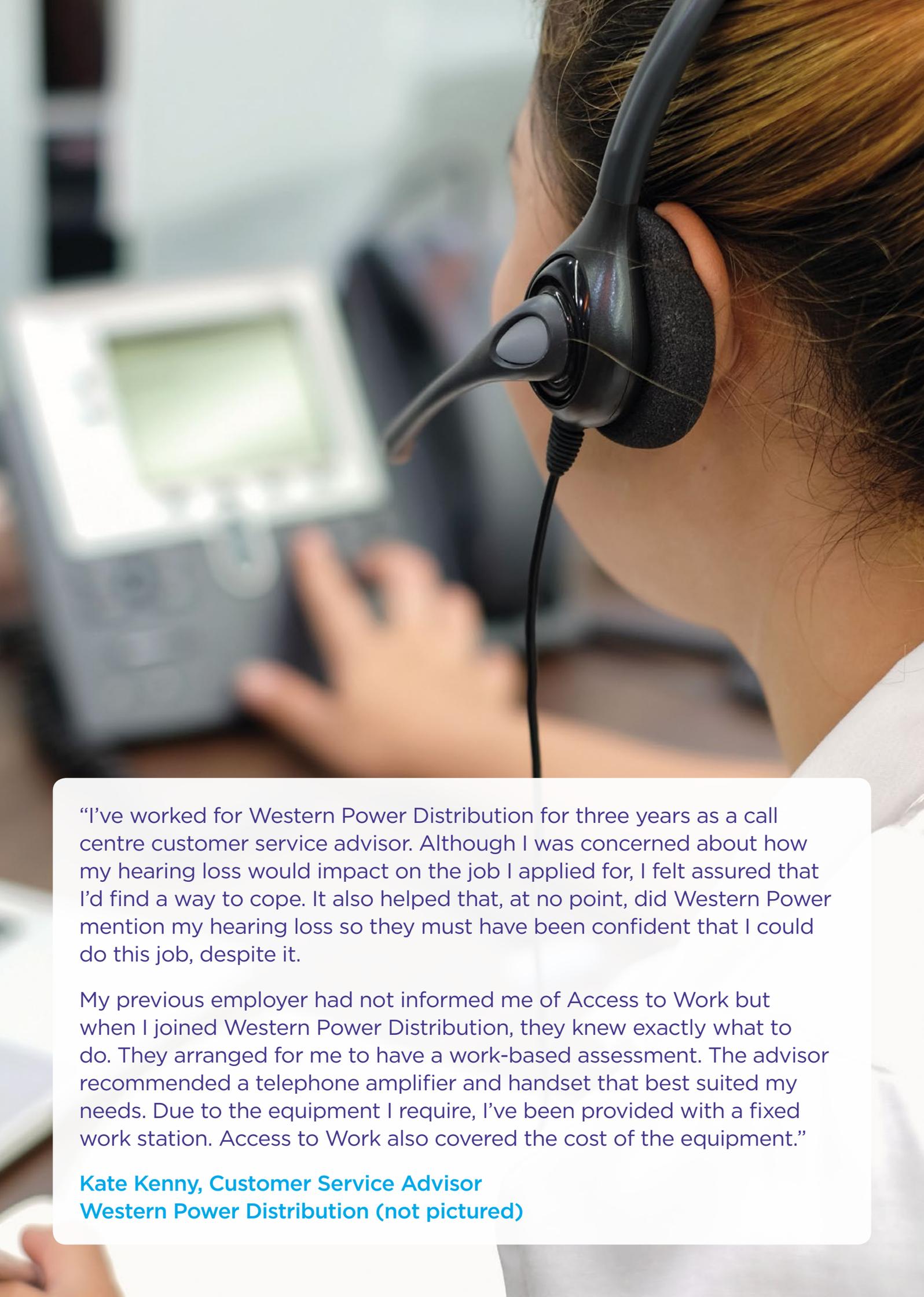
From those surveyed in our YouGov poll, we identified that almost two-fifths (39%) of UK businesses have heard of Access to Work, and a tenth of those are already making use of it to cover the costs

associated with the adjustments needed by employees with a disability.

For those who are deaf or have a hearing loss, Access to Work could cover the cost of the communication support and equipment necessary to provide equal access in the workplace. This can include the cost of communication professionals such as British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters and safety equipment like vibrating pagers and flashing light fire alarms.

Where you’re unsure as to what support is required, you can request a work-based assessment. This offers practical advice on what equipment, support and reasonable adjustments can be made to support your staff. These assessments are normally provided and paid for by Access to Work, but they are also available from specialist providers, such as Action on Hearing Loss, which can help speed the process up.

If an employee, or prospective employee, has a relatively minor hearing loss and it doesn’t affect their day-to-day life, it’s unlikely that you’ll be required to provide support under the Equality Act (or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland). But, if they ask for any assistance, some simple changes could benefit you both.



“I’ve worked for Western Power Distribution for three years as a call centre customer service advisor. Although I was concerned about how my hearing loss would impact on the job I applied for, I felt assured that I’d find a way to cope. It also helped that, at no point, did Western Power mention my hearing loss so they must have been confident that I could do this job, despite it.

My previous employer had not informed me of Access to Work but when I joined Western Power Distribution, they knew exactly what to do. They arranged for me to have a work-based assessment. The advisor recommended a telephone amplifier and handset that best suited my needs. Due to the equipment I require, I’ve been provided with a fixed work station. Access to Work also covered the cost of the equipment.”

**Kate Kenny, Customer Service Advisor  
Western Power Distribution (not pictured)**

## How you can support your employees

- Make sure your HR department is aware of Access to Work so that you can best support your employees from interview right through their working life with you. Perhaps revisit your equality and diversity policy to ensure it fully supports people with disabilities, particularly deafness and hearing loss.
- Access to Work will cover the cost of support required during interviews. The candidate will need to contact Access to Work to make arrangements for a budget to be made available. For candidates coming to you from Jobcentre Plus, the advisor may have already arranged for a budget and support to be available for the interview.
- To ensure that an employee with hearing loss is best supported from their first day, encourage them to request a work-based assessment. Not everyone who is deaf or has a hearing loss is aware of the support that Access to Work can provide; share this information with new and existing employees. To be eligible for full support, new employees must apply for Access to Work support within eight weeks of starting.

### Find out more about Access to Work here:

- [www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview](https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview)
- [actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/access-to-work.aspx](https://actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/access-to-work.aspx)

A construction worker wearing a green polo shirt, a bright yellow high-visibility safety vest with reflective silver stripes, and blue work gloves is kneeling on a concrete surface. He is holding a large, rectangular concrete block with his left hand. In the foreground, a hammer with a wooden handle and a metal head lies on the ground. The background shows a construction site with dirt and concrete structures.

“When I was younger, I really struggled to find full-time employment as a builder. Although I had all the relevant qualifications, I was always unsuccessful due to a perceived health and safety risk.

So I decided to become self-employed and have now run my own business for more than 40 years. The very companies who turned me down now subcontract work to my business. I have a reputation for being an extremely fast worker as I’m rarely distracted by noise.”

**‘Stephen’, Builder**  
**(Name has been changed)**

## Myth 2: “It’s too dangerous to employ a deaf person...”

Some employers worry that there will be health and safety implications in hiring someone who is deaf or has a hearing loss. It’s easy to understand how this fear has come about – for instance, alarm systems are sound-based and a profoundly deaf person wouldn’t be able to hear a warning being shouted out. But in fact, 65% of employers do not see hearing loss as posing a health and safety risk in the workplace.

People who have a hearing loss simply require the same health and safety requirements as their hearing peers, with consideration given to additional support that may be required to meet their particular needs (such as a vibrating fire alarm pager). As explained in myth one, Access to Work may cover the cost of such additional equipment.

### How you can support your employees

- Staff who are deaf or have a hearing loss require the same health and safety equipment as their hearing peers. For instance, a builder who is deaf or has a hearing loss will require hard hat, high-visibility jacket, safety boots and so on.
- Check that emergency evacuation procedures are written in plain English (this may not just be of use to employees with a hearing loss, but also staff whose first language isn’t English).
- To ensure the safety of employees and customers alike, ensure all private/quiet areas, such as toilets and prayer rooms, have flashing alarms to alert people in the event of an emergency.
- Fire marshals should be made aware of employees who have a hearing loss. We recommend for all fire marshals to do deaf awareness training, to ensure they’re able to communicate with a person who is deaf or has a hearing loss in the event of an emergency.
- Action on Hearing Loss can provide work-based assessments and can discuss with you what reasonable adjustments, if any, are required. We can also provide deaf awareness training, Start to Sign and British Sign Language (BSL) at Work courses for your hearing staff. Some, or all, of this cost may be covered by the government’s Access to Work scheme.



## Myth 3: “It’s too difficult to communicate with someone who has a hearing loss...”

There is a common misconception that communication is difficult with people who have a hearing loss. Often, when people think of deafness, they assume the person uses sign language. In fact, effective communication can be as simple as making sure they can see your face properly, in a good light, to be able to lipread you, or meeting in a room with a hearing loop (if they’re a hearing aid wearer).



“All employees at Sass and Belle are offered an opportunity to learn BSL and most do take up the lessons. The classes are excellent for team building as well as providing staff with a new skill.

We currently employ one Deaf BSL-user in our design team. His colleagues communicate with him using his preferred language, so he feels part of the team.”

**Richard Stone**  
Managing Director, Sass and Belle

### How you can support your employees

- Ask the employee their preferred method of communication.
- For some deaf people who use BSL, English may not be their first language. To ensure written communication is less of an issue, adopt the Plain English principles ([plainenglish.co.uk](http://plainenglish.co.uk)) including signage, policies and online content.
- Sometimes the staff member might like to teach other employees basic BSL or lipreading tips.
- There are plenty of resources and short courses online. [signature.org.uk](http://signature.org.uk) has a list of certified BSL courses available in your area.
- Action on Hearing Loss can provide a variety of training courses tailored to meet the needs of your business such as deaf awareness, British Sign Language at Work and Start to Sign. The cost of these courses may be covered by Access to Work.
- Engage in the government’s Disability Confident initiative to find out more about how to be confident when communicating with disabled people, including people with a hearing loss: [www.gov.uk/disability-confident](http://www.gov.uk/disability-confident)



## Myth 4: “People who lose their hearing can’t continue working...”

It’s easy to assume that, once someone starts to lose their hearing, they will become increasingly restricted in what they can do in the workplace. But the truth is that people can adapt to living with a hearing loss, and make adjustments in the workplace, to allow them to continue as before. People will find it easier to adjust to living with a hearing loss the earlier they seek support.

This is an issue that all employers are going to face. The proportion of people in employment aged 50 to 64 increased from 62% in 2001 to 67% in 2013 (DWP, 2013) – and continues to rise. More than 40% of over 50-year-olds have some degree of

hearing loss and more than 75% of people with hearing loss are over the age of 60.

In addition, the State Pension age will rise to 67 by 2028 under the Pension Act 2014 ([www.gov.uk/government/collections/pensions-bill](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/pensions-bill)). Based on the terms set out in the 2014 Act, it will be subject to continuous review.

Action on Hearing Loss estimates that in 2031, there will be 14.5 million people in the UK with some form of hearing loss.

Wessex Water has a very low staff turnover and some staff have been working there for 25 years or more. With an ageing workforce comes inevitable, age-related health conditions and disabilities (such as hearing loss) but Wessex Water recognises the need to retain experienced staff, as well as attract new people to the organisation. So managers are encouraged to have open conversations, to talk about what equipment is available, and to

be prepared to make adjustments when required.

The organisation runs annual equality training days for all recruiting managers to keep staff up to date on current equality legislation, and remind them of their responsibilities under the Equality Act. There is also an occupational health team and disability information available on their intranet.

Over two-fifths (44%) of business leaders agreed that, with the retirement age increasing, they could support an ageing workforce with hearing loss, so what kind of steps could you take to retain your dedicated and experienced employees?

## How you can support your employees

- Have a good system of supervision in place for all your employees.
- Discuss your employees' changing needs with them and ask what would suit them best.
- If someone develops a hearing loss, consider changing the person's workstation so that they have more light and better visibility.
- Think about noise levels in the building; an open plan office is good for being able to see but can become noisy. Cubicles or dividing screens could reduce noise but also create visual barriers. Where possible, staff members with hearing loss should be seated in an area where they can clearly see their team but are away from noisy equipment or heavy footfall areas.
- It's not uncommon for some employees to be unaware of the technology available to them or of the advances made in technology that would better assist them. A work-based assessment could help them recognise how their needs have changed and could highlight any additional support that they may not have considered or be aware of. Your employee can get in touch with Access to Work to request a work-based assessment that will identify any changes you could make and offer you a budget to help with the cost of adjustments. Alternatively, you may prefer to use a specialist provider such as Action on Hearing Loss.
- Consider offering all your staff some deaf awareness training (again, the cost of this may be covered by Access to Work).
- Encourage your staff to create and follow simple ground rules for team meetings (for example, people only talking one at a time).
- If someone develops a hearing loss that has an acute impact on their ability to fulfil their role, then you may want to discuss with them the possibility of moving to a different role, at the same grade, which offers a higher level of accessibility. This will ensure that you can retain their expertise.

# Directory

## Disability Confident:

Website: [www.gov.uk/disability-confident](http://www.gov.uk/disability-confident)

## Access to Work:

Website: [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

## Action on Hearing Loss

Action on Hearing Loss can offer practical advice on what equipment, support and reasonable adjustments can be made to support your staff and ensure that you, as an employer, are taking steps towards fulfilling your obligations under the Equality Act 2010 (or the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland).

### We can offer:

- **Deaf awareness and sign language training**  
We deliver a range of courses to suit your needs and to ensure that your staff can communicate effectively with colleagues and customers who have a hearing loss.
- **Work-based assessments**  
Our assessors provide an individual assessment with practical advice and solutions to maximise employee and team potential.
- **Products**  
We stock a large range of products that can support staff members to start – or stay in – work.

- **Communication support**  
With over 600 communication professionals working with us across the UK, we can offer staff members a range of communication support options that would best meet their needs. We are able to offer sign language interpreters, lipspeakers, electronic and manual notetakers, speech-to-text reporters and interpreters for deafblind people.
- **Access auditing and benchmarking**  
Our Louder than Words™ charter mark assesses your business against our 10 quality standards. These cover not just your employment practices (to ensure that you're able to recruit and retain the right workforce) but also assess and suggest solutions for gaps in service delivery to your customers.

Please contact us to discuss your needs.

 **0333 240 5658**  
(Calls welcome via Text Relay)

 **[access.solutions@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:access.solutions@hearingloss.org.uk)**

## Summary



### **Myth 1:** “It’s too expensive to employ a person who is deaf...”

- Adjustments in the workplace may not be as costly as you first thought. Access to Work is a Government scheme that can cover the costs of adjustments for disabled people in the workplace.
- Where you’re unsure as to what support is required, you can request a work-based assessment. This offers practical advice on what equipment, support and reasonable adjustments can be made to support your staff.



### **Myth 2:** “It’s too dangerous to employ a deaf person...”

- Some employers worry that there will be health and safety implications in hiring someone who is deaf or has a hearing loss.
- People who have a hearing loss simply require the same health and safety requirements as their hearing peers, with consideration given to additional support that may be required to meet their particular needs.



### **Myth 3:** “It’s too difficult to communicate with someone who has a hearing loss...”

- There is a common misconception that communication is difficult with people who have a hearing loss. Often, when people think of deafness, they assume the person uses sign language.
- In fact, effective communication can be as simple as making sure they can see your face properly, in a good light, to be able to lipread you, or meeting in a room with a hearing loop (if they’re a hearing aid wearer).



### **Myth 4:** “People who lose their hearing can’t continue working...”

- It’s easy to assume that, once someone starts to lose their hearing, they will become increasingly restricted in what they can do in the workplace.
- But the truth is that people can adapt to living with a hearing loss, and adjustments can be made in the workplace, to allow them to continue as before.

Tell us what your company is doing, and we can help you improve your business

## Good practice checklist – supporting employees with a hearing loss

Now that you've read our myth-busting guide, we'd love to know what you're already doing to be accessible to employees with hearing loss – and what you might consider doing now that you know a bit more about how you can better recruit and retain staff who are deaf or have a hearing loss.

Please complete the checklist and post it back to us at the freepost address below, or scan and email it to us. This will help us to further understand the perspective of employers and, if you're happy for us to contact you, we can discuss how to help you make any changes you want to introduce – or recognise you for the good work that you're already doing.

Your details and your responses will be kept confidential.

**Is there anything else you would like to know about?**

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**Any other comments**

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Thank you for taking the time to feedback.

Please send this to:

**Campaign Team, Action on Hearing Loss, 19–23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL**  
or email [campaigns@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@hearingloss.org.uk)

Turn over  
for checklist 

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ Company: \_\_\_\_\_

Job title: \_\_\_\_\_

If we can contact you about this issue, please provide contact details:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Approximately how many employees do you have in your company? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any employees with a hearing loss? \_\_\_\_\_

	Yes	No	I would like to learn more about this	Any Comments
1. Is your HR department aware of Access to Work (AtW)?				
2. Do any of your employees use AtW?				
3. Does your equality and diversity policy fully support people with deafness and hearing loss?				
4. Is your company engaged with the Disability Confident initiative?				
5. Are all your communications, including job descriptions, policies, evacuation procedures, etc, written in plain English?				
6. Have all fire marshals received deaf awareness training?				
7. If you have employees who are deaf or have a hearing loss, are they asked about their preferred method of communication?				
8. Do you have a strategy/plan to retain employees who begin to lose their hearing?				
9. Did you find this myth-busting guide useful?				

**Action on Hearing Loss** (formerly RNID) is the largest UK charity helping people who are confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss. We give support and care, develop technology and treatments, and campaign for equality. We enable people to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way. We rely on donations to continue our vital work.

For up-to-date information about hearing loss and tinnitus, how to hear better, and our breakthrough medical research, visit our website: **[actiononhearingloss.org.uk](https://actiononhearingloss.org.uk)**

For free, confidential information about anything related to hearing loss or tinnitus, you can call us on **0808 808 0123**, email us at **[information@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:information@hearingloss.org.uk)** or send a text message to **07800 000360**.

To find out about our events, news and services, and to share experiences and information with others, like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter:

 Action on Hearing Loss

 @ActionOnHearing