

Communication support for people who are deafblind

You'll find this factsheet useful if you need to arrange communication support for someone who has become deafblind.

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i If you'd like this factsheet in Braille, large print or audio, please contact our Information Line – see last page for contact details.



In this factsheet...

We tell you about the communication support available to people who become deafblind, including those:

- who are born deaf and lose their sight
- who are born blind and lose their hearing
- who lose both hearing and sight at some stage in their life, usually older people.

For advice on the communication needs of people who are born deafblind, please contact Sense or Deafblind UK ([see page 8](#) for contact details).

What is deafblindness?

Deafblindness is a combination of sight loss and hearing loss that causes difficulties with communication, access to information and moving around.

The causes of deafblindness vary. Some people are born deafblind – this is known as **congenital deafblindness**. Other people become deafblind because of an illness, an accident or old age – this is called **acquired deafblindness**.

Most people who are deafblind are not totally deaf and blind; they have a little hearing or sight, or a little of both. However, deafblindness has a big impact on a person's life due to the way that sight loss and hearing loss affect each other – even if, individually, each impairment is mild.

Sense, a national charity supporting and campaigning for deafblind people, estimates that there are around 358,000 people in the UK who are deafblind.

What are the different ways of communicating with people who have become deafblind?

Clear, accessible communication is crucial for people who are deafblind – their quality of life depends on it. They may find it very difficult to understand what's happening around them and to communicate with those they meet. This can cause feelings of frustration, mistrust and isolation.

People who have acquired deafblindness will often have learnt formal language, but they may need to adapt the way they communicate or learn new ways. It depends on how much useful sight and hearing they have – and whether they have any additional disabilities.



To find out more, see our factsheet *Deafblindness*.

Some people who are deafblind with a little useful sight and hearing communicate using speech and hearing aids. They may also use communication support such as lipspeakers, notetakers and speech-to-text-reporters.

Others who are deafblind may use one or more of the following methods to communicate and access information.

 See the other factsheets in our **Communication** range to find out more about different types of communication support.

British Sign Language (BSL)

BSL is the main sign language used in the UK. People who are deaf and use BSL who then lose their sight may prefer to continue using BSL if they can still see some signs.

Visual frame signing

This type of signing helps people who use BSL but have a limited field of vision. Someone using BSL adapts their signs and places them within the visual field of the person who is deafblind, so they can see them.

Hands-on signing

If a BSL user can no longer see the signs, they may use hands-on signing (also known as 'tactile signing'). This is where they follow the signs by placing their hands on top of those of the person signing.

Block Alphabet

Some, mainly older, people with deafblindness, who have limited sight or hearing (or none), use the Block Alphabet method. To communicate in this way, you spell out words onto the palm of the hand of the person who is deafblind. You trace each letter with your finger in block capitals. It's a good way of communicating, and requires little training, but it can take time.

Deafblind manual alphabet

You can communicate relatively quickly with a person who is deafblind using the deafblind manual alphabet, which you can learn in around half an hour. It's similar to the BSL fingerspelling alphabet. You spell out words onto the hands of the person who is deafblind. Each letter is signified by a particular sign or position on the hand.

With practice, you can communicate at a reasonable speed using this method. That's why it's one of the most commonly used methods of communication for people who are deafblind.

 Contact our [Information Line](#) ([see last page for details](#)) for our free deafblind manual alphabet card.

Clear speech

Speaking clearly is one of the best ways to communicate with someone who is deafblind but has some sight and hearing. Choose a quiet place and clarify the subject of the conversation first.

If the person can lipread, make sure you face the light, and sit or stand at the same level as them while talking.

i For more communication tips, visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk/communicationtips

Tadoma

Some people who are deafblind use a method called 'Tadoma' (also known as 'tactile lipreading'). They place their hands on the speaker's lips, jawline or neck to feel vibrations. However, this method is now very rare.

Braille and Moon

Braille is a tactile system that's commonly used to read and write by people who are blind. Braille characters are small rectangular blocks that contain tiny raised dots. The number and arrangement of these dots distinguish one character from another.

People who are deafblind who read Braille can use a Braille printer to create Braille documents. Some people also have a refreshable Braille display that can be linked to their computers.

Moon is a similar writing system to Braille, but it uses raised symbols that are derived mostly from the Roman alphabet. It is useful for people who develop sight loss in later life, as they already know the shapes of letters.

While Braille and Moon can't be used in general conversation, they can help people who are deafblind to access information and write.

i To find out more about the different communication methods, contact Deafblind UK or Sense ([see page 8](#) for details).

Technology

New technology can also help people who are deafblind to communicate and access information. For example:

- **screen readers** that can 'read out' text
- **screen magnifying software** that can make part of a computer screen bigger
- **mobiles** and **telephones** designed for people with hearing loss and/or sight loss
- **assistive listening devices** that can make it easier to hear speech – including phone calls – the TV, music and other sounds.

i To find out more about the products to help with hearing loss, see our **Products and technology** range of factsheets at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets

What professional communication support is available?

Interpreters for deafblind people

An interpreter for deafblind people relays what's being said onto the hand of the person who is deafblind using the

Deafblind Manual Alphabet. They work at speeds of up to 150 words per minute. The interpreter will also communicate visual information – for example, reactions to what has been said and the movement of other people.

Interpreters for deafblind people provide support in formal situations such as:

- medical appointments (including a visit to a GP)
- business or work appointments and meetings
- conferences
- training courses.

Communicator guides

Communicator guides work in informal situations, supporting people who have become deafblind to take an active part in everyday life. They:

- provide one-to-one communication support and guiding
- provide practical help with everyday tasks such as shopping, dealing with mail and paying bills
- support people to lead independent and fulfilling lives at home and in their community.

Combined support

The roles of interpreters and communicator guides for people who are deafblind sometimes overlap. For example, if someone who is deafblind attends a conference, they are likely to get there with the support of a

communicator guide, but an interpreter will most likely provide communication support during the conference.

How do I book an interpreter?

You can book interpreters for deafblind people through our Access Solutions team (see below) or through an agency or communication services unit. You can also book a freelance interpreter directly through The National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) – visit nrcpd.org.uk

Try to book an interpreter around four to six weeks in advance, as they get booked up quickly.

Access Solutions

Telephone: **0845 685 8000**

Textphone: **0845 685 8001**

Email: communication.services@hearingloss.org.uk

Website: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/communication

Book a registered interpreter

Make sure that the interpreter you book is registered with NRCPD. This means they will have the relevant qualifications and follow a professional code of practice. They must also keep information strictly confidential.



To find a registered interpreter for deafblind people, visit nrcpd.org.uk

How do I book a communicator guide?

Communicator guides usually work under Deafblind UK, Deafblind Scotland or Sense, but some work freelance. Again, book in advance.

Rates of pay vary, so check when you book. Agencies may add a fee for arranging the communication support.

Only book a qualified communicator guide

For a professional, high-quality service, make sure the communicator guide has one of the following qualifications:

- Signature Level 2 Award in Communicating with Deafblind People
- Signature Level 2 Award in Communicating and Guiding Skills with Deafblind People.

How many interpreters or communicator guides will I need to book?

A person who is deafblind needs one-to-one support. In a long meeting, you may need to book two interpreters for someone who is deafblind. This will allow both the person who is deafblind and the interpreter to have regular breaks.

Who pays for communication support?

Usually, people who are deafblind won't have to pay for the communication support they need. Under Section 7 of the Local Authorities Act 1970, local authorities (councils) must assess the support needs of people who are deafblind. If the person is assessed as needing care services – including communication support – this can be arranged in two ways:

- the local authority's social services department can provide the services through an agency
- the local authority can provide the individual with funds under the Direct Payments Plan, so they can arrange and pay for the services they receive.

Access to public services

Under the Equality Act 2010 (the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland), NHS services, and other public services, have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments to make sure that people who are disabled can access their services – this includes providing communication support.

NHS England's Accessible Information Standard means NHS services and publicly funded adult social care services in England must provide people with disabilities with the support they need to communicate well and understand information when using their services – that includes communication support.

Access to Work

The Government's Access to Work scheme may help to pay for any communication support or assistive equipment that people who are deafblind need at work or for job interviews.

 For more information about who pays for communication support, contact our Access Solutions team ([see page 8](#)). To find out more about the Equality Act, see our **Your rights** range of factsheets.

What should I consider when working with an interpreter for deafblind people?

When you have booked communication support, it will help the interpreter to do their job better if you plan ahead. Give them information about the booking in advance so that they are familiar with the subject and any specialist terms.

If you have booked an interpreter for a formal occasion, meet before the booking begins to discuss the set-up. For example, book a room that's big enough to accommodate everyone, and possibly a guide dog or hearing dog, comfortably. Make sure the room has good lighting and that there'll be no interruptions.

Allow more time for meetings, as the communication methods used by people who are deafblind can make meetings longer by 50-70%.

Remember that the interpreter has a right to breaks, so confirm these with them beforehand. If the session is likely to last more than two hours, you may be asked to book two interpreters.

Where can I get more information about communication support?

Action on Hearing Loss

The other factsheets in our **Communication** range are:

- *Booking a sign language interpreter*
- *Working with a communication support worker*
- *Working with a lipspeaker*
- *Working with a notetaker*
- *Working with a speech-to-text reporter*
- *Careers supporting people who are deaf.*

You can order these from our Information Line ([see last page](#)) or download them from our website at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets

Access Solutions

To book communication support through Action on Hearing Loss, contact our Access Solutions team:

Telephone: **0845 685 8000**
Textphone: **0845 685 8001**
Email: communication.services@hearingloss.org.uk

You can also book online at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/communication

Other organisations

Deafblind UK

National charity providing support services to, and campaigning on behalf of, deafblind adults and their carers.

Telephone/textphone: **01733 358 100**
Fax: **01733 358 356**
Online contact form: deafblind.org.uk/contact-us/
Email: info@deafblind.org.uk
Website: deafblind.org.uk

Sense

National charity supporting people who are deafblind, have sensory impairments or complex needs, to enjoy more independent lives.

Telephone (information and advice): **0300 330 9256/020 7520 0972**
Textphone: **0300 330 9256/020 7520 0972**
Fax: **0300 330 9251**
Email: info@sense.org.uk
Website: sense.org.uk

The National Registers for Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD)

NRCPD regulates communication and language professionals who work with deaf and deafblind people. It holds registers of interpreters for deafblind people, lipspeakers, notetakers, sign language interpreters, sign language translators and speech-to-text reporters.

Telephone: **0191 383 1155**
SMS: **07974 121 594**
Email: enquiries@nrcpd.org.uk
Website: nrcpd.org.uk

Information you can trust

We are certified by The Information Standard as a producer of high-quality, evidence-based information.

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We'd love to know what you think of this factsheet – please email us at reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk

If you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create new publications and improve existing ones, please let us know.

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

Our expert information covers everything you need to know about:

- hearing loss and deafness
- tinnitus
- ear problems and treatments
- hearing aids and cochlear implants
- useful products and technology
- communication tactics and support
- benefits and grants
- your rights.

Visit our website actiononhearingloss.org.uk or call our Information Line ([see last page](#)) for information, support and publications. You can also find out about services in your area, our hearing research, and how you can get involved.

Please help us support others

We provide our leaflets, factsheets and Information Line service free of charge to anyone affected by deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss in the UK. We rely on the generosity of our supporters to help us do this. We would be very grateful if you would consider making a donation - of as little or as much as you can afford.

Please send a cheque, payable to Action on Hearing Loss, to:

Freepost RTLX-CZKX-BTTZ
Action on Hearing Loss
1-3 Highbury Station Road
London N1 1SE
(No stamp needed)

Donate online at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/icanhelp
Or make a donation over the phone by credit or debit card:

 **0203 227 6182**

 **0203 227 6185**

Thank you.

Our purpose is to help people confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss to live the life they choose. We enable them to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss Information Line

Telephone **0808 808 0123**
Textphone **0808 808 9000**
SMS **0780 000 0360**
(standard text message rates apply)
Email **information@hearingloss.org.uk**

Join us



Action on Hearing Loss



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