

## **Access for road users with hearing loss Policy statement**

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People with hearing loss face communication issues and may face safety issues when using the road. We advocate raising awareness of the needs of different road users, including the implications of introducing shared streets. Consideration should be given to how systems such as emergency roadside telephones and payment for parking could be adapted so that they are more accessible to people with hearing loss.

### **Introduction**

This policy statement outlines the main issues for people with hearing loss when using the road as a pedestrian, cyclist or driver. It also includes our stand on the issues and suggests what actions need to be taken to improve access and safety for road users with hearing loss.<sup>1</sup>

We use the term 'people with hearing loss' to refer to people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing throughout.

### **Background**

#### *Pedestrians*

People with hearing loss may be unable to hear vehicles or other road users approaching. They rely largely on sight to use the road safely. People who have lost their hearing later in life may not have developed the necessary skills to compensate for their lost sense, and may be at more risk of an accident than others. It is important that there is a 'safe area' where people can walk without needing to be alerted to different types and speed of traffic.

A 'shared space' is a new design concept for town centre and high street developments. In most cases the design involves removing the kerb that has traditionally separated areas for vehicles and pedestrians creating a shared surface street. This could remove the relative safety for people with hearing loss or other sensory impairments. We have supported the Guide Dogs campaign Streets Ahead, which aims to make street spaces more accessible to people with sight loss and raise awareness of the varied needs of all road users.

We have also supported Guide Dogs 'Safe and Sound' campaign, which has aimed to raise awareness of the dangers posed by quiet hybrid and electric vehicles to road users – particularly people with sensory loss.

For further information on these campaigns, please go to the Guide Dogs website.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that, like many policy documents, this statement reflects the issues relevant at the time of writing. Over time this may be subject to change, such as new legislation, and we may review and amend the document.

### *Cyclists*

It is important that drivers are aware of the different needs of other road users, and understand that not all cyclists are able to hear vehicles or their horns. Cyclists in turn must also be aware that not everyone can hear their warnings, such as their bicycle bell.

### *Drivers*

A big issue for drivers with hearing loss is access to information. We welcome the use of signs displaying the latest traffic news – known as variable message signs – across the motorway and trunk road network. Many people with hearing loss are not able to use local radio stations for up-to-date travel information, so it is important that alternative methods of receiving information are available.

The Highways Agency now use an emergency roadside telephone that is accessible to people with hearing loss across the motorway network. There is an inductive coupler in the handset for motorists with hearing aids, volume control and a text facility.

The increasing availability of smartphone apps for parking payment has been beneficial and helps to avoid situations where people with hearing loss are disadvantaged by not being able to make use of voice call payment systems.

The Blue Badge scheme provides parking concessions for people with severe mobility problems who have difficulty using public transport. It enables badge holders to park closer to their destination and is a nationwide scheme. People with hearing loss are not eligible for the scheme. We are not campaigning to change the criteria to include people with hearing loss, as we think that currently there is no evidence to justify it. It is more important that information is available in accessible formats and for bus drivers, traffic wardens and other relevant service providers to be deaf aware.

### *Driving test*

The Driving Standards Agency (DSA) requests that people let them know if they have hearing loss when booking their driving test. The theory test is available in BSL and the DSA allows more time in the practical test for people with hearing loss. However, whilst interpreters are allowed to accompany the person taking the test, the individual must pay for the communication support themselves. Interpreters are prohibitively expensive for most individuals, so this may lead to people who use sign language not taking a driving test, or using an interpreter who is not properly trained.

The DSA are a public body, so they should take the needs of people with hearing loss into account when planning their services. We believe that providing an interpreter in a driving test would be a reasonable adjustment for people who use sign language. We also believe that all examiners should receive deaf awareness training to ensure that people with hearing loss are not at a disadvantage during the driving test.

### *Level crossings*

In some areas there are level crossings without any barriers: this poses a real risk for people with hearing loss. Warning lights may not always be visible, for example, when the sun is shining on them. Most emergency telephones by level crossings are not accessible to people with hearing loss.

### *Awareness*

There are various ways to raise awareness about road safety for people who are deaf. For example, most children receive both pedestrian and cycling training, so it would be useful to include discussion about the different needs of road users. The Highway Code specifically mentions that people with hearing loss may be vulnerable as pedestrians.

We would like to see this included in all driving tests, so that new drivers have better understanding and awareness of vulnerable road users.

### **Evidence**

In our 2006 annual survey, 64% of respondents had been a driver in a private car during the past week, and 53% had been in a car as a passenger.

### **Recommendations**

In addition to the issues discussed in the general public transport policy statement, Action on Hearing Loss would like to see the following:

- Raised awareness among all road users to the different needs of pedestrians, cyclists and drivers.
- The introduction of shared streets stopped.
- All emergency roadside telephones to have an inductive coupler, volume control and a text option.
- Variable road message signs installed in all suitable locations.
- Where payment for parking is offered by mobile phone, a similar text alternative must be offered for free to people who are deaf.
- Interpreters provided without charge to candidates whose first language is sign language in driving tests.
- All driving test examiners to receive deaf awareness training.

### **References**

*Annual Survey RNID (2006)*

[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/membersurvey](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/membersurvey)

DirectGov – public services website

[www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

Guide Dogs:

[www.guidedogs.org.uk/supportus/campaigns/streets-ahead/](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/supportus/campaigns/streets-ahead/)

<http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/supportus/campaigns/safe-and-sound-ev/>

Highways Agency

[www.highways.gov.uk/](http://www.highways.gov.uk/)