

The provision of social  
care for people with  
hearing loss

By Rachel Calton

**ACTION ON**  
**HEARING**  
**LOSS**

**LIFE**  
**SUPPORT**



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## Executive summary

The social care and support provided through local authorities are essential to many people who are deaf or have hearing loss so they can stay healthy, maintain their independence and play an active role in their communities. However, provision of and access to services varies.

This research was carried out in England and Wales to build a picture of local authorities' approaches to:

- **Understanding need:** Do local authorities in England and Wales assess the level of need and make plans to support people with hearing loss?
- **Meeting need:** What services are on offer to meet the needs of people with hearing loss?
- **Access to services:** How can people with hearing loss access the services provided by local authorities?
- **Service cuts:** How are government spending cuts affecting services for people with hearing loss?

With support from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS), we surveyed heads of adult sensory services in local authorities in England and Wales. In England, we collected the results between May and June 2012. Of the 152 local authorities we surveyed, 64 responded – a 43% response rate. In Wales, we collected the results in August 2012. Of the 22 local authorities we surveyed, eight responded – a 36% response rate.

## Findings

### Understanding need

We looked at whether hearing loss features in local authorities' joint strategic needs assessments (JSNAs), which assess a population's health and wellbeing needs, and whether they have strategies to plan their services for people with hearing loss. We also asked whether, and how, feedback is gathered directly from people with hearing loss.

#### JSNAs, strategies and feedback

In England, only one-third of respondents said that hearing loss appears as a specific issue in their JSNA. The rest said it does not or they did not know, indicating that these local authorities may not be assessing levels of need.

In both England and Wales, half of the respondents said they have a sensory loss strategy. One in four respondents in England and one in six respondents in Wales said they have a strategy dedicated to hearing loss. However two-fifths of respondents in England and

one-third in Wales said they have no sensory impairment strategy in place.

The local authorities we surveyed use a wide range of methods to gather service user feedback. There are innovative examples where service users' comments feed directly into need assessments and strategies for hearing loss services. However, one in 10 respondents in England and one in seven in Wales do not gather any service feedback from people with hearing loss.

## Meeting need

Eligibility criteria thresholds set the level of need that must be met to receive social care from an authority. To cover all levels of need we asked about the support offered to those who do and do not meet this threshold. We also asked authorities if their Resource Allocation System (RAS), which decides the resources needed to arrange support, allocates points for communication needs.

### Support for people with hearing loss who do meet the eligibility criteria

All respondents in England and Wales said they provide equipment for people with hearing loss who meet the eligibility criteria. A high proportion said they offer services such as social work and support planning. Some local authorities also told us about a range of services they offer including rehabilitation support, family signing classes and peer support groups, however the range varies across local authorities. In England and Wales, at least one in four do not offer advocacy support and more than one in 10 do not offer crucial interpreting support for people with hearing loss.

### Support for people with hearing loss who do not meet the eligibility criteria

Almost all local authorities in the sample in England (98%) and all in Wales said they offer information and advice on equipment for the home for people with hearing loss who do not meet the eligibility criteria. A high proportion in England and all respondents in Wales said they offer signposting to other hearing loss charities, organisations and community support networks. Some local authorities told us about other forms of support, including coping mechanisms and communication skills. However, more than one in four respondents in England (28%) and three out of eight (37%) in Wales said they do not offer signposting to lipreading classes. Almost one in five (18%) in England and one in four in Wales said they do not offer information on Access to Work. These findings suggest there is a lack of join up with services to support independent living and economic inclusion.

### Resource allocation

In England, fewer than half of the respondents (46%), and in Wales, two out of three, said the RAS they use for personal budgets allocates points for communication support needs. The remainder said their RAS does not, or they do not know, meaning many people living in these local populations are unlikely to have the costs of their communication needs met.

## Access to services

Service accessibility is affected by how people find out about services for those with hearing loss and the choice of where assessments for adult social care services take place. For British Sign Language (BSL) users, the provision of a fully qualified BSL interpreter is key to accessing services.

### Information

As well as providing information on their websites, some local authorities told us about a rich network of routes through which people can find out about the services they offer for those with hearing loss, including referrals and signposting from health professionals, third sector organisations and community networks. But the research revealed that a quarter of respondents in England and three quarters of respondents in Wales do not offer a bespoke telephone or textphone number for people with hearing loss. This means people with hearing loss may face difficulties finding out about services from their home.

### Assessment

Almost all respondents in England (98%) and all respondents in Wales said that need assessments can take place in the home. Some local authorities also told us about a range of other locations and community settings where assessments can take place, such as community centres, residential care homes or hospitals. This demonstrates a drive to personalise care and support, which should be shared amongst all authorities.

### BSL users

In England and Wales, when a service user needs information or an assessment, in some cases a team member trained to interpreter level (level 6) in BSL is available. But in the majority of cases the service is delivered by an underqualified interpreter, either a member of the team with no formal BSL training or up to level 3 BSL, or a friend or family member. Better processes must be introduced to book proper communication support where it is needed.

## Service cuts

Government cuts have led to funding pressures on all local authorities and a rise in some eligibility criteria thresholds. We asked about any cuts to services for people with hearing loss that have been made or are likely to be made in the future.

In England, 20% of respondents reported cuts to services for people with hearing loss in the 18 months leading up to June 2012. Some 70% of the sample did not know if future cuts were planned in the months leading up to June 2014. In Wales, one in eight authorities said they had been subject to funding cuts in the 18 months leading up to August 2012 and one in eight said services are likely to be subject to cuts in the lead up to August 2014. Three in eight were unsure if services would be subject to funding cuts in this period. Cutting support services for people with hearing loss will lead to reduced quality of life and higher costs in the longer term, since individuals will need more expensive services if they are not properly supported to stay healthy and socially engaged.

## Recommendations

There are many ways in which local authorities can provide the support that people with hearing loss need, and no one model fits all. However, increased pressures on funding, rising eligibility criteria thresholds and an ageing population mean this is a critical time to highlight the importance of well-planned, accessible social services for people with hearing loss that allocate resources in a cost-effective way. Based on the findings, we have a number of recommendations.

- All local authorities should assess the needs of local people with hearing loss and put in place plans to engage with and provide high-quality services for this population. In England, hearing loss should appear in all local authorities' JSNAs.
- Hearing services should be joined up and person-centred to ensure all people with hearing loss get the information and support they need to stay healthy and well. People should not be excluded from the support they need because of changes to eligibility criteria thresholds.
- The RAS used by each local authority should allocate proper resources for communication support for all those who would benefit.
- Where reforms aim to personalise care and support, this should include providing a choice of services and service settings for people with hearing loss, ensuring that they have proper access and the information they need to make an informed choice.
- People with hearing loss should have the same level of access to social services as hearing people. BSL users should always be provided with a fully qualified BSL interpreter.
- Governments, commissioners and local authorities must protect and improve access to care and support in a way that is cost effective and supports people's communication, dignity and independence. It is a false economy to cut vital services.
- Local authorities should ensure good outcomes by monitoring and evaluating their own services and sharing good practice across areas.

## Introduction

Hearing loss and deafness can lead to barriers to inclusion and feelings of isolation. Hearing loss more than doubles the risk of depression in older people. People with mild hearing loss also have nearly double the chance of developing dementia and this risk increases significantly for those with moderate and severe hearing loss.

Many people with severe hearing loss have one or more additional long-term conditions; managing hearing loss well is crucial to managing other health issues effectively. The social care and support provided through local authorities are essential to many people with hearing loss so they can stay healthy and well. The right support at the right time can transform people's lives. It can give them the independence to enjoy life in their own homes, ensuring they are able to get help when they need it, and allowing them to play an active role in their communities.

The organisation and provision of services varies across local authorities. In some areas, services have come under increased pressure from government spending cuts. At the same time, an ageing population means that the number of people with age-related hearing loss and other long-term conditions is increasing.

Action on Hearing Loss is the charity working for a world where hearing loss doesn't limit or label people. We wanted to build a picture of whether local authorities in England and Wales assess levels of need and make plans to support people with hearing loss. We also wanted to know if the services local authorities offer meet the needs of people with hearing loss and whether they are accessible. In addition, we wanted to find out how these cuts are affecting services for people with hearing loss. We carried out this research with the support of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS).

This research will help us to support the best possible delivery of adult social care and support for people with hearing loss in this difficult financial environment, and provide a valuable reference point for future research.

There are many ways in which local authorities can provide the support that people with hearing loss need, and no one model fits all. However, proper engagement with and planning to meet the needs of people with hearing loss is a necessary first step to securing high-quality services. Hearing services should be joined up and person-centred to ensure people with hearing loss get the information and support they need to stay healthy and well. Services across the board should be fully accessible to people with hearing loss, and local authorities should consider the communication needs of people with hearing loss when allocating resources.



The aims of the research were to assess a number of areas.

### **Understanding need**

We wanted to find out if:

- the joint strategic needs assessments (JSNAs) used by local authorities assess the needs of the local population with hearing loss
- local authorities have a documented strategy to address sensory loss or hearing loss
- local authorities gather feedback from service users about their hearing services.

### **Meeting need**

We wanted to find out:

- the forms of support local authorities provide or fund for people with hearing loss who do meet the eligibility criteria
- the forms of support local authorities provide or fund for people with hearing loss who do not meet the eligibility criteria
- if the communication support needs of people with hearing loss are properly accounted for within the Resource Allocation Systems (RAS) that local authorities use.

### **Access to services**

We wanted to find out:

- how people find out about the services for people with hearing loss that local authorities offer
- whether people with hearing loss have a choice of where they have their assessments for adult social care services
- if British Sign Language (BSL) users are always provided with a fully qualified BSL interpreter when they need information or assessment.

### **Service cuts**

We wanted to find out if:

- local authorities had made cuts to their hearing services
- services for people with hearing loss are likely to be subject to cuts in the near future.

We surveyed heads of adult sensory services in local authorities in England and Wales. In England, we collected the results between May and June 2012. Of the 152 local authorities, 64 responded to the survey – a 43% response rate. In Wales, we collected the results in August 2012. Of the 22 local authorities we surveyed, eight responded – a 36% response rate. While these are the total numbers that responded to the survey, not every authority answered every question.

## Findings

### Understanding need

Hearing loss should be included in the local needs assessment so local service planning reflects the level of need of the local population with hearing loss. Local authorities should make plans for hearing services and people with hearing loss in their area and people with hearing loss should be involved in service design and commissioning.

### JSNA

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 requires PCTs and local authorities in England to produce a JSNA of the health and wellbeing of their local community. JSNAs aim to improve the health and wellbeing of the local community and reduce inequality through strategic assessment and planning. They also underpin local commissioning plans.

We asked local authorities in England if hearing loss appears as a specific issue in their JSNA. In England, 60 authorities responded. One-third said hearing loss appears as a specific issue; more than a quarter said it does not; and almost two-fifths did not know. JSNAs are not part of Welsh health policy and we did not ask this question in Wales.

Does hearing loss appear as a specific issue in your JSNA? (England)	
Yes	35% (21)
No	28% (17)
Don't know	37% (22)

### Sensory strategies

We asked local authorities if they have a documented strategy in place to address sight loss, hearing loss or both. Where respondents selected 'no', we asked them to indicate if one or more of the above strategies are in development. In England, 54 authorities responded. Around half said they have a sensory loss strategy and around a quarter said they have a dedicated hearing loss strategy. But almost four in 10 authorities said they have no sensory loss strategy at all.

Do you have a documented strategy in place to address any of the following? (England)	
Yes, sensory loss (a combined strategy including sight and hearing loss)	52% (28)
Yes, sight loss	28% (15)
Yes, hearing loss	24% (13)
No sensory loss strategy	39% (21)

In Wales, six authorities responded. A similar picture emerged. Half have a sensory loss strategy and one out of the six said they have a dedicated hearing loss strategy. But one-third said they have no sensory loss strategy at all.

Do you have a documented strategy in place to address any of the following? (Wales)	
Yes, sensory loss (a combined strategy including sight and hearing loss)	50% (3)
Yes, sight loss	17% (1)
Yes, hearing loss	17% (1)
No sensory loss strategy	33% (2)

In some cases in England and Wales, strategies are under review, in development, or form part of a wider, joint, long-term conditions or physical and sensory disability strategy.

### Feedback

We asked local authorities if they gather feedback about the sensory services they provide to people with hearing loss. Where authorities responded 'yes', we asked them to briefly describe how they collect feedback. In England, 58 authorities responded. Most said they do collect feedback, in a variety of forms, but 10% do not gather feedback at all.

Does the authority gather feedback about the sensory services it provides to people with hearing loss? (England)	
Yes	76% (44)
No	10% (6)
Don't know	14% (8)

In Wales, seven authorities responded. Most gather feedback in a variety of forms, but one said it does not collect feedback at all.

Does the authority gather feedback about the sensory services it provides to people with hearing loss? (Wales)	
Yes	86% (6)
No	14% (1)
Don't know	0% (0)

Forms of feedback included written feedback, such as surveys, questionnaires and comments and complaints leaflets, and face-to-face feedback such as focus groups and consultation events with service users. Some local authorities revealed innovations where service users feed directly into need assessments and strategies:

**“Our service users are involved in a county strategy group, which is currently writing a hearing loss section for inclusion in the JSNA.”**

**“Our service users are being invited to take part in JSNA focus groups. Our Physical Disability and Sensory Issues Board has people with hearing loss represented on it.”**

**“We held a ‘sensory confrontation event’ to gather people’s views on current services and gaps in provision. Following on from this we have a sensory development worker in place to liaise with groups to inform the strategy, which is currently being updated.”**

## Meeting need

Local authorities should offer services and support, and information and guidance on all services on offer, including those promoting economic inclusion and independent living, to support people with hearing loss. This is more important than ever as access to social care in some areas becomes increasingly restricted because of rising eligibility thresholds. Furthermore, each local authority’s selected RAS should allocate adequate funding to support people’s communication needs.

## Eligibility criteria

Local authorities use a banding system (critical, substantial, moderate, low) to determine eligibility for services, but have discretion to set their threshold individually within these bands, taking account of their resources, local expectations and costs. This creates variation in access to care across local authority borders. Eligibility thresholds among local authorities have slowly gone up since they were introduced in 2003. In 2011-12, Age UK research found that the majority (119) set the threshold at substantial; 25 set it at moderate; five set it at critical and three councils set it at low<sup>1</sup>. We wanted to assess what is on offer for people, whether or not they meet the eligibility criteria.

## Support for people with hearing loss who do meet the eligibility criteria

We asked local authorities about the forms of support they provide or fund for people with hearing loss who do meet the eligibility criteria. In England, 62 authorities responded. All said they provide equipment; almost all said they offer advice and social work and support; and three-quarters offer occupational therapy. However, more than 25% do not offer advocacy and more than 10% do not offer interpreting for people with hearing loss.

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<sup>1</sup> Age UK: ‘Social Care eligibility thresholds briefing’ 2012

What forms of support for people with hearing loss who do meet the eligibility criteria does your authority provide or fund? (England)	
Equipment provision	100% (62)
Advice	97% (60)
Social work and social support	95% (59)
Support planning	89% (55)
Interpreting	87% (54)
Occupational therapy	76% (47)
Advocacy	71% (44)
Home visitor scheme	27% (17)
Counselling	18% (11)

In Wales, eight authorities responded. All said they provide equipment, and offer advice, social work and support, and occupational therapy. As in England, however, 25% do not offer advocacy and more than 10% do not offer interpreting for people with hearing loss.

What forms of support for people with hearing loss who do meet the eligibility criteria does your authority provide or fund? (Wales)	
Equipment provision	100% (8)
Advice	100% (8)
Social work and social support	100% (8)
Occupational therapy	100% (8)
Interpreting	88% (7)
Support planning	75% (6)
Advocacy	75% (6)
Counselling	38% (3)
Home visitor scheme	25% (2)

Authorities across England and Wales told us about a broad range of other forms of support that they offer, including:

- coping mechanisms and communication skills
- specialist rehabilitation and support for people who are hard of hearing with additional needs
- family/carer education on communication skills
- peer support through user groups
- specialist tenancy support
- equipment demonstrations for wardens of residential homes
- community outreach support
- referrals for counselling
- family signing classes, social groups and carers' activities
- enhanced support work for people with severe hearing loss
- technical advice and support
- interpreting to assist with the assessment process
- specific hearing loss reablement
- specialist floating support for dual sensory loss and BSL users.

Some comments indicated a move towards personalisation and individual budgets:

**“We give people an individual budget and they can choose how they meet their support needs.”**

### Support for people with hearing loss who do not meet the eligibility criteria

We also asked local authorities about the kind of support they offer to adults with hearing loss that do not meet the eligibility criteria. In England, 60 authorities responded. Almost all said they offer information and advice on equipment for the home and signposting to other agencies that deal with hearing loss. But more than a quarter do not offer advice about lipreading classes and almost one fifth do not offer information on Access to Work.

What kind of support do you offer to adults with hearing loss that do not meet the eligibility criteria? (England)	
Information and guidance on equipment for the home	98% (59)
Signposting to other charities or organisations that deal with hearing loss	97% (58)
Signposting to community support networks such as clubs for people who are deaf or hard of hearing or Hear to Help	93% (56)
Information and guidance on Access to Work	83% (50)
Signposting to lipreading classes	72% (43)

In Wales, eight authorities responded. All said they offer information and guidance on equipment for the home and signposting to other agencies that deal with hearing loss. But a quarter do not offer information on Access to Work and almost half do not offer signposting to lipreading classes.

What kind of support do you offer to adults with hearing loss that do not meet the eligibility criteria? (Wales)	
Information and guidance on equipment for the home	100% (8)
Signposting to other charities or organisations that deal with hearing loss	100% (8)
Signposting to community support networks such as clubs for people who are deaf or hard of hearing or Hear to Help	100% (8)
Information and guidance on Access to Work	75% (6)
Signposting to lipreading classes	63% (5)

Other services that local authorities across England and Wales told us they signpost or refer on to include:

- the regional association for sensory support
- universal support services such as Citizens Advice
- schemes run by BT and benefits advice services
- commissioned services such as Disability Advice and Disability Equipment Services
- Centres for Independent Living
- local support and sensory needs networks for people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- tenancy support
- third sector specialists such as Action on Hearing Loss and Deafblind UK
- BSL courses for adults and carers/family
- local online services directories
- community mobile advisory service
- equipment demonstration clinic
- neighbourhood access and prevention officers, who support people in their own homes
- user-led support groups
- regular duty and outreach duty sessions for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.



### Resource allocation

A RAS is a system which converts assessed needs into an amount of money the person is likely to need to arrange support. To support people with hearing loss, the RAS each local authority uses should allocate proper resources for communication support for all those who would benefit.

We asked local authorities whether the RAS they use for personal budgets allocates points for communication support needs. In England, 61 authorities responded. Less than half said the RAS they use does allocate points for communication support needs; just over two-fifths said that their RAS does not and the remainder do not know.

Does the RAS that you use for personal budgets allocate points for communication support needs? (England)	
RAS allocates points for communication support needs	46% (28)
RAS does not allocate points for communication support needs	41% (25)
Don't know	13% (8)

In Wales, three authorities responded. Two said their RAS allocates points for communication support needs, and one said it does not.

Does the RAS that you use for personal budgets allocate points for communication support needs? (Wales)	
RAS allocates points for communication support needs	67% (2)
RAS does not allocate points for communication support needs	33% (1)
Don't know	0% (0)

## Access to services

To make services fully accessible for people with hearing loss, information about the services should be widely available, there should be a choice of settings for personal assessments and proper communication support should be provided for BSL users.

### Information

Service information is crucial to improving integration across health and social care so that more people with diagnosed hearing loss benefit from equipment and services at the right time, to improve their communication and independence.

We asked local authorities to identify the different ways in which people can find out about the services they offer for people with hearing loss. In England, 64 local authorities responded.

Most local authorities said people can find out on their authority website, through a professional referral or through signposting by a hearing loss organisation. But the results showed that a quarter of the respondents do not offer a bespoke telephone or Minicom number, so people with hearing loss may face difficulties finding out information about services from their home.

How can people find out about the service for people with hearing loss that you offer? (England)	
Authority website	92% (60)
GP or audiologist referral	91% (59)
Referral by other hospital or community professionals, such as occupational therapists	91% (59)
Signposting by third sector organisations for people with hearing loss	89% (58)
A bespoke telephone or Minicom number for people with hearing loss	74% (48)
Signposting by outreach services for people with hearing loss	72% (47)

In Wales, eight local authorities responded. A similar picture emerged here, but three quarters of the respondents said they do not offer a bespoke telephone or Minicom number, representing a significant inequality in access.

How can people find out about the service for people with hearing loss that you offer? (Wales)	
Authority website	100% (8)
GP or audiologist referral	100% (8)
Referral by other hospital or community professionals, such as occupational therapists	100% (8)
Signposting by third sector organisations for people with hearing loss	88% (7)
A bespoke telephone or Minicom number for people with hearing loss	25% (2)
Signposting by outreach services for people with hearing loss	50% (4)

Other ways in which people can find out about services offered by authorities across England and Wales include:

- clubs for people who are deaf or hard of hearing and local societies for people with visual impairments
- adult education lipreading classes
- information and equipment demonstrations at local information days and events
- word of mouth from carers, other professionals, friends, family, other service users and members of the deaf or hard of hearing community
- referrals via customer services centres, Centres for Independent Living, deafness support networks and previous authorities
- self-referral via an adult services duty information team
- consultation events with people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- forums and enablement service websites for people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- leaflets and posters about services in places such as surgeries and libraries
- awareness-raising talks at housing with care units and day centres
- signposting via advocacy services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

## Assessments

Assessments enable individuals' social needs to be properly identified and met. To help people achieve personalised care and support, they should have a choice of locations where this can be assessed including in the home and other locations.

We asked where assessments take place. In England, 62 local authorities responded. The results show assessments can almost always take place in the home, or alternatively where the service is based or in a community location.

Where do assessments take place? (England)	
In the home	98% (61)
In the location where the services is based	55% (34)
In a community centre or setting	53% (33)

In Wales, eight authorities responded and a similar picture emerged.

Where do assessments take place? (Wales)	
In the home	100% (8)
In the location where the services is based	50% (4)
In a community centre or setting	38% (3)

Other places where assessments can take place across England and Wales include: audiology clinics, hospitals, residential care homes, sheltered accommodation, independent living centres, resource centres, deaf trusts, a sensory bus and a one-stop-shop. One authority said the assessment can take place wherever the client wants.

### BSL users

The Equality Act 2010 requires service providers to make reasonable adjustments to make their services accessible to people who are disabled. It states that they must anticipate and promote these adjustments rather than simply responding to needs. Local authorities should ensure their services are fully accessible to people with hearing loss and consider the communication needs of people with hearing loss in their allocation of resources.

People with hearing loss may require communication support to take part effectively at appointments, meetings or other events. BSL users should always be provided with a fully qualified BSL interpreter who is registered with the National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD).

We asked local authorities what happens when a BSL user needs information or assessment. In England, 60 local authorities responded. In a significant proportion of cases, a BSL interpreter booked through a council contract delivers the service. In some cases, a member of the team trained to interpreter level in BSL is available. But in the majority of cases the service is delivered by an underqualified interpreter: a member of the team with no formal BSL training or up to level 3 in BSL, or sometimes a friend or family member who interprets on behalf of the client.

What happens in your service when a BSL user needs information or assessment? (England)	Information	Assessments
A member of the team with no formal BSL or up to level 1 BSL	23% (14)	13% (8)
A member of the team trained to level 2 or 3 in BSL	77% (46)	68% (41)
A member of the team trained to interpreter level in BSL	15% (9)	17% (10)
A BSL interpreter booked through a council contract	60% (36)	70% (42)
A friend or family member interprets on behalf of the client	22% (13)	10% (6)
Don't know	5% (3)	2% (1)

In Wales, eight authorities responded and a similar picture emerged.

What happens in your service when a BSL user needs information or assessment? (Wales)	Information	Assessments
A member of the team with no formal BSL or up to level 1 BSL	13% (1)	13% (1)
A member of the team trained to level 2 or 3 in BSL	63% (5)	63% (5)
A member of the team trained to interpreter level in BSL	13% (1)	25% (2)
A BSL interpreter booked through a council contract	100% (8)	75% (6)
A friend or family member interprets on behalf of the client	25% (2)	13% (1)
Don't know	0% (0)	0% (0)

## Service cuts

### Cuts to local authority services for people with hearing loss

Under the coalition's spending cuts, local authorities have been facing funding pressures. We wanted to know how these cuts are affecting services for people with hearing loss. Ensuring proper funding for services that enable people to access services and live independently is important. Without these services, people are more likely to need more acute services, reducing their quality of life and leading to higher costs.

We asked local authorities if services for people with hearing loss have been subject to funding cuts in the past 18 months. Where local authorities replied 'yes' to this question, we asked them to outline the extent of these cuts and how they have adapted the service. In England, 60 authorities responded. One in five reported cuts to services for people with hearing loss in the 18 months leading up to May and June 2012.

#### Have services for people with hearing loss been subject to funding cuts in the last 18 months? (England)

Yes	20% (12)
No	70% (42)
Don't know	10% (6)

Local authorities mentioned a range of areas in which they had made cuts. In one case, an authority described more effective joint working as a result of the cuts. But other reported effects included: an increase in eligibility criteria thresholds; a reduction in equipment provision; a reduction in externally commissioned service contracts; back-office and staffing cuts; and service restructure.

In Wales, eight authorities responded, of which one (12%) said that it had been subject to funding cuts in the past 18 months.

#### Have services for people with hearing loss been subject to funding cuts in the last 18 months? (Wales)

Yes	12% (1)
No	88% (7)
Don't know	0% (0)

### Future cuts

We went on to ask local authorities if services for people with hearing loss are likely to be subject to funding cuts in the next two years. In England, 60 authorities responded. Only 3% said services are likely to be subject to cuts, while 70% are uncertain whether they will face cuts in the coming two years.

#### Are services for people with hearing loss likely to be subject to funding cuts in the next two years? (England)

Yes	3%	(2)
No	27%	(16)
Don't know	70%	(42)

In Wales, eight authorities responded. Of these, one (12%) said services are likely to be subject to cuts and three (38%) said they are uncertain.

#### Are services for people with hearing loss likely to be subject to funding cuts in the next two years? (Wales)

Yes	12%	(1)
No	50%	(4)
Don't know	38%	(3)

## Discussion

There are many ways in which local authorities can provide the support that people with hearing loss need and no one model fits all. These findings include examples of good practice in the way adult social services are provided for people with hearing loss. Other local authorities should learn from these examples, to ensure that people with hearing loss receive consistently high-quality services across England and Wales.

### Understanding need

In England, only one-third of respondents said hearing loss does appear as a specific issue in their JSNA. This indicates that there are many local authorities that may not be assessing their local population's level of need for services. They may benefit from changes to their JSNA.

In both England and Wales, less than half of the respondents said they have a sensory loss strategy. Around one in four in England and one out of six in Wales said they have a strategy dedicated to hearing loss. All local authorities should draw on needs assessments and feedback to create plans to provide high-quality services for people with hearing loss. In this sample, local authorities employ a wide range of methods to collect service user feedback and there are innovative examples where service users feed directly into need assessments and strategies for hearing loss services. But one in 10 respondents in England and one out of seven in Wales do not gather feedback and could learn from the methods used by other local authorities.

### Meeting need

It is positive that all respondents in England and Wales said they provide equipment for people with hearing loss who meet the eligibility criteria and a high proportion also offer social and support work and occupational therapy. A wide range of other support services were offered by individual authorities, such as rehabilitation, family signing classes and peer support groups. However, access to these services varies across local authority boundaries. Furthermore, in both England and Wales, at least 25% do not offer any advocacy support and more than 10% do not offer crucial interpreting support for people with hearing loss. Every local authority should provide these core services, along with a range of other useful support services.

For people with hearing loss who do not meet the eligibility criteria, almost all respondents in England and all in Wales said they offer information and advice on equipment for the home. Most in England and all respondents in Wales offer signposting to other hearing loss charities, organisations and networks. Some authorities offer other effective forms of support, such as training in coping mechanisms and communication skills. These services should be more widespread. It is concerning that not all authorities offer signposting to lipreading classes and Access to Work, as these are important services to support independent living and economic inclusion for people with hearing loss.



All local authorities must offer vital support planning and interpreting services for people who are eligible. But as criteria thresholds in many areas exclude those in need of services, consistent signposting to, and provision of, general (non-exclusive) services will be increasingly important. Local authorities should replicate more widely the good examples of services that are on offer in particular areas.

Less than half of respondents in England and two-thirds in Wales said the RAS they use for personal budgets allocates points for communication support needs. The remainder said the RAS does not, or they do not know, meaning that many local authorities are not allocating adequate resources for people with hearing loss; for example, interpreting services for those who require communication support for daily living. The RAS used by each local authority should allocate proper resources for communication support for all those who would benefit.

### **Access to services**

People with hearing loss should have the same level of access to social services as hearing people. Almost all local authorities provide information on their websites about the services they offer. Some also told us about a rich network of routes through which people can find out about their services for people with hearing loss, including through referrals and signposting from GPs, audiologists and other hospital or community professions, third sector organisations and community clubs, events and informal networks. These provide examples of good practice which should be used by all local authorities to improve access to services. Local authorities should engage with people with hearing loss about their preferred information channels and further research is needed into the levels of service take-up.

It emerged from the research that a quarter of respondents in England and three-quarters of respondents in Wales do not offer a bespoke telephone or Minicom number for people with hearing loss. All councils should provide bespoke telephone or textphone numbers for people with hearing loss to ensure they have equal access to information and services.

Across almost all respondents in England and all respondents in Wales, need assessments can take place in the home. Some authorities also told us about a range of other locations and community settings where assessments can take place, such as community centres, in the service location, residential care homes, hospitals, audiology clinics or independent living centres. This demonstrates a drive by some local authorities to personalise care and support, which is good practice that all authorities should follow.

BSL users should always be provided with a fully qualified BSL interpreter. In most cases in England and Wales, when a service user who has BSL as a first language needs information or an assessment, the service is delivered by an underqualified interpreter or a friend or family member. This situation needs to be improved and monitored, with better processes put in place to book proper communication support where it is needed. It is clear that many local authorities are not providing reasonable adjustments for people with hearing loss. Local authorities risk complaints and legal proceedings if they do not meet their legal duty by providing properly qualified BSL interpreters and sufficient communication support where it is needed. Further research is required into whether local authorities hold contracts with fully qualified interpreters.

### **Service cuts**

This is a critical time to highlight the importance of well-planned, cost-effective and accessible social services for people with hearing loss. In England, one in five respondents reported recent cuts to services for people with hearing loss. In both England and Wales, there are high levels of uncertainty about whether cuts will affect services in the future.

Cutting support services for people with hearing loss will lead to reduced quality of life and higher costs in the longer term, since individuals will need more expensive services if they are not properly supported to stay healthy and socially engaged. Continued monitoring will be needed to ensure that further cuts are not made to these services.

There is a worrying trend that eligibility criteria thresholds are being raised, and there is a need to ensure that people who rely on services to stay well and live independently are not excluded. With such variation in the services and information provided, there is a need to ensure consistently good outcomes across areas, through good monitoring, evaluation and sharing of good practice.

## Recommendations

There are many ways in which local authorities can provide the support that people with hearing loss need, and no one model fits all. However increased pressures on funding, rising eligibility criteria thresholds and an ageing population mean this is a critical time to highlight the importance of well-planned, accessible social services for people with hearing loss that allocate resources in a cost-effective way. Based on the findings, we have a number of recommendations.

- All local authorities should assess the needs of local people with hearing loss and put in place plans to engage with and provide high-quality services for this population. In England, hearing loss should appear in all local authorities' JSNAs.
- Hearing services should be joined up and person-centred to ensure all people with hearing loss get the information and support they need to stay healthy and well. People should not be excluded from the support they need because of changes to eligibility criteria thresholds.
- The RAS used by each local authority should allocate proper resources for communication support for all those who would benefit.
- Where reforms aim to personalise care and support, this should include providing a choice of services and service settings for people with hearing loss, ensuring that they have proper access and the information they need to make an informed choice.
- People with hearing loss should have the same level of access to social services as hearing people. BSL users should always be provided with a fully qualified BSL interpreter.
- Governments, commissioners and local authorities must protect and improve access to care and support in a way that is cost effective and supports people's communication, dignity and independence. It is a false economy to cut vital services.
- Local authorities should ensure good outcomes by monitoring and evaluating their own services and sharing good practice across areas.

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**Telephone 0808 808 0123**

**Textphone 0808 808 9000**

**Email [information@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:information@hearingloss.org.uk)**