



# Improving attitudes to hearing loss in the workplace

by Laura Cook

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants who were interviewed for this research.

## Executive summary

Of the 11 million people in the UK with hearing loss, almost five million are of working age (Action on Hearing Loss, 2015). But, as a direct result of the condition, someone with hearing loss can lose their job (Matthews, 2011) or find it difficult to find one (RNID, 2008). One reason for this is employer attitudes towards hearing loss – in our previous research, this was identified as a major barrier in the workplace in nearly eight out of ten (79%) respondents (Arrowsmith, 2014).

We wanted to look a little deeper at this ‘attitude problem’ and compare the experiences of people with hearing loss with their employers’ perspective. We believe that a shift in employer attitudes is an important part of ensuring that people with hearing loss are able to go as far as their talents will take them.

In April 2016, we commissioned YouGov to survey British business leaders. We also conducted interviews with businesses to gain an understanding of the statistics, and an insight into good practice, which could be replicated across the country.

*Working for Change: Improving attitudes to hearing loss in the workplace* presents the findings of this research, along with recommendations. It serves as a contribution to the discussion around the government’s Green Paper, *Improving Lives* (DWP, 2016), providing responses to some of the questions posed by the government.

### **In the YouGov survey, and in the interviews we conducted, we asked about:**

- The confidence of employers to hire people with hearing loss
- The availability of information on employing people with hearing loss
- Awareness of Access to Work
- Support for people who develop hearing loss while in employment.

## Our findings

There is a lack of confidence among employers to hire people with hearing loss. A majority of those surveyed felt that there is not enough information or advice available.

The lack of confidence, and perceived lack of information, means that employers are fearful of employing people with hearing loss, as they don't understand their legal obligations. As one interviewee explains:

**“I think there’s quite a lot of fear out there ... about what questions to ask. From my experience, most people prefer an open conversation about what support they might need, rather than having no conversation at all. But because people are afraid of saying the wrong thing... the issues are not tackled.”**

Given this fear, it's significant that we discovered employers are unaware of the support that's available to them. It confirms our thinking that Access to Work is still the government's 'best-kept secret'. This is worrying as, potentially, many more people with hearing loss could benefit from the scheme in the workplace.

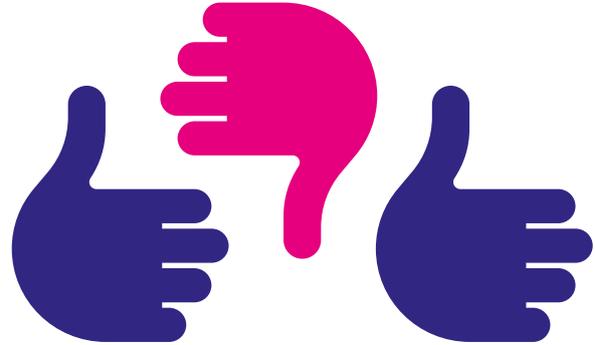
We also asked whether employers are prepared to support staff to remain in work as they get older. This is doubly pertinent – retirement age is rising, and hearing loss is more prevalent in people over 60.

Working in an unsupportive environment can mean that people feel they have to retire earlier than they would like. This can also be costly for employers, who lose highly skilled staff and have to recruit and train new team members. As one interviewee told us:

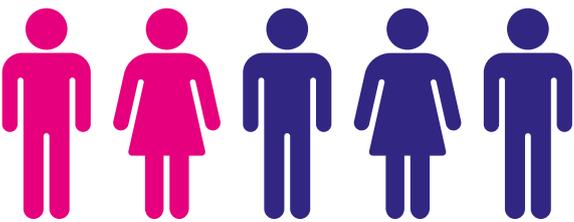
**“Why would we, as an employer, want to lose someone with excellent skills just because they develop hearing loss?”**



**Over half (57%)** of business leaders who responded to our YouGov poll **agree that there is a lack of support or advice** available for employers about employing someone with hearing loss



**Just over a third (35%)** of business leaders in our YouGov poll stated that they **do not feel confident** about their business employing a person with hearing loss



Our YouGov survey revealed a concerning result: **nearly two-fifths (39%) of business leaders don't feel well-equipped** to enable staff with hearing loss to stay productive in the workforce



Our YouGov survey found that **almost two-thirds (63%)** of all business leaders had **never heard of Access to Work**

## Our recommendations

To solve these issues, we recognise the need for a three-pronged approach from employers, government and people with hearing loss. As such, our recommendations are targeted at these groups. In particular, our recommendations provide solutions to some of the questions the government asks in the Green Paper around supporting employers to recruit with confidence.

### Recommendations to employers

- We call on employers to sign up to – and engage in – the Disability Confident scheme. This will provide them with useful resources on attracting, recruiting and retaining staff with hearing loss, as well as recognising the efforts they make to be accessible.
- We call on employers to seek advice on introducing employment policies and practice which are inclusive to people with hearing loss, and to consider deaf awareness training for all staff (especially if they work with a person with hearing loss).
- We recommend that employers use the Action on Hearing Loss myth-busting guide (which accompanies this report), to ensure their workplaces are inclusive of people with hearing loss.
- We recommend employers share their knowledge of supporting people with hearing loss in the workplace, and mentor other employers to become disability confident.
- We call on employers to develop internal policies on retaining employees who develop age-related disabilities (including hearing loss), or health conditions. Policies could include flexible working, job sharing, assistive technology or redeployment.

### Recommendations to government

- We call on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to conduct regular evaluation of the attitudes of employers to different disabilities (including hearing loss), in order to maximise and improve the impact of the Disability Confident campaign.
- We recommend that the DWP develops a rigorous and robust review process for Disability Confident to ensure businesses are delivering on their commitments.
- The DWP, as part of the Disability Confident campaign, should establish a disability information hub which consolidates all the information on the gov.uk website into a comprehensive guide on all disabilities, and where to find support. There should also be a free telephone helpline providing expert advice on employing disabled people, including people with hearing loss.
- The DWP should use bodies which represent small businesses in order to disseminate information on employing people with hearing loss.
- We recommend that the DWP embarks on a publicity campaign to ensure widespread awareness of Access to Work among employers.

## Recommendations to government (continued)

- The DWP should develop, as a priority, an information campaign on working into later life, in order to increase awareness of the ageing population in the workforce. This should include a focus on how employers can support staff who develop a hearing loss while in employment.

## Recommendation to people with hearing loss

- We call on people with hearing loss to have the confidence to tell their employer about their condition. They can use the Action on Hearing Loss guide to telling your employer you have a hearing loss for useful hints on how to do this or, for people with hearing loss who are out of work, our guide to using the Jobcentre.

## Recommendations to Action on Hearing Loss

- We will provide information and advice to employers on employing people with hearing loss, through dissemination of the myth-busting guide for employers.
- We will continue to support people with hearing loss through our employment support services across the UK.
- We will seek to influence government on the Green Paper, *Improving Lives*, and future priorities on the work and health agenda.

# Introduction

## Background

Of the 11 million people in the UK with hearing loss, almost five million are of working age (Action on Hearing Loss, 2015). Despite this high number, hearing loss can lead to a loss of employment (Matthews, 2011) and difficulty in getting work (RNID, 2008). One reason for these challenges is employer attitudes towards hearing loss – identified as a major barrier in the workplace by 79% of people with hearing loss in our previous research, *Hidden Disadvantage* (Arrowsmith, 2014). One respondent to the 2014 survey said:

“I retired to remove the stress from my life. It was difficult to maintain good communications with my hearing peers in the workplace and I often felt under-valued and under-appreciated.”

We wanted to look more closely at this problem and compare the experiences of people with hearing loss with their employers’ perspective. First, we commissioned a YouGov poll of business leaders and then we conducted interviews with leading businesses who employ people with hearing loss. From our findings, we’ve identified three main themes:

There is a lack of confidence among employers to hire people with hearing loss

There is a perceived lack of information and advice available on employing people with hearing loss

There is a lack of preparation to address the issues of the ageing workforce

From these themes, we make recommendations to employers, government and people with hearing loss, as well as setting out what we will do. We hope the recommendations to government will provide answers to questions posed in the Green Paper, ‘Improving Lives’. We believe that changing employer attitudes to hearing loss is an important part of ensuring that people who are affected are able to go as far as their talents will take them.

In our research, we asked about confidence in employing people with hearing loss, as well as access to information and advice. The results were clear: a substantial number of employers do **not** feel confident employing people with hearing loss, and there is a perceived lack of information or advice about doing so. This lack of confidence could have a big impact on employer attitudes to hearing loss. As well as presenting this research in

the report, we provide solutions and case studies to inspire employers to feel more confident about employing people with hearing loss.

We see the government's Green Paper, *Improving Lives*, as a positive step towards the ambition to halve the disability employment gap. However, we also highlight the need for more investment in, and promotion of, the two key tools available to do this: Access to Work and Disability Confident. Meaningful analysis of the impact that Disability Confident has had is also needed. We want to be sure that more people with hearing loss are finding sustainable employment.

Employers can be proactive and commit to being disability confident, which will give them access to a wealth of resources on employing people with disabilities. Where possible, disability confident employers should take the lead and provide advice and support to other companies. This would increase the number of organisations that feel confident to employ people with hearing loss.

We also want to see people with hearing loss having the confidence to explain their hearing loss, and their needs, to employers or potential employers. Doing so can overcome barriers in the workplace, and give organisations the confidence to talk about the challenges of hearing loss in an open and honest way.

The country faces the challenge of an ageing population and this will certainly be felt in the workforce. As people work longer, they are more likely to develop hearing loss while actively employed. It seems that not many businesses have planned for this. Society needs to prevent people with hearing loss taking early retirement, and we want to see the government and employers develop strategies which will ensure that employers are confident in retaining staff if they develop hearing loss during their working lives.

Above all, we want to see a coordinated approach between government, employers and people with hearing loss (as suggested by the government), which could lead to faster change than action coming from one direction at a time. This will support employers to have the confidence to recruit and retain staff with hearing loss, which will ensure that workplaces are inclusive and welcoming of people who are deaf or have a hearing loss.

To download or view the government's Green Paper, *Improving Lives*, visit [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/work-health-and-disability-improving-lives](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/work-health-and-disability-improving-lives)



## Methodology

In April 2016, Action on Hearing Loss commissioned YouGov to conduct a survey of British 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 GB businesses.

We also conducted interviews with five businesses to gain more understanding of the YouGov statistics. These interviews have given us an insight into excellent good practice (which is highlighted throughout this report), and which could be replicated in businesses across the country.

A cross-section of industry is represented in this research: we interviewed two utility companies, one wholesale retailer, one media company and one professional body. The format of the interviews was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews which took place in July and August 2016.

We use the term 'hearing loss' to refer to people with all levels of hearing loss, including people who are profoundly deaf and people who are hard of hearing.

## Section 1: Our research findings

### There is a lack of confidence among employers to employ people with hearing loss

We wanted to find out how confident businesses are in employing people with hearing loss so that we can better understand why people with the condition feel that the attitude of employers is a major barrier to work. With this information, we can then make recommendations to employers to ensure people with hearing loss are included in the workplace.

We found a considerable proportion of business leaders who responded to our YouGov poll (just over a third – 35%) lack the confidence to employ someone with hearing loss. To change this, it's essential that employers have the tools and resources to gain the necessary confidence. The government's Disability Confident campaign offers one way in which employers can find useful resources to support their knowledge and understanding of hearing loss.

The businesses we spoke to generally believe that this lack of confidence is reflected in workplaces nationwide. When we asked their reasons for this view, 'fear' was a commonly used word – employers might fear offending someone with hearing loss, so they don't ask the important questions about the individual's needs. Or, there's an assumption that it would be too costly or difficult to hire a person with hearing loss. One business interviewee stated that ignorance is a major barrier:

**"I think there's quite a lot of fear out there ... about what questions to ask. From my experience, most people prefer an open conversation about what support they might need, rather than having no conversation at all. But, because people are afraid of saying the wrong thing... the issues are not tackled."**

Debbie Caple  
HR Manager, Wessex Water

A nationwide survey conducted by the disability organisation, Purple, in June 2016 found that employers worry about breaking the law. When asked, "What would be your biggest personal worry when interviewing someone with a disability?", nearly a third (32%) of respondents cited using incorrect terminology. Just over a fifth (22%) of those surveyed said their biggest worry was breaking the law by asking questions not permitted by the Equality Act, or wider disability discrimination legislation (Purple, 2016).

## There is a perceived lack of information and advice available to employers

Employers need a good understanding of hearing loss, or at least know where to go for information about it, to feel more confident in this area. Over half (57%) of business leaders who responded to our YouGov poll agree that there is a lack of support or advice available for employers about employing people with hearing loss.

This evidence can also be found in other research. Results from a survey conducted by Reed in Partnership and Disability Rights UK revealed that nearly two-fifths (37%) of employers would find a single gateway for assistance and advice helpful in employing more disabled people in their organisation. The businesses interviewed were adamant that this is an issue that needs to be addressed, and the information must be easily accessible to employers, as Brad Taylor from CIPD said:

**“[Employers need] a ready source of information so if something comes up and the employer thinks, ‘How do I do that?’, there’s somewhere they can turn to: a website or helpline.”**

Brad Taylor, Head of People, CIPD

## There is a lack of awareness of the support that’s available

We also found that employers are not aware of the government support that’s available. Access to Work has previously been described as ‘DWP’s best-kept secret’ (Work and Pensions Committee, 2009) and our evidence shows that this remains the case. In our YouGov poll, we found that almost two-thirds (63%) of all business leaders had never heard of Access to Work. This lack of awareness is a matter for concern as the scheme can have a positive impact on people with hearing loss in the workplace and, potentially, many more people could benefit from a specialist work-based assessment, equipment, or form of communication support to help them fulfil their role at work.

In the survey conducted by Disability Rights UK and Reed, nearly half (49%) of employers said that additional funding for adaptations would help businesses to retain disabled people in employment (Disability Rights UK/Reed, 2016). In the survey of business leaders conducted by Purple, over a quarter (28%) of respondents said that concerns about the cost of adaptations would be the biggest barrier to employing someone with a disability (Purple, 2016).

Through our interviews, we found that, where businesses use Access to Work, it generally works well. Promoting the scheme was highlighted as a priority by the businesses involved in the interviews.

**“We need to showcase how Access to Work can support employers to employ people with hearing loss.”**

Graeme Whippy, Channel 4

## There is a lack of preparation for an ageing workforce

The DWP published data in August 2016 that there are now 9.4 million people in work aged 50–74 in the UK (DWP, 2016). Over a third (35%) of people in their 60s have hearing loss, which means that the likelihood of people developing hearing loss while in work is quite high, particularly as the state pension age is rising. Steps must be taken to ensure that if people develop hearing loss while in employment, they can continue to work for as long as they wish.

Our YouGov poll asked business leaders if they feel well-equipped to enable staff with hearing loss to stay productive in the workforce; nearly two-fifths (39%) stated that they do not. In fact, a significant proportion (17%) of those asked stated that they didn't know if they feel well-equipped or not. It's concerning that employers don't feel prepared, as people who develop hearing loss may leave work or take early retirement. Previously, we found that over two-fifths (41%) of people with hearing loss who had retired early said this was related to their hearing loss (Arrowsmith, 2014).

Retiring early is not only an issue for people who develop hearing loss. According to research by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), almost half a million people aged 60–65 are missing from the labour market because of ill-health or disability (TUC, 2016). The TUC analysis of ONS data suggests that almost half (49%) of 60–64 year olds have stopped working before their official retirement age – whether through choice, unavailability of work, or ill-health. If more people who developed hearing loss felt confident to discuss their needs and were supported to remain in work, this number could be reduced.

Failing to retain staff could also lead employers to lose highly skilled and experienced employees, creating additional costs in the recruitment and training of new staff. The organisations involved in this research understood how important it is to keep skills and knowledge in an organisation.

**“Why would we, as an employer, want to lose someone with excellent skills just because they develop hearing loss?”**

Debbie Caple  
HR Manager, Wessex Water

The next section of the report makes recommendations to employers, government and people with hearing loss. The recommendations can provide solutions to the issues explained above.



**Debbie Caple (not pictured),  
HR Manager at Wessex Water,  
explains the inherent supportive  
culture at the company:**

“Wessex Water has always been an open and supportive company with an almost familial culture. The company is growing, and we recognise the challenges in maintaining this; however, we feel confident we will do so because we have management who lead by good example, and guidance available for supporting a more diverse workforce. The Human Resources and Occupational Health teams are well-trained to provide support

to line managers, plus lot of disability information is included on the intranet, which staff can access at any time.

We are proud to have a very low turnover – some staff have been working here for 25 years or more. We recognise that our workforce is ageing, and so we need to retain experienced staff as well as attracting new people to the organisation. We encourage managers to have open conversations, to talk about what equipment is available, and to be prepared to make adjustments when required. The Human Resources team is always here for support.

We also run regular employment law updates for all senior managers which aims to keep staff up to date on current equality legislation, but also as a reminder of their responsibilities under the Equality Act.”

## Section 2: Our recommendations

### Recommendations to employers

#### 1. Employers should commit to being disability confident

It is important for managers to be open and honest about disability – but this does require confidence. Confidence comes from having knowledge, or from knowing where to go for support. By engaging with the Disability Confident campaign, employers could gain the knowledge they need.

Employers must have the confidence to know what to ask a person with hearing loss about their needs in the workplace, as this could avoid potential legal implications. Openness and honesty are, in fact, preferred by employees, which would prevent people with hearing loss feeling they have been discriminated against. Employers must take responsibility for understanding the Equality Act – the most practical way to do this is by engaging with the government’s Disability Confident campaign, which could provide employers with the information and resources they need to give them the confidence to recruit and retain people with hearing loss in their workforce.

As the case study shows, employer confidence comes from having good knowledge of disability which, in time, infiltrates the whole culture of an organisation. To start this culture shift, employers should take the initial step and commit to become disability confident.

**Recommendation to employers:** We call on employers to sign up to and engage in the Disability Confident scheme that will provide them with useful resources on attracting, recruiting and retaining staff with hearing loss, as well as recognising the efforts they make to be accessible.

**Recommendation to employers:** We recommend that employers use the Action on Hearing Loss myth-busting guide, which accompanies this report, to ensure their workplaces are inclusive of people with hearing loss.

#### 2. Employers should share their best practice with other businesses and become leaders in disability confidence

This report gives examples of companies that are aware of the needs of people with hearing loss and there are other businesses that demonstrate the same understanding. These examples must be publicised, and, where possible, the companies should take the lead and support other organisations to become confident to employ people with hearing loss.

One issue that can be daunting to employers is around making ‘reasonable adjustments’. Employers have obligations under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments

to a workplace to ensure that it offers an accessible environment for a disabled person. We need to ensure that employers understand what reasonable adjustments can be made for people with hearing loss, as well as realising that these need not be costly. Where organisations have made simple reasonable adjustments, these need to be promoted to, or shared with, other employers. Doing so could give a business the inspiration and confidence to employ a person with hearing loss.

Two organisations involved in this research have the **Louder than Words™** charter from Action on Hearing Loss.

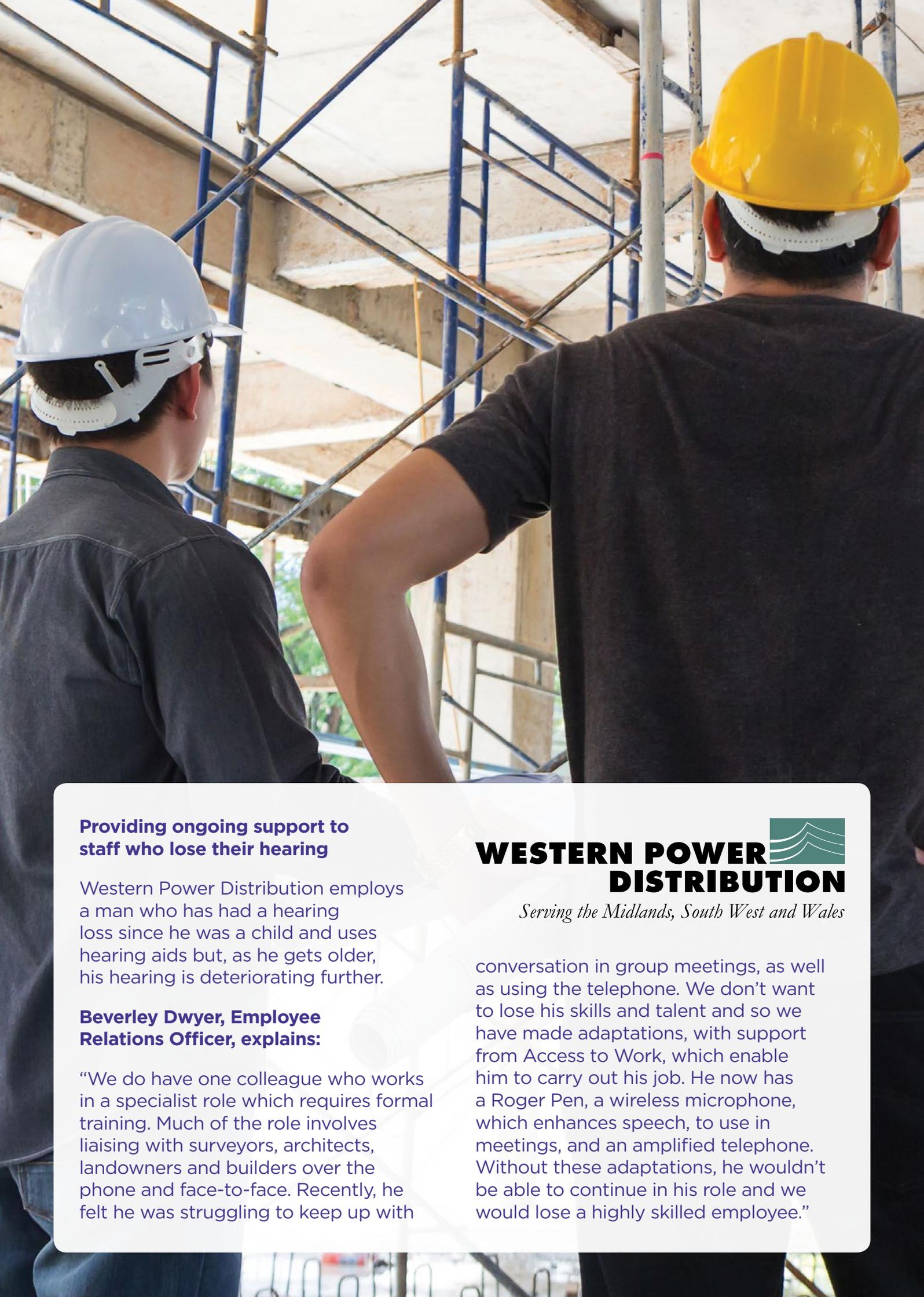
Both **Wessex Water** and **Western Power Distribution** successfully employ people with hearing loss. By going through the process of accreditation, they have had to examine their practices and environments in the workplace to ensure they are inclusive to people with hearing loss. Both organisations offer staff deaf awareness training and include information on hearing loss on their staff intranet. They have

also both had to consider their fire evacuation procedures; Western Power Distribution has introduced flashing fire alarms in the staff toilets, while Wessex Water has a buddy system to ensure any member of staff with hearing loss leaves the building safely.

Not only does the charter help organisations in adapting their working practices, it also shows that they are committed to offering a good customer service to all their clients with hearing loss.

The organisations we interviewed all had a good level of deaf awareness. There were some good examples of reasonable adjustments which were often simple and inexpensive, or even free, including:

- A woman with hearing loss who works at CIPD explained that her colleagues will book well-lit meeting rooms for team meetings to ensure that she can lipread.
- At Western Power Distribution, a woman who works in the customer service centre moved desks to a quieter area so she had no trouble hearing the other person on the telephone. The company has a hot-desking environment, but the employee has her own desk with access to her specialist equipment.



### **Providing ongoing support to staff who lose their hearing**

Western Power Distribution employs a man who has had a hearing loss since he was a child and uses hearing aids but, as he gets older, his hearing is deteriorating further.

#### **Beverley Dwyer, Employee Relations Officer, explains:**

“We do have one colleague who works in a specialist role which requires formal training. Much of the role involves liaising with surveyors, architects, landowners and builders over the phone and face-to-face. Recently, he felt he was struggling to keep up with

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conversation in group meetings, as well as using the telephone. We don't want to lose his skills and talent and so we have made adaptations, with support from Access to Work, which enable him to carry out his job. He now has a Roger Pen, a wireless microphone, which enhances speech, to use in meetings, and an amplified telephone. Without these adaptations, he wouldn't be able to continue in his role and we would lose a highly skilled employee.”

These changes are all relatively easy to make, but serve to highlight the positive impact they can have on a person's experience at work. Graeme Whippy from Channel 4 said in the interview, "It's often the simple things that make the biggest differences." But sometimes we need to be reminded of the sensible thing to do. If examples such as these can be shared between businesses, employers shouldn't feel as daunted by any potential changes they may need to make if they employ a person with hearing loss.

**Recommendation to employers:** We call on employers to seek advice on introducing employment policies and practice, which are inclusive to people with hearing loss, and to consider deaf awareness training for all staff, especially where they work with a person with hearing loss.

**Recommendation to employers:** We recommend employers share their knowledge of supporting people with hearing loss in the workplace, and mentor other employers to become disability confident.

### 3. Employers should develop policies that address the issue of the ageing workforce

Employers need to develop strategies on retaining older employees. As our research found, it makes good economic sense to retain staff who develop hearing loss, rather than incur considerable costs to recruit and train new staff. Therefore, it is paramount that employers consider how they can retain their employees as they age.

The organisations we interviewed have considered the future of their workforces. For example, flexible working was one option for the employers we spoke to, where an employee's needs had changed. Those interviewed said they'd be happy to make adaptations to a person's role, or look to assistive technology, in order to retain a member of staff in the organisation. All employers should be developing organisational policies in the event that members of staff develop hearing loss.

**Recommendation to employers:** We call on employers to develop internal policies on retaining employees who develop age-related disabilities, including hearing loss, or health conditions. Policies could include flexible working, job sharing, assistive technology or redeployment.

## Recommendations to government

### 1. Government must introduce a rigorous evaluation and review processes of Disability Confident

Disability Confident is at the core of improving attitudes to disability at work. We laud the government for opening up the discussion on employer attitudes to disability in its Green Paper. Our research shows employers remain tentative about employing people with hearing loss. The Disability Confident campaign was originally launched in 2013 as a central part of halving the disability employment gap and was based around MP constituency events to bring companies and local disability organisations together. In 2014, the then Minister for Disabled People, Mark Harper, wrote:

**“Over the second year of the campaign, we will continue to build on the reach of communications, but will also assess specific, measurable, action taken by employers as a result of the campaign.”**

(Hansard, 2014)

However, in June 2015, in response to a written question on the number of people who found work as a result of Disability Confident, the government changed its policy and wrote:

**“We are not able to measure the number of disabled people moving into employment as a direct result of it, but the campaign is an important contributor towards our commitment to halve the gap between the employment rates of disabled and non-disabled people.”**

(Hansard, 2014)

As a result, there is no evidence of the number of disabled people who have found employment through these events. This means, since 2013, we can't assess how successful the campaign has been, or identify areas for improvement. There is a need, then, for a clear and meaningful method of evaluating the Disability Confident campaign.

**Recommendation to government:** We call on the DWP to conduct regular evaluation of the attitudes of employers to different disabilities, including hearing loss, in order to maximise and improve the impact of the Disability Confident campaign.

In July 2016, the government relaunched Disability Confident, replacing the Two Ticks scheme. While we welcome this additional step for the campaign, Disability Confident must not become a simple box-ticking exercise for employers. Research in 2014 showed that the Two Ticks scheme was not delivering promises to people with disabilities; nearly a



fifth (18%) of companies signed up were not delivering on any of the commitments (Hoque, K and Bacon, N, 2014). The accreditation and review processes for Disability Confident must be rigorous and robust to ensure businesses are delivering on their commitments.

The Green Paper states that the government will take action to ‘ensure public sector employers monitor their recruitment, sickness absence and wellbeing activities...’ (DWP, 2016). While it would be a positive development for public services to report on the number of disabled people they employ, figures must be collected across all sectors. This will ensure we know how many disabled people are recruited and retained in any organisation. It could take the form of a disability index, as suggested in the Green Paper.

The Disability Confident scheme must also be promoted to people with hearing loss who may be unaware that Disability Confident has replaced Two Ticks. People with hearing loss must feel confident to apply for jobs with companies that may be sympathetic to their requirements in the workplace.

**Recommendation to government:** We recommend that the DWP develops a rigorous and robust review process for Disability Confident to ensure businesses are delivering on their commitments.

## 2. The government should establish a disability information hub as a central point for all information on disability

Employers told us they feel there is a lack of information and advice available on employing people with hearing loss. The government has already made positive steps to provide valuable resources on employing disabled people on the gov.uk website but information is dispersed across the site and not always easy to locate. Access to information is key to developing employers’ confidence to employ people with hearing loss. The government should bring this information together into one hub, or micro-site, on the gov.uk website.

**Recommendation to government:** The DWP, as part of the Disability Confident campaign, should establish a disability information hub consolidating all the information on the gov.uk website into a comprehensive guide on all disabilities, and where to find support. There should also be a free telephone helpline giving expert advice on employing disabled people, including people with hearing loss.

The information needs of organisations may depend on their size. Some medium and large organisations may have knowledgeable Human Resources (HR) teams but, for many small companies, this structure isn’t available. In 2015, 60% of all private sector employment was in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (BIS, 2015). The government has a role, therefore, to provide good-quality, clear information to those organisations that do not have the infrastructure of larger businesses. Information on employing people with hearing loss could be disseminated from government to small businesses via British Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. As well as working directly with local employers,

advisers in Jobcentre Plus must also take advantage of these existing networks to provide support and advice to small businesses.

**Recommendation to government:** The DWP should use bodies which represent small businesses in order to disseminate information on employing people with hearing loss.

### 3. The government should promote support that's already available

The low awareness of Access to Work among employers as highlighted in our research as a major concern. The scheme needs to be promoted by the government to ensure it has a wider reach to people with hearing loss.

The government also needs to promote Access to Work to employers, which could give them more confidence to employ people with hearing loss as they become aware of the support that is available.

**Recommendation to government:** We recommend that the DWP embarks on a publicity campaign to ensure widespread awareness of Access to Work among employers.

### 4. The government needs to address the issues of the ageing workforce

If more people feel forced into early retirement (as our research shows is often the case), there could be significant costs to the welfare state. The government must develop a strategy for ensuring that employers are prepared to support employees who develop hearing loss.

**Recommendation to government:** We recommend that the DWP develops, as a priority, an information campaign on working into later life to increase awareness of the ageing population in the workforce, with a focus on how employers can support their employees who develop a hearing loss while in employment.

Katie has worked at **Western Power Distribution (WPD)** for three years as a call centre customer service advisor. Her previous employer had not told her about Access to Work but WPD knew just what to do.

They arranged for Katie to have a work-based assessment, provided by Access to Work, where she was recommended a telephone amplifier and headset that best suited her needs.

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## Recommendation to people with hearing loss

### People with hearing loss must be confident to talk about their needs

People with hearing loss should be supported to feel confident to discuss their needs with their employer. If an employer offers a supportive environment, people with hearing loss may feel more confident to apply for a job in that organisation, and explain how their hearing loss affects them at work.

The effects of low confidence in how their employer might react can be detrimental to people with hearing loss. In research by Totaljobs, nearly one-in-five (19%) respondents said they hadn't told their employer about their hearing loss and a quarter (25%) of respondents stated they'd left a job due to discrimination (Totaljobs, 2016). While it could be difficult, people with hearing loss should feel they can discuss their needs with their colleagues, as this can break down the fear of the unknown and give confidence to employers.

In our interviews with people with hearing loss, we found that when they explain their daily challenges and needs to their employer, they tend to find that colleagues feel more confident and are open to finding solutions. One person said:

**“I supported my employer by being very clear about the challenges I face with a hearing loss – for example, on the phone, in large meetings, not being able to see someone’s face when listening to them.”**

Speaking to an employer about adjustments, as this quote demonstrates, can support their understanding of hearing loss, and give them the confidence to make changes in the workplace.

Similarly, people with hearing loss must also take some responsibility for ensuring they can remain in work if they develop hearing loss. Our previous evidence shows that many people with hearing loss retire earlier than they would like. The reasons they gave for retiring early (due to hearing loss) included difficulties in fulfilling day-to-day tasks, such as using the phone, or communication challenges with colleagues (Arrowsmith, 2014). People who develop hearing loss as they age must feel they can talk to employers about their needs in the workplace, which could encourage them to remain confident in work for as long as possible.

**Recommendation to people with hearing loss:** We call on people with hearing loss to have the confidence to tell their employer that they have developed a hearing loss. They can use Action on Hearing Loss' guide to telling your employer you have a hearing loss for useful hints on how to do this or, for people with hearing loss who are out of work, our guide to using the Jobcentre.

## Recommendations to Action on Hearing Loss

### 1. Action on Hearing Loss will continue to support employers and employees

Action on Hearing Loss provides specialist employment support across the UK. Through these services, we've successfully supported many people with hearing loss in sustainable employment. We must continue this and look for opportunities to develop these services further.

**Recommendation to Action on Hearing Loss:** We will continue to support people with hearing loss, through our employment support services across the UK.

We understand that, as the organisation with expertise in hearing loss, we have a role to play in raising awareness of the ways employers can support people with hearing loss. Through our YouGov research we identified some common misconceptions held by employers, and we wish to be the organisation that employers come to for high-quality information and advice on employing people with hearing loss. For this reason, we are publishing a myth-busting guide along with this report, which we will disseminate to employers to engage them with this campaign.

**Recommendation to Action on Hearing Loss:** We will provide information and advice to employers on employing people with hearing loss, through dissemination of the myth-busting guide for employers and our range of employer focused resources and services.

### 2. Action on Hearing Loss will continue to influence the government on the employment and disability agenda

As a campaigning organisation, we will continue to engage with the government on employment and disability policy. The Green Paper, *Improving Lives*, gives us the opportunity to join this discussion, bringing the needs of people with hearing loss to the attention of decision-makers.

**Recommendation to Action on Hearing Loss:** We will seek to influence government policy through our response to the Green Paper, *Improving Lives*, and future priorities on the work and health agenda.

## Conclusions

In this research, we set out to delve deeper into the attitudes of employers, particularly from the perspective of employers themselves. We identified three main themes from our research: a lack of confidence among employers to employ people with hearing loss; a perceived lack of information and support on employing people with hearing loss; and a lack of planning to support the ageing workforce.

It's pleasing that there are employers who are confident to employ people with hearing loss, and are effectively doing so. We are also pleased that the government has committed to halve the disability employment gap and the campaigns to support this ambition should give employers more confidence to recruit disabled people.

While we commend the government for opening up the discussions on employer attitudes to disability in the Green Paper, with regards to the Disability Confident campaign – a major part of the commitment to get more disabled people into work – we remain unclear about the impact this has had on the confidence of employers, and the numbers of disabled people who have found sustainable employment as a result. The government needs to consider how it will comprehensively evaluate the campaign, and ensure that it's not merely a box-ticking exercise. The campaign must demonstrate that organisations are gaining more confidence to employ people with hearing loss.

We do, however, encourage employers to engage in Disability Confident. Employers can be proactive by committing to become disability confident with DWP. With myths surrounding the Equality Act 2010, and a feeling there is a lack of information on hearing loss available, it is paramount that businesses can easily access guidance and advice to increase their confidence to employ people with hearing loss, without fear of saying the wrong thing. Disability Confident offers the resources and, by engaging in the campaign, employers can gain the confidence to attract, recruit and retain people with hearing loss in the workplace.

However, employers must not solely rely on government for support but, instead, look to leaders in their community. Employers who are confident in employing people with hearing loss must share their practice and ideas with other businesses. Mentoring opportunities can support employers to become confident in hiring and retaining people with hearing loss.

We also want to see employers and the government taking action to address the issues that will inevitably arise as people are working later into life. It is vital that businesses have the confidence to support colleagues as they age and, potentially, develop hearing loss.

Furthermore, people with hearing loss must feel empowered to talk about their needs in the workplace. By talking openly about their hearing loss and informing employers about their needs, they should feel enabled to carry out their role at work, or feel confident to apply for jobs.

Above all, it is important to remember that attitudes do not change quickly, and it may take time for employers to feel completely confident in supporting people with hearing loss at work. However, if the government, employers, people with hearing loss and the organisations which represent them all work together, as suggested by the government in the Green Paper, this is not an impossible task. To ensure employers have the confidence to employ people with hearing loss, we believe that government, employers and people with hearing loss must take action straight away. By doing so, we will improve attitudes to hearing loss in work, and give confidence to employers to employ people with hearing loss.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations to employers

- We call on employers to sign up to and engage in the Disability Confident scheme that will provide them with useful resources on attracting, recruiting and retaining staff with hearing loss, as well as recognising the efforts they make to be accessible.
- We call on employers to seek advice on introducing employment policies and practice that are inclusive to people with hearing loss, and to consider deaf awareness training for all staff, especially those who work with a person with hearing loss.
- We recommend that employers use the Action on Hearing Loss myth-busting guide, which accompanies this report, to ensure their workplaces are inclusive of people with hearing loss.
- We recommend employers share their knowledge of supporting people with hearing loss in the workplace, and mentor other employers to become disability confident.
- We call on employers to develop internal policies on retaining employees who develop age-related disabilities, including hearing loss, or health conditions. Policies could include flexible working, job sharing, assistive technology or redeployment.

### Recommendations to government

- We call on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to conduct regular evaluation of the attitudes of employers to different disabilities, which includes hearing loss, in order to maximise and improve the impact of the Disability Confident campaign.
- We recommend that the DWP develops a rigorous and robust review process for Disability Confident to ensure businesses are delivering on their commitments.
- The DWP, as part of the Disability Confident campaign, establishes a disability information hub consolidating all the information on the gov.uk website into a comprehensive guide on all disabilities, and where to find support. We also recommend a free telephone helpline which gives expert advice on employing disabled people, including people with hearing loss.

- The DWP should use bodies which represent small businesses in order to disseminate information on employing people with hearing loss.
- We recommend that the DWP embarks on a publicity campaign to ensure widespread awareness of Access to Work among employers.
- We recommend that the DWP develops, as a priority, an information campaign on working into later life to increase awareness of the ageing population in the workforce, with a focus on how employers can support their employees who develop a hearing loss while in work.

## Recommendation to people with hearing loss

- We call on people with hearing loss to have the confidence to tell their employer that they have developed a hearing loss. They can use Action on Hearing Loss's guide to telling your employer you have a hearing loss for useful hints on how to do this or, for people with hearing loss who are out of work, our guide to using the Jobcentre.

## Recommendations to Action on Hearing Loss

- We will provide information and advice to employers on employing people with hearing loss, through dissemination of the myth-busting guide for employers.
- We will continue to support people with hearing loss through our employment support services across the UK.
- We will seek to influence government on the Green Paper, *Improving Lives*, and future priorities on the work and health agenda.

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**Survey figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.** Total sample size was 618 GB senior decision makers (aged 18+). Fieldwork was undertaken between 4-8 April 2016. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all senior decision makers in GB businesses.

**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](http://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:

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