

# Policy position: access to health

Action on Hearing Loss is campaigning for an Accessible Information Standard for Northern Ireland, to improve access to health services for people who are deaf or have hearing loss.

## Background

Access to healthcare is a human right. Successive research reports have shown that for people with hearing loss, deafness and tinnitus, getting equal access to health services remains a problem. Things are improving, but there's still a lot to be done.

In 2004, Action on Hearing Loss published *A Simple Cure*,<sup>1</sup> which showed that 35% of people who are deaf or have hearing loss had been left unclear about their condition because of communication problems with their GP or nurse. In 2012, we published *Access All Areas? A report into the experiences of people with hearing loss when accessing healthcare*.<sup>2</sup> This showed an improvement in patient experience.

In the 2004 report, 24% of respondents had missed an appointment because they couldn't hear their name being called out. By 2012, this had reduced to 14%. The number of people who had been left unclear about the medical conditions they were seeking help for reduced by 7%, from 35% in 2004 to 28% in 2012.

In 2010, in partnership with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and the British Deaf Association (BDA) in Northern Ireland, we published *Is It My Turn Yet?*,<sup>3</sup> to identify what accessibility arrangements GP surgeries had put in place and how we could help them improve access to their services. Following that survey, GP practices requested practical guidance to help them improve accessibility, and so in 2014, in partnership with RNIB and the Health and Social Care Board, we published *Best Practice Guidance – creating accessible primary care services for people with sensory loss*.<sup>4</sup> The Health and Social Care Board sent the guide to every GP practice in Northern Ireland.

<sup>1</sup>*A Simple Cure. A national report into the deaf and hard of hearing people's experiences of the National Health Service*, RNID, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>*Access All Areas? A report into the experiences of people with hearing loss when accessing healthcare*, Action on Hearing Loss, 2012, [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports)

<sup>3</sup>*Is It My Turn Yet? Access to GP practices in Northern Ireland for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind or partially sighted*, RNID, RNIB, BDA, 2010 [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports)

<sup>4</sup>*Best Practice Guidance – creating accessible primary care services for people with sensory loss*, Action on Hearing Loss, RNIB, 2014, [www.hscboard.hscni.net/accessible-gp-services-for-people-with-sensory-loss](http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/accessible-gp-services-for-people-with-sensory-loss)

In 2018, we plan to update our research on the experiences of people who are deaf or have hearing loss when accessing GP services, to measure whether GPs have implemented our guidance and if patients have benefited.

## **Around the UK**

In 2016, in England, the Accessible Information Standard was introduced into law. It requires GP and NHS services to record their patients' communication needs, share that information with other services, and provide accessible communication methods.

In Wales, the All Wales Standards for Accessible Communication and Information for People with Sensory Loss makes clear that people with sensory loss in Wales should, as needed, be provided with appropriate support to contact services. This ensures they can communicate well during appointments and understand any information given.

In Scotland, the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 requires local authorities, including Scotland's NHS health boards, to publish British Sign Language Action Plans by October 2018. This may help improve access to health services for sign language users.

In Northern Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act (NI) 1995 gives people with disabilities (including those who are deaf or have hearing loss) important rights when visiting their GP or other NHS services. It also imposes a duty on GPs and other NHS services to make reasonable adjustments. However, access to GP surgeries is still difficult.

## **What needs to be done**

- We are calling on the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to introduce an Accessible Information Standard in Northern Ireland. It should ensure a consistent and specific approach to identifying, recording, flagging and sharing accessible information needs.
- Any Standard should be supported by a clear set of quality standards relating to the procurement and provision of sign language interpreters.
- GP and NHS services should ensure that procedures are in place to meet the communication needs of people with hearing loss, deafness and tinnitus, and that these are communicated to all staff.
- Staff working in health services should be provided with deaf awareness training.

## **For further information on the Access to Health campaign, please contact:**

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**Action on Hearing Loss is the trading name of The Royal National Institute for Deaf People.**

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