

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

**HIDDEN**  
**DISADVANTAGE**

**Why people with hearing loss are  
still losing out at work**

By Laura Arrowsmith

small. In fact the numbers of people working in the commission are fewer than work in the UK department of work and pensions, for example. I have forgotten the figures - it is something like 17,000, but it is a decent size metropolitan council, not some huge sprawling out of control machine. I mention it simply

DELL

# Contents

Executive summary	6
Introduction	11
<b>Section 1: Employment experiences</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Section 2: Support and adjustments at work</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Section 3: Barriers to employment</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Section 4: Our recommendations</b>	<b>31</b>
Appendix: Overview of respondents	34
Further Information	36



“I never declare my deafness in applications unless asked straight out. If I do, I never get an interview...”

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all our research panel members who took the time to complete the survey.

# Executive summary

Ten million people in the UK have hearing loss – that’s one in six of us. Often referred to as a ‘hidden’ disability, the barriers people with hearing loss face are not always obvious – but they’re very real. In this report we take a look at their experiences in the labour market – and suggest practical adjustments that the government and employers should make to support people to find jobs, and stay in them.

Disabled people are at a disadvantage in the labour market. They have significantly lower levels of employment – only 46% of working-age disabled people are in work, compared with nearly 80% of the wider workforce.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of the Labour Force Survey, a government survey of the employment circumstances of the UK population, found that people with hearing loss were less likely to be employed than people with no long-term health issue or disability.<sup>2</sup>

At Action on Hearing Loss, we’ve established a strong body of evidence about the barriers to employment, and keeping in employment, that people with hearing loss face. This report comes seven years after the research findings and recommendations outlined in *Opportunity Blocked* and three years after *Unlimited Potential*.<sup>3</sup>

In June 2013, we sent out an employment survey to the members of our research panel – a group of people who’ve signed up to take part in research on a regular basis. The panel consists of approximately 1,200 people across the UK, of all ages, most of them with different levels of hearing loss and tinnitus. In total, 442 respondents took part in the survey.

*Hidden Disadvantage* presents the findings of that survey, along with our subsequent recommendations. In the survey, we asked respondents about:

- their employment experiences
- support and adjustments at work
- views on barriers to employment.

Seventy per cent of respondents were hearing aid wearers, and 59% described themselves as ‘hard of hearing’. Only a very small proportion (just 3%) said they used British Sign Language (BSL). The findings, therefore, are based mainly on the experiences of hearing aid wearers; the experiences of profoundly deaf, BSL users may differ. This represents an area for potential future research.

## What we found

As with previous research, the 2013 survey found that having hearing loss can have a significant impact on people’s views and experiences of the workplace. Our findings demonstrate that hearing loss can force people to exit employment, prevent people from fulfilling their potential, and often leads to people feeling isolated at work. A number of respondents reported that they had retired early as a result of their hearing loss – one of

<sup>1</sup> Trotter, R. (2013) *Work in Progress: Rethinking employment support for disabled people.*

<sup>2</sup> Coleman, N., Sykes, W. and Groom, C. (2013) *Barriers to employment and unfair treatment at work: a quantitative analysis of disabled people’s experiences, EHRC.*

<sup>3</sup> Baker, M. (2007) *Opportunity Blocked*, RNID. Matthews, L. (2011) *Unlimited Potential*, Action on Hearing Loss.

the most striking findings from this survey and something that could be avoided if people had access to the right support. However, our findings show that many people with hearing loss are not making use of equipment and support that could help them in the workplace, and many respondents feel that the attitude of employers still presents substantial barriers.

Here’s a summary of some of our key findings<sup>4</sup>:

- In total, 442 respondents took part in this survey. Approximately two-fifths of respondents (42%) were working either full- or part-time.
- A large proportion, almost half of respondents (47%), reported that they were retired.
- Two-fifths (42%) of retired respondents had left work in the last five years. A large proportion of those in retirement had not retired recently, with around half (49%) reporting that they had been retired for between six and 20 years.
- A small proportion of respondents (11%) identified that they were not in employment (and not retired).
- Of those respondents who had retired, two-thirds (66%), said they retired ‘early’ and, of those, 41% said this was related to hearing loss.
- Reasons for early retirement (due to hearing loss) included difficulties in fulfilling day-to-day-tasks, such as using the phone, or communication challenges with colleagues. As one respondent explains:

**“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”.**

- The vast majority (86%) of employed respondents said their employer was aware of their hearing loss.
- A significant number of respondents felt that hearing loss had an impact on employment, both in terms of applying for work and being in work. The majority agreed with statements indicating that hearing loss had an impact on the opportunities available to them and their ability to fulfil their potential<sup>4</sup>. For example:
  - Approximately three-quarters of respondents (74%) felt their employment opportunities were more limited because of their hearing loss.
  - Over three-quarters (77%) disagreed that hearing loss had made no difference to them at work.
  - 70% of respondents agreed that hearing loss sometimes prevented them from fulfilling their potential at work.
  - Approximately two-thirds (68%) agreed they sometimes felt isolated at work because of their hearing loss. As one respondent states:

**“[There is] a feeling of isolation. Even with hearing aids it’s not always possible to hear what is being said in a busy office or staffroom”.**

<sup>4</sup> Based on analysis of all employed respondents

- Relatively small numbers of respondents in employment used equipment or adaptations, suggesting that many people are not making the most of workplace adjustments that could help them. The most popular adjustments that respondents did use were:
  - an amplified telephone, used by nearly half of respondents in employment (48%)
  - a hearing loop system (30%)
  - changes to their working area (30%).
- We asked respondents how helpful different groups had been at providing information and support – including employers, audiologists and specialist charities. The resulting picture is mixed, and there’s no obvious, consistent route for someone needing this help:
  - just under half of respondents in work (46%) said that their employer had been very or quite helpful
  - a similar proportion (44%) said their audiology department had been helpful in providing information
  - seven in ten (69%) respondents had carried out their own research to find information about managing hearing loss at work.
- Just over half (54%) of respondents in work said they were aware of the Access to Work scheme, which provides funding to pay for practical support at work for people with a disability or health condition.
- All respondents were asked what they thought the main barriers to employment were for people with hearing loss. A substantial proportion, nearly eight in ten (79%), identified the attitude of employers. This issue was also highlighted in our previous research report *Opportunity Blocked*. Other common barriers were: not knowing where to access support or advice (64%), and difficulty accessing funding for adjustments or equipment (47%).

**“I think employers are mostly ignorant of what can be done to help”.**

## Our recommendations

For people with hearing loss, the job market can be a challenging place. Many of our respondents felt that their hearing loss did have an impact on their experiences at work.

While there are products and equipment that can help people to manage their hearing loss in the workplace, our survey found that people do not always access this support. There is much more that could be done to promote life-changing equipment and support schemes, such as Access to Work.

Our survey found that there is no consistent route for people to access support or information about hearing loss at work – and employers’ attitudes to, and help for, people

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-disability-confident-campaign>.

with hearing loss vary enormously. Quite rightly, many people with hearing loss are proactive about finding out about the adjustments and support that could benefit them at work – but it’s disappointing that it’s not always easy to find.

Despite the findings in *Hidden Disadvantage* coming seven years after our previous research, the barriers remain the same, with the attitude of employers continuing to pose a real challenge.

We welcome the steps taken by the government, through its ‘Disability Confident’<sup>5</sup> campaign, to encourage employers to recruit people with a wide range of disabilities, including those with hearing loss. The government should monitor the success of this initiative and make more employers aware of their legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010.

Furthermore, the government needs to do more to make people aware of the Access to Work scheme, so that both employers and employees are better informed about what assistance is available and what they’re entitled to. We’d also like them to direct other relevant bodies to promote the scheme, for example, audiology departments and other health professionals.

In the workplace itself, employers should make sure that employees with hearing loss are not disadvantaged in terms of promotion opportunities; and they should take active steps to fully involve these employees in the workplace ‘culture’ to safeguard against feelings of isolation. Functions with responsibility for overseeing employee wellbeing, such as HR or Occupational Health, should make sure they’re familiar with the ways in which employees with hearing loss can be supported.

Employers must also aim to ensure that people are supported to stay in work for as long as they would like to, so that people with hearing loss no longer feel they have to retire early. This is particularly important against the backdrop of an ageing workforce and rising retirement age. Employers will need to be ready to support increasing numbers of people with hearing loss in the workplace.

We’ve published online guidance for employers about how to support people with hearing loss at work:

**<http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/accreditations-assessments-and-training-for-businesses/support-people-with-hearing-loss-at-work.aspx>**

In addition to the specific recommendations listed overleaf, our survey points to a number of areas where there’s potential to conduct further research in the area of employment. This includes further research into the experiences of British Sign Language users and unemployed people with hearing loss.

Given our findings about invisible, but very real barriers, such as employer attitudes, it would also be useful to further explore the issue of stigma in relation to hearing loss in the workplace.

Finally, we’d like to see further research into understanding better how people find out about equipment and adjustments at work, so that we can identify and promote best practice.

**The UK Government should:**

- tell far more people about the Access to Work scheme (AtW), so that both employers and employees are better informed – and understand how AtW can support with adjustments in the workplace
- monitor the success of its ‘Disability Confident’ initiative, including its impact on employer attitudes
- promote far more widely the ‘Age Positive’ initiative, which provides information and guidance to employers on managing an ageing workforce. They should incorporate specific guidance on hearing loss – which will affect a significant proportion of older employees.<sup>6</sup>

**Employers should:**

- be proactive in supporting employees who tell them that they have a hearing loss
- make sure that employees with hearing loss are not disadvantaged in the workplace, by supporting them to access helpful adjustments and equipment
- become familiar with the information and resources available to people with hearing loss, so that they can offer the best support possible.

**Audiology departments should:**

- consider how they can best support people with information about managing hearing loss at work, such as signposting people to information sources that are relevant to hearing loss and the workplace.

**We will:**

- continue to provide support with, and information about, hearing loss at work, to both employers and employees<sup>7</sup>
- consider additional research to gain a better understanding of the employment experiences of people with all levels of hearing loss.

<sup>6</sup> 41.7% of over-50-year-olds will have some kind of hearing loss. Action on Hearing Loss (2011) *Hearing Matters* [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/hearingmatters](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/hearingmatters)  
<sup>7</sup> Our website contains information about support for people with hearing loss at work. Action on Hearing Loss Scotland has also published a free pack for employers called *Sound Advice*.

# Introduction

In June 2013 we conducted a survey about employment with members of our research panel – a group of people who’ve signed up to take part in research on a regular basis, mainly through online surveys. They number around 1,200 people, and include individuals with different levels of hearing loss and tinnitus, across a range of demographic characteristics.

We sent the survey to all panel members, and 442 took part, representing a response rate of 37%. While this represents a level of response that is lower than would be expected from a group of people who have signed up to take part in research activities, this is likely to be a function of the subject matter of this survey. A number of panel members got in touch to tell us that they’d been out of employment for some time and, therefore, didn’t feel they could respond. Approximately two-fifths of panel members (40%) are aged over 65 and as such, it may be the case that panel members in older age groups may have chosen not to respond to this survey if they were no longer in employment.

**Why ask about employment?**

Ten million people in the UK have hearing loss – one in six of the population. Often referred to as a ‘hidden’ disability, it may not always be obvious what barriers people with hearing loss face in the labour market and what adjustments need to be made to support people to find and remain in employment.

Disabled people often face disadvantage in the labour market, with lower levels of employment compared with the wider workforce.<sup>8</sup> Analysis of the Labour Force Survey, a government survey of the employment circumstances of the UK population, found that people with hearing loss were less likely to be employed than people with no long-term health issue or disability.<sup>9</sup> We’ve been developing a strong body of evidence about hearing loss and employment, with research that has explored the barriers that people can face both in employment and when trying to access employment. The purpose of this survey was to expand on our evidence, and to complement our existing research, including our *Opportunity Blocked* and *Unlimited Potential* reports.<sup>10</sup>

“41% of those who’d retired early did so because of hearing loss.”

<sup>8</sup> Trotter, R. (2013) *Work in Progress: Rethinking employment support for disabled people*.

<sup>9</sup> Coleman, N., Sykes, W. and Groom, C. (2013) *Barriers to employment and unfair treatment at work: a quantitative analysis of disabled people’s experiences*, EHRC.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, M. (2007) *Opportunity Blocked*, RNID. Matthews, L. (2011) *Unlimited Potential*, Action on Hearing Loss.

# Section 1:

## Employment experiences

### Employment status

We wanted to find out about the employment status of our respondents. Less than half (42%) of survey respondents were in employment: a quarter of respondents (24%) were in full-time employment, while a further 18% were working part-time. A substantial proportion of respondents, nearly half (47%), were retired. Approximately one in 10 respondents (11%) was not currently working.

Respondents who identified that they were retired were asked how long they had been in retirement. Many respondents had left employment a number of years ago, with around half (49%) reporting that they had been retired for between six and 20 years. A further one in 10 respondents (10%) had been retired for over 20 years. The majority of retired respondents, therefore, had been out of employment for some time and did not have recent experience of the job market. Approximately four in 10 respondents (42%) had retired more recently; within the last five years.

Respondents who were retired were asked whether they had taken early retirement, with two-thirds of respondents (66%) stating that they had.

**Table 1: Are you currently working? (All respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes, working full-time	107	24
Yes, working part-time	79	18
No, retired	208	47
No, looking for work	17	4
No, other	31	7
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>442</b>	

**Table 2: How long have you been retired? (Those who stated they are retired)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Less than one year	11	5
Between one and five years	76	37
Between six and 10 years	47	23
Between 11 and 20 years	54	26
More than 20 years	20	10
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>208</b>	

**Table 3: If you are retired, did you retire early? (Those who stated they are retired)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	134	66
No	70	34
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>204</b>	

Respondents who had retired early were asked whether their early retirement had been related to their hearing loss in any way. A substantial proportion of respondents, two-fifths (41%), reported that their early retirement had been related to hearing loss. The remaining three-fifths of respondents (59%) said early retirement had not been related to hearing loss.

It is disappointing that people may feel they have to exit the workplace early due to hearing loss, when there are many ways that people could be supported to stay in work.

**Table 4: Was early retirement related to your hearing loss in any way? (Those who retired early)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	54	41
No	79	59
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>133</b>	

Respondents who identified that their early retirement had been related to hearing loss were asked to provide more information about why this was. A number of respondents' comments related to how hearing loss had created issues at work that subsequently led them to exit employment early. These included difficulties in carrying out day-to-day tasks because of hearing loss, such as using the phone, or communication challenges with colleagues.

**“My hearing loss affected my ability to use the phone effectively, [and to] hear at meetings. A chance for voluntary redundancy allowed me to retire early.”**

**“I found it too stressful working in an open-plan office as I could not hear the things I needed to hear.”**

**“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.”**

**“Occupational Health knew of my hearing loss and had assessed it. When pressure was put on me about my performance it was easy for my employer to offer early retirement.”**

### Experiences and attitudes of those in employment

We asked our panel members a number of questions which explored their experiences of, and attitudes to, employment. The tables in the following section present the findings for respondents who reported that they were in employment, either full or part-time.<sup>11</sup>

The majority of respondents worked in either the private or public sector: just under half of respondents (46%) worked in the public sector, while just over one-third (36%) worked in the private sector. Small proportions, one in 10, identified that they worked in the voluntary sector (10%) or chose the 'other' category (9%).

Respondents in employment were asked whether their employer was aware of their hearing loss. Encouragingly, the vast majority of respondents, 86%, stated that their employer was aware of their hearing loss. It is important that employers are made aware of a person's hearing loss so that they can support staff with any adjustments they might need.

<sup>11</sup> Where respondents were not in employment, they were asked to think back to their most recent job. However, given the employment/retirement breakdown of our respondents – and the fact that many had been retired for some time and therefore not had recent experience of the labour market – we 'excluded' retired respondents from this analysis.

**Table 5: Which of the following best describes the area that you mainly work in? (All employed respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Private sector	66	36
Public sector	85	46
Voluntary/third/charity sector	19	10
Other	16	9
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>186</b>	

**Table 6: Is your employer aware of your hearing loss? (All employed respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	157	86
No	25	14
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>182</b>	

Respondents who reported that their employer was not aware of their hearing loss (14%) were asked to provide more details about why this was. A number of them commented that they did not want to mention their hearing loss in case this led to their employer questioning their ability to do their job, while others felt that their hearing loss did not have an impact on their role and, therefore, it wasn't necessary to mention it.

**“I don't want to make it public knowledge, as I don't want them to query whether I can do the job.”**

**“I have become so used to my hearing loss, and have developed so many coping strategies, that I only tell people when I'm really not managing. Even then I would rather not mention it, as I can see people either don't believe me or think I'm being overly dramatic!”**

**“I am the oldest employee and do not want any further reason for my colleagues to make fun of me.”**



We gave respondents a series of statements about the impact of hearing loss in relation to employment and asked them to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The first set of questions asked about the impact of hearing loss and applying for work (see Table 7). Key findings included:

- Only one in seven respondents (14%) agreed that employers are just as likely to employ a person with hearing loss as someone without hearing loss
- Three-quarters of respondents (74%) agreed that their employment opportunities are more limited because of hearing loss
- Over half (54%) agreed that they have concerns about their future job opportunities because of hearing loss.

It's clear that many respondents believe that their hearing loss would have an impact on their prospects for employment, in terms of the job opportunities available to them both now and in the future.

**Table 7: Statements about the impact of hearing loss and applying for work (All employed respondents)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Number of respondents
<b>Applying for work</b>	%	%	%	%	%	
When applying for a job, I would always tell the employer about my hearing loss	45	24	13	11	7	181
Employers are just as likely to employ a person with hearing loss as they are to employ someone without hearing loss	4	10	32	37	18	181
I feel my employment opportunities are more limited because of my hearing loss	32	42	12	9	6	182
I have concerns about my future job opportunities because of my hearing loss	27	27	24	15	7	179

In terms of being in work, respondents reported that hearing loss affected their experience of the workplace in a number of ways (see Table 8). Many of them felt that hearing loss had some impact on employment experiences, with only a small proportion of respondents (15%) agreeing that hearing loss made no difference to them at work.

Specific examples of how people's experiences were affected by their hearing loss included:

- Seven in ten respondents (70%) agreed that their hearing loss sometimes stopped them from fulfilling their potential at work; and a similar proportion (72%) agreed that they lacked confidence at work because of hearing loss
- Two-thirds of respondents (68%) agreed that they sometimes felt isolated at work because of their hearing loss
- Half of respondents (50%) felt that their hearing loss had stopped them from changing jobs as often as they wanted to.

We also included statements about the impact of hearing loss and opportunities at work (see Table 9), such as training or promotion. The findings suggest that hearing loss had less of an impact in these areas, particularly with training, with two-thirds of respondents (66%) agreeing that they had the same training opportunities as other colleagues.

**Table 8: Statements about the impact of hearing loss at work (All employed respondents)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Number of respondents
<b>In work</b>	%	%	%	%	%	
Having a hearing loss has made no difference to me at work	7	8	8	52	25	185
My employer has taken steps to support my needs resulting from my hearing loss, for example, providing equipment	12	32	25	19	12	179
My hearing loss sometimes stops me from fulfilling my potential at work	26	44	10	13	7	184
I sometimes lack confidence in my abilities at work because of my hearing loss	29	43	9	9	10	182
My colleagues are aware of my hearing loss	39	43	9	6	4	183
I sometimes feel isolated at work because of my hearing loss	24	44	18	9	7	183
My colleagues know how to communicate with me effectively	12	31	32	19	6	183

**Table 9: Statements about the impact of hearing loss and opportunities at work (All employed respondents)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No. of respondents
<b>Opportunities in work</b>	%	%	%	%	%	
I have the same opportunities for promotion as other colleagues	11	35	32	15	8	179
I have the same opportunities for training as other colleagues	17	49	20	9	4	181
Having a hearing loss has stopped me from changing jobs as often as I wanted to	21	29	28	13	9	181

These findings show clearly that hearing loss can present certain challenges for people in employment. People with hearing loss do not necessarily feel that they have the same opportunities as hearing people, whether in the job market, or in terms of feeling integrated and involved at work.

Our *Unlimited Potential*<sup>12</sup> report provides more in-depth information about people's experiences of hearing loss in the workplace.

“Two-thirds of respondents said they did have the same training opportunities as hearing colleagues.”

<sup>12</sup> Matthews, L. (2011) *Unlimited Potential*, Action on Hearing Loss.

## Section 2: Support and adjustments at work

### Use of equipment and adaptations

We wanted to explore the type of equipment and adjustments our panel members had access to at work. We asked them whether they had access to equipment for people with hearing loss, communication support, and other workplace adjustments. Overall, only a relatively small proportion did use the equipment or adjustments we asked about.

The most popular adjustment was an amplified telephone, which just under half of respondents (48%) had used at work. Just under one-third of respondents stated that they had used a hearing loop system (30%), and the same proportion (30%) also identified that changes had been made to their work area, such as different seating arrangements. One-fifth of respondents (19%) had used a personal listener and a similar proportion (17%) stated that there had been changes to their job role or responsibility.

Less than one in 10 respondents used any form of communication support, such as a speech-to-text reporter (9%), or a notetaker (7%).

**Table 10: Please tell us whether you have used the following equipment at work? (All employed respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
An amplified telephone	89	48
Hearing loop system	55	30
Personal listener	36	19
An alerting system for the fire alarm	25	13
Textphone	20	11
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>186</b>	

**Table 11: Please tell us whether you have used any of the following communication support at work? (All employed respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Speech-to-text reporter	16	9
A notetaker	12	7
A lipspeaker	9	5
A sign language interpreter	7	4
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>186</b>	

**Table 12: Please tell us whether you have received any of the following adjustments at work? (All employed respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Changes to work area	55	30
Changes to job role or responsibility	32	17
Your employer or colleagues attending disability/deaf awareness training	27	15
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>186</b>	

These findings suggest that many respondents may not be accessing adjustments or equipment that could be beneficial to them in the workplace. We weren't able to explore the reasons behind this, however, so we cannot say whether this is because respondents were not aware of these mechanisms or, for example, because respondents feel the equipment or adjustments would not be beneficial.

We do know from previous research<sup>13</sup> that people are not always made aware of the availability of equipment and communication support through avenues such as audiology. Hearing services tend to focus on fitting hearing aids and, while follow-up appointments and referrals to services such as hearing therapy may give people the opportunity to discuss how they can get support with their hearing loss at work in more detail, we know that cuts to audiology have placed these services under threat in some areas.<sup>14</sup>

We believe that, if all audiologists made their patients aware of what's available in terms of equipment and adjustments, there would be an increase in employee and employer take-up.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Calton, R. (2012) *Cut Off: Assessing provision of adult audiology services and the impact of budget cuts*. Action on Hearing Loss.

## Sources of support

We then asked our panel members how helpful different organisations and information sources had been in providing information or support to help them manage their hearing loss in the workplace.

Employers and audiologists were identified as being the most helpful: just over two-fifths (46%) stated their employer had been either very or quite helpful, and a similar proportion (44%) stated their audiology department had been very or quite helpful. GPs and health services were rated as less helpful, two-fifths of respondents (41%) stating that their GP had been not very or not at all helpful.

“Two-fifths of respondents said their GP had not been helpful in providing information or support”



A large proportion of respondents stated that certain information sources were not applicable, suggesting they had not used these avenues. This included Occupational Health departments, which nearly half (48%) identified as not applicable; and lipreading classes, which seven in ten (69%) identified as not applicable.

This may be because these sources of information were not available to respondents. Our previous research<sup>15</sup> has shown that lipreading classes can be an extremely beneficial source of support for people with hearing loss, including providing information to improve communication at work. The high proportion of respondents identifying this as 'not applicable' suggests that people may not be benefiting from this support. We're recommending that lipreading support be recognised as a part of rehabilitation for people with hearing loss, to complement interventions such as hearing aids, so that, in the future, more people can benefit from accessing this support.

“Lipreading support needs to be recognised as part of rehabilitation.”



<sup>15</sup> Ringham, L. (2013) *Not Just Lip Service* [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/notjustlipservice](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/notjustlipservice) Action on Hearing Loss.

**Table 13: How helpful have the following been in providing information or support to help you manage your hearing loss in the workplace? (All employed respondents)**

	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not helpful at all	N/A	No. of respondents
	%	%	%	%	%	
Your employer	16	30	20	18	16	174
Your audiology department	15	29	15	17	25	171
Your organisation's HR department	6	14	18	25	38	171
Your organisation's Occupational Health department	5	11	14	22	48	170
Your GP/health service	9	22	20	21	28	174
A lipreading class	14	9	3	5	69	162
Action on Hearing loss	11	28	8	4	48	168
A specialist hearing loss charity (not Action on Hearing Loss)	7	6	5	5	77	160
Staff at Jobcentre	3	4	9	13	71	166

We asked respondents if they'd ever carried out their own research to find out more about how to manage hearing loss at work. The majority of respondents, seven in 10 (69%), reported that they had, while three in 10 (31%) stated that they had not. It's clear, therefore, that most people were motivated to find out what was available to help them manage their hearing loss in the workplace.

Of those who had carried out their own research, three-fifths of respondents (61%) stated that they found it very or fairly easy to access information to help them manage their hearing loss at work. Two-fifths of respondents (40%) stated that they did not find it easy. This suggests that people with hearing loss may not always know where to look to find information about support at work. There could, therefore, be a bigger role for specific groups, including audiologists and employers, in signposting people to the latest, up-to-date information.

**Table 14: Have you ever carried out your own research to find information to help you manage your hearing loss in the workplace? (All employed respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	122	69
No	55	31
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>177</b>	

**Table 15: How easy did you find it to access information to help you manage your hearing loss at work? (Those who said they carried out their own research)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Very easy	13	11
Fairly easy	61	50
Not very easy	41	34
Not at all easy	7	6
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>122</b>	

**Table 16: Did you use the Action on Hearing Loss website or Information Line to find information about hearing loss at work? (Those who said they carried out their own research)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	79	66
No	41	34
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>120</b>	

The findings present quite a mixed picture and suggest that, at the moment, there's no consistency as to how people access information and support on hearing loss at work.

## The Access to Work scheme

Access to Work is a government scheme that provides funding to give people practical support in the workplace. It's for people with a disability or a health condition, including hearing loss.<sup>16</sup> Access to Work can be used to pay for adjustments such as appropriate equipment or communication support. We wanted to find out how much our panel members knew about, and made use of, the scheme.

Of respondents in employment, just over half (54%) were aware of Access to Work<sup>17</sup> – that's relatively low.

No clear pattern emerged for how respondents who were aware of Access to Work had found out about it. One-fifth (20%) had found out about the scheme through their own research. A small proportion had found out from an employer (13%), a friend or family member (11%), or from an audiologist (10%).

Access to Work is an important scheme that can help someone with hearing loss to access vital equipment or adjustments, but our findings suggest that simply not enough people are being made aware of it.

Of those respondents who were aware of Access to Work, approximately six in 10 (59%) had used the scheme to support them with adjustments at work at some point. A smaller proportion, less than half (44%), had used the scheme to support them with adjustments in their current role.

Professionals who regularly come into contact with people with hearing loss, such as audiologists and GPs, should be signposting people to the scheme as a matter of course.

Greater awareness of the scheme amongst employers could also help to increase take up and enable people to access adjustments that could support them in the workplace.

“Audiologists and GPs must signpost people to Access to Work as a matter of course.”

<sup>16</sup> Further information about the Access to Work scheme can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview> and in the following 'Guide for Employers': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-guide-for-employers>

<sup>17</sup> Some of the figures in this section are based on small numbers of responses and, as such, should be interpreted with caution.

**Table 17: Are you aware of the Access to Work scheme? (All employed respondents)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	98	54
No	82	46
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>180</b>	

**Table 18: How did you first find out about Access to Work? (Those aware of AtW)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
I found out about it through my own research	20	20
An employer	13	13
A friend or family member	11	11
An audiologist told me about it	10	10
I can't remember	8	8
An adviser at Jobcentre Plus told me about it	7	7
Action on Hearing Loss	7	7
A lipreading class	3	3
An adviser from another specialist organisation	2	2
A GP told me about it	1	1
Other	16	16
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>98</b>	

**Table 19: Have you ever used the Access to Work scheme to support you with adjustments at work? (Those aware of AtW)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	57	59
No	40	41
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>97</b>	

**Table 20: Have you used the Access to Work scheme to support you with adjustments for your hearing loss in your current job? (Those aware of AtW)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	43	44
No	54	56
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>97</b>	

Respondents who reported that they had used the Access to Work scheme were asked about their experiences. Seven in 10 respondents (70%) disagreed that employers are knowledgeable about the scheme and how it works. Just under half (49%) agreed that their Access to Work adviser was knowledgeable about hearing loss.

In terms of satisfaction with the scheme, six in 10 respondents (60%) were very or quite satisfied with the scheme; three in 10 (32%) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; and approximately one in 10 (9%) was dissatisfied.

**Table 21: Based on your experiences of Access to Work, to what extent do you agree with the following statements: (Those who have used AtW. Please note the low base numbers)**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No. of respondents
Employers are knowledgeable about Access to Work and how it works	5%	14%	10%	42%	28%	57
My Access to Work adviser is knowledgeable about hearing loss	26%	23%	36%	8%	8%	53

	Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	No. of respondents
Based on your experiences of Access to work, how satisfied are you with the scheme?	18%	42%	32%	5%	4%	57

## Section 3: Barriers to employment

We wanted to ask people about barriers to employment for people with hearing loss. Table 22 (page 29) presents all the responses, including those from people in employment and those who are retired.

The vast majority of respondents, eight in 10 (79%), identified the attitude of employers as the main barrier to employment for people with hearing loss. This echoes our findings seven years ago, detailed in our 2007 report *Opportunity Blocked*.<sup>18</sup> The finding is also interesting in another context: that of the vast majority of employed respondents having told their employers about their hearing loss (86%). We were unable to explore employer reactions and attitudes to staff disclosing hearing loss in this survey, although our previous research has identified the different ways in which managers tend to respond<sup>19</sup>.

“Eight out of 10 (79%), identified the attitude of employers as the main barrier to employment for people with hearing loss.”

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) expressed the belief that not knowing where to access support or advice was a barrier to employment. We believe this could be easily addressed. For example, audiology departments could play a greater role in signposting people to sources of support, as outlined above. Just under half of respondents stated that difficulty accessing funding for adjustments or equipment (47%), or a lack of suitable jobs (47%), were specific barriers.

<sup>18</sup> Baker, M. (2007) *Opportunity Blocked*, RNID.

<sup>19</sup> Matthews, L. (2011) *Unlimited Potential*, Action on Hearing Loss.

**Table 22: What do you think are the main barriers to employment for people with hearing loss? (All respondents). NB Respondents could select more than one option.**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
The attitude of employers	265	79
Not knowing where to access support or advice	217	64
Difficulty accessing funding for adjustments or equipment	159	47
A lack of suitable jobs	159	47
Lack of access to specialist employment advisers	148	44
Difficulty arranging suitable communication support at interview stage	118	35
Lack of support from Jobcentre		
Other	98	29
No	47	14
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>337*</b>	

\*This question is based on responses from all respondents – both those in employment and retired and, therefore, the base number is higher than with previous questions.

### Other challenges in employment

We also invited people to give us their additional comments on hearing loss and employment, so that we covered all areas of concern/interest. Many people chose to expand on the issues we'd already asked about, such as their personal experiences of the impact of hearing loss at work and the attitude of employers, including managers who were unwilling to support people with hearing loss. A number of respondents said that deaf awareness training could help to improve employer attitudes, and that employers should be encouraged to take this up. Many commented specifically about applying for jobs and their uncertainty over when to mention their hearing loss.



**[There is] a feeling of isolation as, even with hearing aids, it is not always possible to hear what is being said in a busy office or staffroom.”**

**“I think employers are mostly ignorant of what can be done to help”**

**“I always tell people I have a hearing loss when applying for jobs. The way they respond at [the] interview helps me decide if I’d want to work for them.”**

**“I never declare my deafness in applications or interviews unless asked straight out. If I declare in applications I never get an interview.”**

**“More information should be provided to employers regarding Access to Work and how they will assist them in employing a hearing impaired person. The government should make it compulsory for all employers to have at least one day of deaf awareness training.**



## Section 4: Our recommendations

For people with hearing loss, the job market can be a challenging place. Many of our respondents felt that hearing loss had an impact on their experiences at work.

While there are products and equipment that can help people to manage their hearing loss in the workplace, our survey found that people do not always access this support. There is much more that could be done to promote life-changing equipment and support schemes, such as Access to Work.

Our survey found that there is no consistent route for how people access support or information about hearing loss at work – and that employers’ attitudes to and help for people with hearing loss vary enormously. Quite rightly, many people with hearing loss are proactive about finding out about the adjustments and support that could benefit them at work – but it’s disappointing that it’s not always easy to find.

Despite the findings in *Hidden Disadvantage*, coming seven years after our previous research<sup>20</sup>, the barriers remain the same, with the attitude of employers continuing to pose a real challenge.

We welcome the steps taken by the government, through its ‘Disability Confident’<sup>21</sup> campaign, to encourage employers to recruit people with a wide range of disabilities, including those with hearing loss. The government should monitor the success of this initiative and make more employers aware of their legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010.

Furthermore, the government needs to do more to make people aware of the Access to Work scheme, so that both employers and employees are better informed about what assistance is available and what they’re entitled to. We’d also like them to direct other relevant bodies to promote the scheme, for example, audiology departments and other health professionals.

In the workplace itself, employers should make sure that employees with hearing loss are not disadvantaged in terms of promotion opportunities; and they should take active steps to fully involve these employees in the workplace ‘culture’ to safeguard against feelings of isolation. Functions with responsibility for overseeing employee wellbeing, such as HR or Occupational Health, should make sure they’re familiar with the ways in which employees with hearing loss can be supported.

Employers must also aim to ensure that people are supported to stay in work for as long as they would like to, so that people with hearing loss no longer feel they have to retire early. This is particularly important against the backdrop of an ageing workforce and rising

<sup>20</sup> Baker, M. (2007) *Opportunity Blocked*, RNID. Matthews, L. (2011) *Unlimited Potential*. Action on Hearing Loss.

<sup>21</sup> For more information, see [www.gov.uk/government/publications/thedisability-confident-campaign](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thedisability-confident-campaign)



retirement age. Employers will need to be ready to support increasing numbers of people with hearing loss in the workplace.

We've published online guidance for employers about how to support people with hearing loss at work:

<http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/accreditations-assessments-and-training-for-businesses/support-people-with-hearing-loss-at-work.aspx>

In addition to the specific recommendations listed below, our survey points to a number of areas where there's potential to conduct further research in the area of employment. This includes further research into the experiences of British Sign Language users and unemployed people with hearing loss.

Given our findings about invisible, but very real barriers, such as employer attitudes, it would also be useful to further explore the issue of stigma in relation to hearing loss in the workplace.

Finally, we'd like to see further research into understanding better how people find out about equipment and adjustments at work, so that we can identify and promote best practice.

# Recommendations

## The UK Government should:

- tell far more people about the Access to Work scheme (AtW), so that both employers and employees are better informed – and understand how AtW can support with adjustments in the workplace
- monitor the success of its 'Disability Confident' initiative, including its impact on employer attitudes
- promote far more widely the 'Age Positive' initiative, which provides information and guidance to employers on managing an ageing workforce. They should incorporate specific guidance on hearing loss – which will affect a significant proportion of older employees.<sup>22</sup>

## Employers should:

- be proactive in supporting employees who tell them that they have a hearing loss
- make sure that employees with hearing loss are not disadvantaged in the workplace, by supporting them to access helpful adjustments and equipment
- become familiar with the information and resources available to people with hearing loss, so that they can offer the best support possible.

## Audiology departments should:

- consider how they can best support people with information about managing hearing loss at work, such as signposting people to information sources that are relevant to hearing loss and the workplace.

## We will:

- continue to provide support with, and information about, hearing loss at work, to both employers and employees<sup>23</sup>
- consider additional research to gain a better understanding of the employment experiences of people with all levels of hearing loss.

<sup>22</sup> 41.7% of over-50-year-olds will have some kind of hearing loss. Action on Hearing Loss (2011) *Hearing Matters*

<sup>23</sup> Our website contains information about support for people with hearing loss at work. Action on Hearing Loss Scotland has also published a free pack for employers called *Sound Advice*.

## Appendix: Overview of respondents

Respondents were asked to answer some questions about themselves, including specific questions about their hearing loss.

The majority of respondents, six in 10 (59%) describe themselves as hard of hearing, while two in 10 respondents (20%) describe themselves as deaf. Seven in 10 respondents (70%) wear hearing aids. Over half of our respondents have tinnitus (54%).

The majority of respondents had lived with hearing loss for a number of years. One-third of respondents (33%) had lived with hearing loss for less than 10 years, while two-thirds of respondents (67%) had lived with hearing loss for 11 years or more.

**Table 23: Which of the following statements apply to you?**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
I am deaf	90	20
I am hard of hearing	261	59
I am deafened	46	10
I use British Sign Language (BSL)	13	3
I use Sign Supported English	9	2
I wear hearing aids	310	70
I have cochlear implant(s)	24	5
I wear a bone-anchored hearing aid (BAHA)	8	2
I have tinnitus	238	54
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>442</b>	

**Table 24: How long have you had hearing loss?**

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Less than one year	2	1
Between one and five years	67	16
Between six and 10 years	68	16
Between 11 and 20 years	89	21
More than 20 years	191	46
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>417</b>	

Gender of respondents	No. of respondents	Percentage
Male	169	40
Female	251	60
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>420</b>	

Age of respondents	No. of respondents	Percentage
16-24	4	1
25-44	51	12
45-54	73	17
55-64	138	33
65-74	116	28
75-84	32	8
85 and over	8	2
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>422</b>	

Location of respondents	No. of respondents	Percentage
East Anglia	30	7
Greater London	46	11
Midlands	63	15
North East England	21	5
North West England	53	13
Northern Ireland	2	1
Scotland	34	8
South East England	63	15
South West England	47	11
Wales	19	5
Yorkshire and Humber	28	7
Other	14	3
<b>Total number of respondents</b>	<b>420</b>	

# FURTHER INFORMATION

## ACTION ON HEARING LOSS INFORMATION LINE

We have a team of trained, dedicated and professional Information Line officers. We provide free, confidential and impartial information to people who are deaf or have hearing loss or tinnitus; their families, friends, and professionals.

Telephone **0808 808 0123 (freephone)**

Textphone **0808 808 9000 (freephone)**

SMS **0780 0000 360**

Email **informationline@hearingloss.org.uk**

The Information Line can provide you with useful information on a wide range of issues related to hearing loss and tinnitus. Alternatively, you can access our information leaflets and factsheets from [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets.asp](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets.asp)

## ACTION ON HEARING LOSS ACCESS SOLUTIONS

There are a number of ways that we can help both employers and employees in the workplace. We offer practical and impartial advice on appropriate equipment, support and adjustments to support staff with hearing loss. We provide staff training in deaf awareness – delivered on-site by experienced trainers, or through our innovative e-learning package – as well as sign language courses. We can also help organisations gain a nationally recognised accreditation to demonstrate their commitment to accessibility for customers that are deaf or have a hearing loss.

For more information about the services and training we offer please visit:

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

Telephone **0333 240 5658**

Textphone **0161 276 2316**

Email **access.solutions@hearingloss.org.uk**



**We're the charity taking action on hearing loss since 1911. We can't do this without your help.**

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**To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk)**

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**Telephone 0808 808 0123**

**Textphone 0808 808 9000**

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

Action on Hearing Loss is the new name for RNID. Our name has changed, but our vision hasn't – a world where hearing loss doesn't limit or label people, where tinnitus is silenced and where people value their hearing enough to look after it.

We also have a new website at [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk)