

Note: Previously, because of the fast moving nature of this crisis, we said we might make changes to the content of this letter before sending it to retailers. We have since made amendments to reflect changes in Government advice. This is the updated version.

Re: How you can support people who are Deaf or living with hearing loss in your stores

Dear _____,

I am writing on behalf of the XX,XXX people who have put their name to our open letter asking you – as one of the UK’s largest retailers - to make sure that your shops are accessible to people with hearing loss, following the introduction of measures to make shops Covid-secure.

As an employer and service provider, we know that premises have had to be rapidly redesigned to meet the Covid-secure guidelines provided by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We appreciate that retail spaces are having to be transformed as well. However, it is vital that we work together to ensure that disabled people do not become locked out of retail services because of new barriers that these regulations have created.

It’s been an increasingly difficult time for people living with deafness and hearing loss, as the imposition of social distancing, face covers and physical partitions all make it harder for them to undertake routine tasks that many others can take for granted. In fact, our communities have told us they are actively avoiding going to shops and are becoming more isolated. We’re hoping you will be able to help people feel more included in your stores during this time and lift the barriers that our communities face each day.

There are twelve million people across the UK living with some form of hearing loss and of these, around four million would normally wear hearing aids. This makes people with hearing loss a substantial part of the estimated £249bn purple pound, the spending power of disabled people. Therefore, not only is it important that your stores are fully accessible to improve the experience for your customers, it is also beneficial for your business.

We have highlighted four initial steps you can take to support people with hearing loss at this time:

1. Face Coverings:

Overcome the barriers created by face covers which prevent lip-reading. Consider face covers with clear panels for your staff which allow people to lip-read. Staff can, if they are happy to do so, be allowed to lower their face masks to speak with someone with hearing loss if they remain two metres apart. Anti-glare clear screens at checkouts can also reduce the need for face covers.

Chairman: **John Morgan** Chief Executive Officer: **Mark Atkinson**

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

A registered charity in England and Wales (207720) and Scotland (SC038926).

Registered as a charitable company limited by guarantee in England and Wales No. 454169.

Registered office: 1-3 Highbury Station Road, London N1 1SE.



2. Deaf Awareness Training:

Provide staff with deaf awareness training. There are a number of simple steps that frontline staff can take to provide a better customer experience to people with hearing loss. Deaf awareness training would allow your staff to understand the barriers faced by people with hearing loss and improve their confidence when communicating with customers. This is particularly important for some of the roles identified within the government's Covid-secure guidance, such as *Social Distancing Champions* and those positioned outside shops or within pinch-points where they will be asked to redirect customers.

3. Accessible and working Hearing Loops:

Utilise hearing loops at key locations within your store. A hearing loop helps people with hearing aids to hear conversations more easily. It works when a person's hearing aids are switched to the hearing loop setting. Sound goes directly to the hearing aids with no distracting background noise. Hearing loops should always be utilised, but where screens are in position or the use of face covers is unavoidable then they become even more essential to allow customers to communicate with staff. It's also important to understand how screens and loops interact with each other and to make sure there isn't any undue interference for the user with hearing loss. Too often we are told that service providers have hearing loops, but that they are not maintained, staff are not aware of how to turn them on or use them or that the existence of the loop is not signalled to customers.

4. Background noise:

Reduce background noise, including piped music. Hearing loss doesn't just *turn the volume down* on everything that people hear. For many people different sounds are reduced more than others and in particular it can become much harder for people to accurately pick out speech from background noise. Given the additional barriers people with hearing loss face at this moment, it is even more important to reduce background noise, think about the acoustics of the environment you provide and create quiet spaces where you can communicate with customers.

Further information on how we can support you to make these changes can be found via <https://louderthanwords.org.uk/>. You can also contact our Head of Campaigns and Public Affairs, Robert Geaney, by emailing robert.geaney@hearingloss.org.uk, or calling 0203 227 6117.

Now that the initial adjustments have been made to make your service Covid-secure we hope that you will consider adapting again to make sure that the new normal becomes inclusive by default. We are happy to work with retailers to demonstrate the value of deaf aware services and to help you make the adjustments you need to support the twelve million people living with deafness and hearing loss.

I look forward to hearing from you and to learning how we can support your future plans.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Atkinson
Chief Executive