

# Communication

## With a Face Covering



# Communication and Face Covering



## **Background**

Grant Shapps, the Transport Secretary's announced that the wearing of face coverings will be compulsory on public transport in England from Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

It's important to remember that 'face coverings' are different from surgical masks or PPE worn by health and social care professionals. Many are home made and often come in a variety of designs and colours.

Face coverings have the potential to make communication for people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment more difficult than normal. This information sheet contains some simple advice for communicating more efficiently under these new conditions.

## **If You Are Out and About in Public**

Action on Hearing Loss knows that the mass use of face coverings on public transport will make life more difficult for many people who are deaf or have hearing loss and who rely heavily on visual cues for communication including facial expressions and lip-reading.

However, there are some simple things we can all do which will improve our ability to communicate more effectively under these challenging circumstances.

## Communication Tips for The General Public & Transport Providers

People who are deaf or have hearing loss have individual communication needs and you should not be frightened to ask someone directly how best you can communicate with them.

You may feel uncomfortable about speaking like this directly to a person who is deaf or has hearing loss, but they will appreciate the efforts you have made to improve your level of communication with them.

Not every tip below will be appropriate for every person who is deaf or has hearing loss. Everyone is different.

Remember, people who rely on facial expressions and lipreading to communicate are finding things especially difficult during the current COVID-19 (Coronavirus) outbreak. The compulsory wearing of facial coverings on public transport will make this even more difficult for them.

The below tips are particularly important when you are speaking to someone who may have a hearing impairment when you are wearing a mask or face covering:

- Make sure you are facing the person you are talking to and speak clearly, avoid shouting, speaking too fast or unnecessarily slow.
- If someone does not understand you, repeat what you said or phrase it differently and use plain language.
- If you are in a noisy place, move to a quieter area if possible.
- Use simple gestures such as pointing or waving to get someone's attention.
- Write things down – use pen on paper, text or device screens, or whiteboards.
- If they ask you to, speak to a relative or friend.

### Useful Tools

There are live speech-to-text smartphone apps available, though these have varying levels of accuracy depending on background noise and speed of conversation.

You can use Video Relay Services, such as 'InterpreterNow', for communicating with people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language or BSL. Below is a web link to one such site.

<https://www.signvideo.co.uk/>

Look out for people using the 'Hidden Disabilities Sunflower' lanyard who may need your support to communicate.

## More Top Tips for Better Communication

A deaf or hearing-impaired person may make you aware that they have difficulties with hearing. They will also often tell you what their preferred communication style is.

Remember, that for many people with a hearing impairment, lip reading and picking up on non-verbal facial cues are an important means of working out what people are saying to them. Wearing a face covering makes this extremely difficult or even impossible.

To make communication more successful where lip reading is not possible due to a face covering:

- Make sure you directly face the person you are trying to communicate with.
- Remember that social distancing itself also presents a communication barrier to people with hearing loss, as the added distance reduces sound levels.
- Make sure you can see their face as clearly as possible.
- Do not remove your own face covering to facilitate better communication. Remember that you are wearing it for your protection and the protection of others.
- Make sure you have the person's full attention before you start speaking.
- Speak as normally as possible and do not exaggerate your lip or facial movements.
- If you think either of you has been misheard, try and resolve the matter by using a closed question to confirm your understanding. For example, say something like, "Did you say 40?" rather than "Did you say 40 or 14?"

## Face Coverings with Clear Panels.

Action on Hearing Loss is aware that face coverings with clear panels, which allow for lip reading, are available for purchase in the UK. Many of these are currently produced in the USA and are not cleared for use in the UK in clinical settings. We are also aware that other such face coverings are in the process of being designed and tested.

In the absence of widespread commercial availability of such face coverings, however, some members of the public and employers have chosen to use face shields or make their own face coverings with clear panels at home. There are several links available online that demonstrate how to make these.

Although we are aware that some such face coverings steam up, preventing lip reading and that others may reduce the sound level of some frequencies in speech, people with hearing loss have overwhelmingly reported that such face coverings are more helpful for them in communicating with people than the standard coverings currently in use.

Considering these significant challenges, deaf awareness amongst the public becomes even more vital than ever and many of the simple tips we suggest for use by health and social care professionals can easily be adopted by transport providers.

### **And finally**

By using some of these simple tips, communication can be made a lot easier. However, if you are wearing a face covering and things don't go quite right the first time you try to communicate with a person who is deaf or has a hearing impairment don't be too hard on yourself. We all need to give ourselves and others time as we get used to the use of 'face covering' in public transport settings. Practice makes perfect and the more times you do this the easier it will get.

The important thing is to be aware of the needs of people who are deaf or who have a hearing impairment.

If you can do that you are halfway there already.

If you need further advice or support contact Action on Hearing Loss on 01983 529533 or email [iow@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:iow@hearingloss.org.uk)

