

I'm sorry, what did you say...?

Deafness is an invisible disability. How many times have you spoken to someone, perhaps in the street, in a shop or a pub, and not received a response? Usually most people's immediate reaction is that the person being addressed is either being ignorant or just unfriendly, but there may be another, far more serious reason for someone's lack of response - hearing loss or deafness. Unlike many other disabilities there is no outward sign of deafness, no physical evidence to show the world that there is a difficulty of communication. Additionally, society as a whole tends not to think of deafness as a reason for lack of response, nor is there a great awareness of how to communicate with deaf people. The Cumbria Deaf Association, which has four centres in the county (Carlisle, Barrow, Whitehaven and Kendal), works to provide a link between deaf people, who are often socially isolated by their disability, as well as increasing awareness of how hearing people can communicate with those with hearing loss.

People who are hard of hearing can easily become left out of everyday activities and conversations. Many people who have hearing loss are able to lip read, but the success of this depends on many factors, such as the clarity of the person speaking, the speed and complexity of speech, and direction from which it comes and the number of people involved in the conversation. CDA say that lip reading alone allows individuals to see less than a third of what is said. Other forms of assistance such as hearing aids can sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help, as they not only amplify speech, but also every other sound heard - footsteps, traffic noise, music, cutlery on plates, etc., which can result in speech being lost in a welter of background noise.

The loss of self-confidence which can result from the loss of hearing can have a devastating impact on the every day lives of deaf people. People may try for a short time to understand the difficulties faced by those who have impaired hearing, but few have the patience to persist in the often slow and time-consuming process of communicating with them. It is a sad fact that communication with deaf and hard of hearing people is not taken more seriously or given a higher priority in this modern world. Yes, there are new methods of communications - induction loops and Minicomms systems, but they only work in very limited areas - not out in the street, down at the pub or in the park. What is needed is a greater public awareness of the problem and a greater willingness to make the effort to communicate with people with hearing loss. How many children learn the Deaf Manual Alphabet? How many adults know it? How would you communicate with a deaf or hard of hearing person? The Cumbria Deaf Association runs classes for those with hearing loss to learn to lip read, and produces posters showing the Deaf Manual Alphabet, but unfortunately, due to a lack of funding, is not able to teach hearing people the sign language so necessary for effective communication with those who suffer deafness. However, if anyone is interested in learning more about this area of disability the CDA is happy to provide such information. The Kendal office is at 5 Castle Street, Kendal, LA9 7AA, telephone 01539 729548.