

NEWS RELEASE – EMBARGOED UNTIL Thursday 3 April 2008

Deaf people calling for better telephone access

“Deaf telecoms not yet in the 21st Century”, says TAG

3 April 2008

The Government was accused today of letting down deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens by failing to enable them to have access to modernised, fairly-priced telecom services suited to their needs.

While an everyday part of hearing people’s lives since the 1960s, poor access to the telephone severely affects the lives and life chances of deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

New-style services which enable deaf people to use the phone have been available for several years and are used widely in countries like America and Australia. These services have appeared in the UK, but only two remain as the others have been forced to close through a lack of funding.

TAG, which represents all the UK’s main deaf and hard-of-hearing organisations concerned with electronic communications, is today encouraging deaf people to take a one-off opportunity to use two telephone services adapted to their needs to lobby their MPs and call for policies that will bring deaf telecoms in Britain into the 21st Century.

Today’s event marks the start of TAG’s campaign ‘Bringing Deaf Telecoms into the 21st Century’.

Ruth Myers, chair of TAG, said: “Four decades after telephones became commonplace in British households, many deaf and hard-of-hearing people still struggle to use the telephone network and some cannot use it at all. They are bereft of key telephone services that could help them gain equality with the rest of society, educationally and professionally.

“New types of phone relay systems using technologies like video communications and the Internet can dramatically improve telecommunications for deaf people, but the powers-that-be are dragging their feet in enabling their use by deaf and hard-of-hearing people at an affordable price. This is discrimination and an infringement of our human rights. Such services are already available at no extra cost in countries such as Sweden, the USA and Australia.”

To start the lobby of MPs, sign language users are expected to inundate one of the two remaining UK-based video relay services. A few other deaf people have been given a one-off chance to use a captioned relay service in the USA to contact their MPs –last December, the captioned relay service that operated in the UK closed.

Sign language users will communicate with their MPs on a phone via an interpreter and a system called video relay, while others will use captioned relay to talk to their MP using their own voice and reading the MP’s reply in text on-screen almost as soon as he or she speaks.

Ruth Myers added: “All deaf and hard-of-hearing people are asking for is to be able to use technology that already exists at a fair price. We want to keep pace with technology. We want equality in education, training, the workplace and as consumers and citizens in the information society.”

TAG is a consortium made up of the British Deaf Association, LINK, National Association of Deafened People, National Deaf Children’s Society, Deaf Broadcasting Council, Royal Association in Aid of Deaf People, Deafness Support Network, Royal Association in Aid of Deaf People, Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), deafPLUS, Scottish Council on Deafness, Hearing Concern and Sense.

Notes to Editors

Case Studies available on request

Deaf telephone services that can change lives

Captioned telephony

Captioned telephony was available in the UK from 2002-2007 on a very limited basis. With two communication channels, speech recognition software to convert the relay operator’s voice into text, deaf people can read the conversations on their PCs or telephone displays with minimal delay. Captel, the only captioned relay service in the UK, was closed in December 2007 for funding reasons.

Video Relay

Video relay enables sign language users to communicate on the telephone through a sign language interpreter. The sign language user and interpreter interact via PCs and webcams or videophones. Two services currently operate in the UK: Significan’t’s SignVideo service and a fledgling service in Scotland. Last year, video relay services run by RNID and the BDA closed.

Text Relay

Text relay has existed in the UK since the 1980s and as a national service, RNID Typetalk, since 1991, but funding issues have inhibited its development. Text relay enables deaf people with keyboards and screens to communicate via an operator who speaks or types parts of conversations as required. In its current format, the relay process can be quite slow and can inhibit conversations. Nonetheless it is a hugely valuable service. TAG wants to see developments in text relay which, for example, speed up the communication and allows access via the Internet.

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