

NEWS RELEASE

Deaf telecoms campaign boosted by Government response New Ofcom study to report soon

8 April 2009

The campaign for better telecoms services for deaf and hard-of-hearing people has been encouraged by a recent answer to a Parliamentary Question.

Led by TAG, a consortium of the UK's main deaf organisations, deaf people are calling for new-style telephone services that will enable them to use the phone much more effectively and put them on a more equal footing with hearing people. Such modernised services are used widely in Sweden, the USA and Australia.

The answer to the Written Parliamentary Question indicated that Ofcom wants to see the introduction of these new style telephone relay services and have commissioned a study of their social and economic benefits. Ofcom also highlighted the importance of using current and emerging technologies like captioned telephony, video relay and Internet access to services. The Ofcom study is due in April 2009.

“The response by BERR (the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform) to the Parliamentary Question posed by Rosie Cooper MP is encouraging as there is a clear recognition by Government of the importance of the issue to deaf and hard-of-hearing people,” said Ruth Myers, Chairman of TAG. “We are moving ahead with our campaign and welcome the positive responses from MPs to pleas by their deaf constituents for modernised relay services.

“We look forward to the Ofcom report which we believe will highlight the significance of new-style relay services for the life and employment chances of deaf people. The existing Typetalk telephone relay service is of huge value to many deaf people, but under the current regulation cannot offer direct Internet access or newer, additional services like captioned telephony. For sign language users video relay could significantly transform the lives of many deaf people.”

MP Rosie Cooper said: “As the daughter of deaf parents I know how important easy to use and accessible means of communication are for deaf and hard of hearing people.”

TAG is a consortium made up of the British Deaf Association, Deafness Support Network, deafPLUS, Hearing Concern Link, National Association of Deafened People, National Deaf Children's Society, National Deaf Children's Society, Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), and Sense.

Notes to Editors

Written Parliamentary Question

Rosie Cooper:

To ask the Minister of State, Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform if he will direct Ofcom to take steps to ensure that deaf and hard-of-hearing people have (a) equal access to mobile and internet telecommunication services and (b) access to modernised relay services.

[254297]

Mr. McFadden

Within its existing remit in this area, Ofcom has stated that it would like to see the introduction of additional relay services and have commissioned a study into the social and economic benefits of such services. It is important that the approach reflects current and emerging technology and this study is examining the gap between services that are currently available (including the existing relay service, SMS, instant messaging and email) and potential services. The study will consider the existing relay service Text direct (also known as Type Talk which allows two way telephone conversations between deaf or speech impaired people), captioned telephony (where the relay assistant re-voices one end of the call into captions using speech recognition technology), Video relay (which enables sign language users to communicate with hearing people in real time, using a sign language interpreter based remotely) and internet protocol access to text relay (which would enable people to have fixed and mobile access to text relay via a PC with an internet connection, removing the need for specialist terminal equipment).

The European legislation that establishes the objectives of member state regulation in this area is currently being reviewed. The Government have supported efforts to strengthen the obligations on member states in this area to achieve results that are practical use to disabled users. Our response to the public consultation on the review of the EU legislation noted

“There was universal recognition that disabled users should not be excluded from being able to enjoy the benefits of a modern telecommunications sector where economic technical solutions existed.”

Deaf telephone services that can change lives:

Captioned telephony

Captioned telephony was available in the UK from 2002-2007 on a very limited basis. It offers almost simultaneous text transcription of the voice channel so that people with hearing loss can follow the conversation 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 with anyone 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. In 2007, video relay services run by RNID and the BDA closed because of a lack of funding.

Text Relay

Text relay has existed in the UK since the 1980s and as a national service, RNID Typetalk, since 1991, but a strict legal regime has inhibited its development. Specifically, Typetalk is only directly accessible via traditional analogue phone lines. 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 direct mobile and Internet access.

Media Contacts

Stephen Fleming at Palam Communications
t 01635 299116
e sfleming@palam.co.uk