

Statement to OFCOM'S Advisory Committee – Call for a Supplementary Consultation Document to 'Review of the Universal Service Obligation'.

In a recent public consultation document entitled, 'Review of the Universal Service Obligation', OFCOM has introduced the concept of enhancing access to telecommunications by people with hearing disabilities. This has included offering the choice of different types of relay services, including the Video Relay Service and the IP Relay Service. While this is to be commended, the needs of a significant group of people do not seem to have been considered.

Hard of hearing people are the largest single group of people with a hearing disability. They use speech as their main method of communication and although the majority manage to access telecommunications using inductive coupler technology, a large proportion cannot hear well enough to use a voice telephone. In fact, in the review documentation the RNID has estimated that there are "450,000 severely or profoundly deaf people who fall into this category. There are about 50,000 BSL users and 18,000 users of TYPETALK®. Most of the remaining 382,000 are hard of hearing.

Hard of hearing people, in general, do not use a text telephone as they still have some residual hearing and struggle to use the telephone with amplification; or rely heavily on their spouses, relatives, friends and work colleagues. However, technology exists that does meet the needs of this group, in the form of the captioned telephone and captioned telephone relay service. Hearing Concern proposes that OFCOM take action to incorporate this type of service into the 'Review of the Universal Service Obligation' document, in order to meet the telecommunication needs of hard of hearing people. Hearing Concern strongly recommends that a supplementary public consultation document be sent out as soon as possible to accompany the current document.

Testimonials from captioned telephone relay users and a copy of our magazine article are included with this statement.

Fiona Robertson, Chief Executive.

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Unlocking the Telephone for People with Hearing Loss

New technologies are available, but will we have access to them?

Has the telephone become too challenging to bother with? Like many hard of hearing people, Peter Allison simply avoided the telephone because it was too difficult to make out conversations. "I am a deafened person who has never spoken into a telephone handset before," explains Mr. Allison, who is now retired.

Knowing of his frustration, Hearing Concern asked him to try a new telephone service, CapTel, which is designed specifically for people with hearing loss. "I really enjoyed conversing with hearing people once I got used to it," states Mr. Allison. "I think that CapTel would be an enormous boon for deafened people in their workplace and only wish that the equipment had been available to me when I was still working. It could have meant a whole lot of difference to my life."

The CapTel works like any other telephone, with one important difference: it also displays written text of everything the caller says. Users can hear the caller and read word-for-word captions of the conversation.

Even Mr. Allison's daughter, who is also hard of hearing, got a new perspective on telephone conversations. "She was very happy indeed with the outcome, as there are frequently bits in other people's conversation with her which she missed completely in order to keep the flow of conversation going," he states. "She found the captions extremely useful for filling in the bits she couldn't hear without having to keep asking the other person to repeat things."

"The phone suited me perfectly because I need the speech to text interpretation," explains Louise Cantwell, who works with social services. "It seems more natural to just pick up a phone and use it as I once did when I was hearing. It helped me to feel more equal and caused me no embarrassment to use it."

"I went deaf very suddenly at the age of 26," states one of the users of Teletec's CapTel service, who works at a prestigious financial institution. "My job is fast moving and involves frequent telephone contact and audio conferences. The CapTel service has allowed me to continue with my job in a similar way to the way I managed it before I went deaf. The service allows me to get an overview of what is being

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discussed on the call so that I can ask about any detail I may have missed."

"I felt the captions were acting as a reinforcement of what I thought I heard," explains Sue Stagg, who relied on the high volume amplification as well as the text captions. "I found I was hearing as well as watching." Others agree that the new technology gives them greater telephone independence. "I was delighted with my access, quality of information, and the overall assessment of the system," says Martin Wiltshire.

"I think it makes you feel more independent to make calls yourself rather than have to rely upon other people," continues Ms. Cantwell. "It was great fun to phone people who I have never spoken to on the phone before...especially my boss at head office!"

At this point, anyone who is employed can benefit from this type of technology, as Access to Work funding covers the costs for employees and businesses. "The disadvantage," states another tester, Liz Brown, "is only CapTel operating during working hours from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. This limits the number of times I could make a call." Nearly all the trialists called for the service to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, as it is in the United States.

To achieve more widespread access, OFCOM and other decision-makers need to be aware of the very real needs that new technologies, like the CapTel, meet for people who are hard of hearing. These new technologies need to be made available, round the clock, to level the playing field for people with hearing loss.

"I would like to think of the phone as a sign of things to come," concludes Ms. Cantwell. "Perhaps somewhere down the line it will be widely available and a standard piece of equipment for hard of hearing people both in their homes and at their workplace."

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Testimonials from Captel Users

Anonymous **Supplied by customer who does not wish to disclose her name or where she works. She held a responsible position in a bank head office.**

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The Captel service has allowed me to continue with my job in a similar way to the way I managed it before I went deaf. The service allows me to get an overview of what is being discussed on the call so that I can ask about any detail I may have missed.

I have found the service efficient and the team have kept in contact with me to advise of any service issues. I would recommend the service to others in a similar situation to myself."

Susan Anderson – Administrator Housing Association

My name is Susan Anderson; I work for a busy Housing Association in Newcastle Upon Tyne. I have been profoundly Deaf since birth, but have a Cochlear Implant, which has restored 75% of my hearing. From being very young I have always had very clear speech and coped well using Hearing Aids and Lip Reading. Due to a very bad bout of Tinnitus I lost the use of my Hearing Aids in 1996. I underwent a Cochlear Implant in 1998 and have not looked back since.

The Telephone has always caused problems for me as I lose the ability to Lip Read and the background noises have always made Telecommunications hard, both at Home and Work. I feel that my job has suffered over the years, due to me being unable to use the Telephone, and a certain reluctance from customers and colleagues to try other systems out, resulting from lack of knowledge about how the system actually works.

Typetalk or BT TEXT DIRECT as it is commonly known now, has been my sole method of telecommunications for many years, but I felt that it had not advanced enough given all the new technology on the market today. Nobody would ring me at work using Typetalk due to the time it took to get connected, the number of digits you had to dial

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and also the intervention of the Typetalk Operator. The other drawbacks were the inability to take internal calls, calls via switchboard or transferring of calls from one phone to another.

I read about the CapTel Telephone in the See Hear Magazine and contacted Teletec International to obtain more information. This was in, October 2004 and by December I was the owner of a CapTel Telephone with the ability to take calls internally, transfer calls and accept calls via the switchboard. My world has changed at work, my confidence has soared and I feel now an Equal member of my Team. It gives me so much satisfaction to be able to answer the telephone, listen to the person on the end and help in any way I can.

CapTel has been the break through for me and I know it will do so for many other deaf and hearing impaired people out there.

There is only one draw back at the moment - because it is not a widely recognised service, the availability is restricted to week days 9am – 5pm, which is unfortunate, as I would so love to have the ability to ring my family in evenings and over the weekend. There is a petition to be signed to promote this service to Telecommunication Companies to make it a more Nationwide Operation, which will need lots of support to make this happen.

Alan Goldsmith – Chemist Graduate

As a result of a continuing deterioration in my hearing, it had become increasing difficult to use a standard telephone within my workplace.

I had tried different telecommunication systems to overcome this, but as I still have some residual hearing, I required something that would enable me to have a more natural telephone conversation where I could listen to the person contacting me with the addition of text to supplement what I could not hear or understand.

When I tested the CapTel system I was immediately impressed at the speed at which the text was relayed by the Captioners and the people I was communicating with had no idea I was using such a system.

The benefits to me have been enormous, as it had been about 5 years since having a “normal” telephone communication and as a result I, and my work colleagues, have noticed a marked improvement in my overall confidence in communicating with people.

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I had also found, with discussions, with Teletec, that the system can also be used for Conference Calls without a problem. This is particularly important to me as I am employed with a multinational chemical company in a relatively senior position.

Also with the help of Teletec, I now have a modified handset that can take standard headphones. This enables me to participate in quite long conference/webex conferences where it would be too tiresome to hand-hold the handset to my ear for lengthy periods. Using the headphones does not disturb other office workers (as they cannot hear the conversation – so this is better than a standard speakerphone system) and if I need to speak, I just pick up the telephone at the appropriate time).

I would not hesitate in recommending the system to similar people to myself and hope it contributes to restoring their confidence in using Telecommunications.

I am a Chemist Graduate employed by a Multinational Chemical Company in the following roles: Analytical Chemist, SHE Officer (Safety Health and Environment) and Deputy Quality Manager for the European Business Group of our organisation.

Alan Goldsmith
(Flintshire, North Wales)