

Over 100 radio aids issued during Covid

Lisa Bull, Educational Audiologist, describes how her service managed the provision of a significant number of devices during this pandemic

The past 18 months have provided the world with challenges and hardships that could never have been imagined prior to 2020. The way we communicate and the way we educate, work and live has changed beyond recognition compared to how the world worked just two short years ago.

For Qualified Teachers of the Deaf (QToDs) and Educational Audiologists this meant new ways of working – and we found ourselves setting up radio aids in the boots of our cars, on driveways and under gazebos as the Covid pandemic sent demand for radio aids and assistive listening technology soaring, but social distancing meant we had to find innovative ways to deliver the technology to the homes of those that needed it ...

Deaf and hard of hearing children and young people (D/HoH CYP) have spent the last year trying, in exceptionally challenging circumstances, to continue to access their teaching and learning. From the first lockdown when all learning moved online, to the spring term of 2021 when face-to-face teaching resumed but with every member of the school community wearing a face covering, the barriers to effective communication for D/HoH CYP have been immense.

We know that hearing aids and cochlear implants work most effectively for the wearer at a distance of less than two metres from the speaker and that listening in background noise is an additional barrier to effective listening. We can therefore conclude that the social distancing of 1m+ introduced as a result of Covid-19 has had a negative impact on speech perception and the understanding of spoken language for those that wear these devices.

Although modern digital hearing aids and cochlear implants allow the best opportunities to hear quiet speech in ideal listening situations, we know that busy classrooms, background noise in the home environment and distance from the person speaking can make hearing clearly extremely difficult.

These difficulties were exacerbated when pupils were required to listen to lessons via a computer where, in some cases, the sound quality was poor, cameras were not turned on to aid lipreading, subtitles were not used and there was an expectation to take notes while listening to the lesson.

When back in the school setting post-lockdown, access was no easier as face coverings were mandatory and social distancing of two metres was enforced. Clear face masks, seen by some as the solution to the lipreading difficulty, were of course not the answer for many, as the quality of the speech heard was often distorted and sometimes inaudible.

D/HoH CYP were at an enormous disadvantage compared to their hearing peers and there was certainly no equality of access to learning during this period.

We found that during this time D/HoH CYP who perhaps had not wanted to use a radio aid system previously were finding it increasingly difficult to access their education, either online or when back in school, because their teachers were wearing face coverings. Our Teachers of the Deaf worked tirelessly throughout this period engaging with mainstream teachers and settings to try to remove some of the barriers to learning that D/HoH CYP were facing on a daily basis. Much guidance and information was produced by the service: detail around making online learning more accessible for D/HoH CYP, guidance on face coverings, information about disinfecting radio aids, advice around using subtitling and speech to text apps, and instructions about connecting hearing aids and/or radio aids to computers, etc. This information and guidance was shared widely, and is still available on our website www.berkshiresensoryconsortium.co.uk

What we found during this period was that radio aids were becoming more important than ever for those with a hearing loss. Many young people told us that the challenges around listening at home or in their educational



This is Helen listening to a podcast through her radio aid, whilst being able to be in the same room as the rest of her family.



This picture shows an example of creative working: Lisa Bull, Ed Aud and Julia Battle, QToD, setting up a young person's newly issued radio aid on their front driveway.

settings was having a negative impact on their mental health and that they were feeling more and more isolated as time went on.

'Every deaf child should be considered as a potential candidate for provision with a personal radio aid ...' QS1. **Quality Standards for the use of personal radio aids, NDCS 2017.**

The Berkshire Sensory Consortium Service has always been committed to QS1, and as a result, we issue a large amount of assistive listening technology each year, for pre-schoolers all the way through to students in further education.

However, it was during the atypical academic year of 2020–2021, and in order to keep pace with the increased

demand from our young people, that we reached the milestone figure of providing and setting up over 100 radio aids – a record figure for the service and an increase of nearly 20% on previous years.

We were enormously proud to reach this milestone, albeit not quite in the circumstances we would have wanted.

Our amazingly dedicated team of QToDs worked hard to ensure that those children and young people who were now requesting assistive listening technology and those for whom it was very evident that access to their education was now increasingly difficult, if not impossible, were able to be issued with the equipment as soon as Covid restrictions allowed.

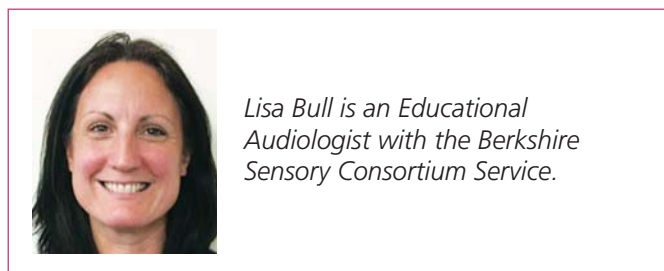
Radio aids were fitted in gardens, under gazebos when the weather was inclement, in the boots of cars on driveways, and in audiology clinics (when these were reopened after the first lockdown). ToDs became (or had they always been?) finders of solutions to problems which had seemed insurmountable. Where there was a will, there was a way!

If the last academic year has taught us anything, it is the need to be resilient in difficult circumstances. If there is a way to ensure that D/HoH CYP on our caseloads have the best access to their teaching and learning, whatever form that may take, then we will find it. We have learnt to be resourceful and flexible in the way we work. Providing support for a family on the doorstep is in no way ideal, but if it is the only way then we will do it.

It has also taught us to continually push the envelope. Who would have thought that we would issue a record number of radio aids and assistive listening technology in the most challenging year of the Berkshire Sensory Consortium's 23-year history? We will not rest on our laurels and will continue to work hard to encourage radio aid provision for all of the D/HoH CYP for whom it is appropriate.

Of course, we will always have to work within our budget, but with a little creativity and resourcefulness, why not aim for another 20% increase in the next, hopefully more normal, academic year?

Although perhaps this time there will be less need for gazebos and extension cables!



Lisa Bull is an Educational Audiologist with the Berkshire Sensory Consortium Service.

BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the Nov 2021 issue.

© BATOD 2021



BATOD
British Association of
Teachers of the Deaf

MAGAZINE • Nov 2021 • ISSN 1336-0799 • www.batod.org.uk

Communication

Spoken language
bilingualism
Language Therapy
in BSL
Why we need to
talk about work

Join BATOD to get THE Magazine for professionals in deaf education (0-25)

The cover features a collage of five photographs: two women standing outdoors, a boy and a woman at a table with cards, a man signing, a woman with a child, and a child holding dolls.