



**April 2008**

**The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)** exists to:

- promote opportunity and independence for all
- help individuals achieve their potential through employment
- work to end poverty in all its forms

As part of their role, staff need to communicate a lot using the telephone, email and written letters.

When communicating with deaf people, hearing people need to understand that there are barriers in written as well as face-to-face communication. The DWP identified these barriers as something that could restrict them providing an equal service to deaf members of the public as well as make work more difficult for staff.

DAT were brought in to train DWP staff on how to communicate clearly with deaf people with a focus on non face-to-face communication i.e. written.

DAT delivered a bespoke workshop to a team of call centre and office staff who were communicating with members of the public.

The first step was to explain the different types of deafness: Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing. Then staff learnt about the likely difficulties they would face, such as problems understanding written English.

Deaf (not deafened or hard of hearing) refers to people who were born deaf, they have lived their lives without

hearing and their level of English varies. This varied level is partly down to the way we all learn to speak a common language. When a hearing person grows up, a lot of learning to speak is by listening to and repeating words. This is the same for learning the structure of a language also. If the person is deaf, this natural way of learning is not available and so do not develop the language as easily as hearing people.

For many deaf people English is in fact their second language, the first being British Sign Language (BSL). BSL is the use of hand signs, gestures and facial expressions to communicate without sound. It is not an exact translation of English, but more of a visual adaptation.

The combination of using a visual language that isn't exactly the same as English, and growing up not hearing people speak means that the level of English language may not be to a similar standard of hearing people. This is where difficulties, miscommunication and frustration often occur – at both ends.

Staff learnt that the level of English language is not an indication of intelligence and that by understanding this, they can avoid awkward situations but more importantly be confident in providing a good level of service by creating a clear channel for communication, be it on the textphone, email or letters.

Want to be more deaf friendly? See our website or call **0845 466 7153**.