Technology and Innovation in the NHS
Scottish Council on Deafness (SCoD)

The Scottish Council on Deafness (SCoD) is the lead for all matters concerning deaf people and their issues in Scotland, representing organisations working with and on behalf of deaf people\(^1\): Deaf /Sign Language users, Deafblind, Deafened, and Hard of Hearing people. SCoD’s membership provides an effective working partnership between the Third, Public and Private Sectors (the Deaf Sector) and the Scottish Government.

SCoD sees a society where deaf people have equal access, equal rights and equal citizenship with their hearing peers. Deaf people have the right to be included, involved and active citizens in Scotland. While some progress has been made in this regard, there is still a way to go before deaf people’s rights to equality of access to goods, services and information in their own language and/or in a manner that they fully understand is the same as their hearing peers. [http://www.scod.org.uk/#](http://www.scod.org.uk/#)

SCoD uses a person-centred, human rights based approach and the social model of disability and recognises that the language/communication support needs of deaf people across the “four pillars of deafness are all different although some of the barriers that people face may be the same.

For example, the hearing world does not always recognise that there are differences in linguistic access depending on the level of deafness the person has and when they lost their hearing. This means that deaf people’s access to their rights is breached in a number of different ways on a daily basis.

Digital Health and Social Care Strategy 2017-2020

A draft vision for the new Digital Health and Social Care Strategy has been developed:

SCoD strongly supports the idea of increased use of technology and innovation in health and social care provision in Scotland as this should greatly improve the equality of access for deaf people in Scotland. We support the draft vision that states

“As a citizen of Scotland:
• I have access to the digital information, tools and services I need to help maintain and improve my health and wellbeing;
• I expect my health and social care information to be captured electronically, integrated and shared securely to assist service staff and carers that need to see it; and

\(^1\) The term “deaf” is used to refer to all people with a hearing loss. The term “four pillars of deafness: Deaf/Sign Language users, Deafblind, Deafened and Hard of Hearing people” is used to differentiate between the different levels of deafness and the different language/communication support needs people have.
• that digital technology and data will be used appropriately and innovatively to help plan and improve services, enable research and economic development and ultimately improve outcomes for everyone.”

As technology develops, it means that more people across the spectrum of deafness can have access to information, goods and services that they could not access previously.

For example, when NHS 24 initiated the service that became contactSCOTLAND-BSL Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users needed a PC and a webcam to use the service; now it can be used on tablets and smartphones through an app and so is portable and easy to use. Furthermore, SCoD believes that contactSCOTLAND-BSL could be extended to provide additional services that would benefit other deaf people, for example, providing online Notetaker services would benefit Deafened and very Hard of Hearing people as well as other people with a communication support need who require written notes to understand what is being said. The digital platform could also provide lipspeaking as another communication support need for deaf people.

Telecare systems were telephone-based only and so were not accessible for deaf people in the past. More recently, camera technology has been installed in several areas so that deaf people who can lipread can understand what is being said to them by social work and health staff. Other systems have a text option which allows deaf people the opportunity to read what is being said – similar to having an Electronic Notetaker in the room with them.

It is easier to produce information in British Sign Language now with digital equipment and advances in technology. Facebook makes it easier to consult with BSL users – see the Scottish Parliament’s consultation on the BSL (Scotland) Bill and the Scottish Government’s consultation on the draft BSL National Plan.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde are piloting a project where Deaf BSL users having inpatient treatment have access to tablets so that they can have a BSL/English Interpreter online when they need one rather than wait for healthcare staff to book one.

On an individual level, new digital hearing aids are making life much easier for deaf people as the audiologist can now use computer technology to set the aids to the level that will benefit the user; rather than the user having to work out what level the aid should be set at for different life circumstances. This set up was too complicated for many people, especially older people, meaning that their hearing aids were taken home and put in a drawer.

But there is still some way to go:

Online Interpreting
There are still too few BSL/English Interpreters to cover all appointments/meetings for Deaf BSL users in Scotland. Online video interpreting may be a significant solution to this problem as it would cut out the travelling time for Interpreters and allow more time for actual interpreting. This could be part of a suite of options which would refocus precious resources. There would still be a need for face-to-face interpreting but online services could be used much more widely.

**Speech to Text** software on tablets/smartphones could be used more widely to support communication with deaf people whose first language is English. This technology is used by people with a sight loss at the moment – text to speech – but can be used the opposite way for people who have little or no hearing. Software is being developed all the time that is more orientated to “non-American” accents so speech to text is becoming more accessible all the time.

**Induction loop systems** are much more sophisticated than they were in the past and are available as a portable system. All new or refurbished buildings should have integrated induction loop systems installed as **standard**.

**Visual calling systems**

Technology is such that it should be possible for all appointment spaces – GP surgeries, outpatients, social work services – to have visual calling systems that are accessible to deaf people.

**Entry systems**

In many health and social care premises, for safety reasons, door entry systems are used. These are not accessible for deaf people – in fact, they actively exclude deaf people. Camera systems are much more accessible as are those that allow the person to type a message to the person wanting to access the premises. Many health board/local authority car parks have telecom systems for entry, which excludes deaf people who are visiting, on Boards, or are members of staff. Camera and text technology is easier to install and much more accessible for everyone.

**Telephone systems**

More health and social care services are moving towards a more accessible contact system. Not only do they offer contact telephone numbers, but they also offer a textphone number, SMS contact, email and online services to make appointments, order repeat prescriptions/aids, access results. But not all do. With the increase in technology and innovation, all health and social care services in Scotland should be able to offer a number of accessible means of communication and contact.

**Training for staff**
Backfilling staff time is costly, but frontline staff in health and social care need deaf awareness and communication skill training on a regular basis to ensure they have the necessary skills to work with deaf people in Scotland, especially as the population ages, more people lose their hearing. With the greater use of technology, it is now easier to access accredited online training which can give staff a better understanding of what it means to be deaf and what needs to be in place to communicate with their deaf clients.

Staff who regularly come into contact with deaf people need more comprehensive training which will involve face to face training, but for everyone else online accredited training should be sufficient.

**Transport Safety**

Staff, visitors, service users and patients who have to travel to health and social care facilities too often face barriers in transport systems, deaf people especially. Technology can improve safety for all people. For example, working with rail and bus providers to ensure all bus and train services have rolling script at the transport hubs, including unmanned stations, as well as on the buses and trains takes away much anxiety for people attending appointments. Many car parks have a telephone in case of emergency but no way for deaf people to contact anyone in an emergency; it is the same with stations. Technological advances should allow for more imaginative methods of contact to be put in place to ensure everyone’s safety is paramount.