

I think most people when they think of 'Deafness' think of people born without the use of sound who grow up to communicate using British Sign Language as their first, or preferred, language. Whilst this is a significant group there are actually in excess of 8 **MILLION** people in the UK who had hearing all their lives and, for a variety of reasons, it departs – either gradually or totally. Add to that the people who lose hearing and sight and you're beginning to get the idea of the sheer numbers of people struggling to communicate. West Sussex Fire & Rescue figures for 2009 show that 144,000 people in West Sussex have hearing loss; 15,000 severe; 37,000 moderate & 92,000 mild.

For some people hearing loss means not quite following in a noisy or crowded environment but they get by without too much difficulty – even though the family may get exasperated from time to time!, strangely enough louder noises become more uncomfortable and difficult to cope with.

Other people may find a hearing aid supports residual hearing quite well and, whilst getting used to hearing aids can take some time, they manage their hearing loss and hearing aids competently. Action for Deafness offers a full NHS Audiology Service via GP referral and a private audiology service. AFD also has a comprehensive range of assistive listening devices (telephones, doorbells, alarm clocks, loops) available for you to try before you buy.

As hearing deteriorates it becomes increasingly difficult to follow what's being said and what's going on. Many of the people who visit us or we visit say they're becoming a 'stranger in their own life' – gradually they withdraw from their usual activities that involve interacting with other people. Loneliness and isolation are very very common.

About 20 years ago I woke up one morning with about a 95% loss of hearing – it was unexpected, I wasn't ill, hadn't had an accident – a virus (I suspect 'virus' is Latin for 'don't know'!) but for me and for my family it was devastating. Imagine your husband of more than 20 years having to write down 'would you like a cuppa' because you simply had no idea what he was saying! However, before you wipe away a tear, pause a moment! My best beloved (Gordon) in his quiet and thoughtful way is incredibly supportive, our son George equally determined that my life should be full and I should be fulfilled! With their continued assistance I lip-read (and am able to follow strangers sometimes too!) and speak clearly (if a little loudly!) I am up-to-date with new words and able to pronounce them too – no mean feat if you can't hear and testament to their efforts on my behalf. With their encouragement I continue to do all sorts of weird and peculiar things (I'm proud to say I can feel if our 1927 Austin is mis-firing long before Gordon can hear it!) we attend rallies and autojumbles where most people are terrific and just treat me as they treat everyone else, but gently making allowances for the inevitable wrong end of sticks and repeats!

But I am increasingly aware that not everyone has a Gordon and a George and that's where Action for Deafness can play a vital role supporting and encouraging others, regardless of hearing ability or not.

Being the chosen charity for Horsham Historics means a great deal and is very much appreciated, not just for the fundraising (urgently needed) but for the opportunity to raise awareness of a disability often overlooked. We're not glamorous (well, apart from me obviously!) we're not cute n fluffy (usually!) but our ability to live ordinary lives is a daily struggle and the impact on our family and friends can be considerable.

Action for Deafness will have a stall at Ardingly in 2012 (thank you!) and if you want to come and chat – help out – bring things n stuff for us to sell – you'll be made welcome (even if you DO have to say things a couple of times!)

We'll also have information and collecting tins at the start and finish of Drive-it-day we're easy to spot – we'll be the ones in yellow tee shirts looking wistfully at your wallet/purse!

Check out our website – www.actionfordeafness.org.uk to see precisely who we are and what we do.