



BRIEFING PAPER

TAG Relay Campaign – modernising deaf telecoms

1 July 2010

TAG is campaigning for better telecom services at fair prices for deaf people. Deaf people are falling behind hearing people in the ongoing telecoms revolution. Funds to modernise the existing national text relay service are not being provided even though better technologies exist. Services like video relay and captioned relay have been available to only a few people in the UK, although elsewhere in the world they are common. TAG urgently needs your support to help improve telecoms services for deaf people.

A national text relay service has been operating in the UK for many years and provides a lifeline for many deaf people. It is funded by BT as part of the Universal Service Obligation imposed on it by Ofcom. Until December 2009, RNID managed the service (called RNID Typetalk) under contract to BT, but BT is now taking the service in-house and rebranding it as Text Relay.

Text relay enables textphone users to contact voice phone users over the ordinary telephone network via a relay operator. It also allows deaf people to use their own voice (through Voice Carry Over – VCO) when a deaf person wants to speak to a hearing caller but receive text as the reply.

Technology has advanced considerably since the national text relay service was officially opened in the early 1990s. Relay services using modern, readily-available technologies including the Internet have appeared around the world.

For example, video relay calls over the Internet are popular. The deaf sign language user has a PC or a videophone and makes calls via a relay centre and sign language interpreter.

Captioned telephony, for hard-of-hearing people who want to speak on the telephone and both hear the replies and see them as text, is also very popular in the USA.

Both video relay and captioned relay enable conversations at near-natural pace and often hearing callers don't even notice that a relay operator is involved. Using older technology, the current VCO service is very slow and cumbersome by comparison.

There have been several attempts to provide relay services using newer technology in the UK, but few deaf people have had access to them and most have closed through a lack of funding. RNID, BDA and SignVideo have each set up video relay services for sign language users and Teletec ran a captioned telephony service called CapTel. Only the SignVideo service is still running.

No matter how low the costs of the technology, all relay services require a relay operator dedicated to each call. These operators are skilled and their services require resources. A phone call between hearing people costs something like one penny per minute; relay services start somewhere around one pound per minute. Not many individuals can afford a pound a minute. The Government's Access to Work scheme has provided a few people with funding for relay calls but only for work-related matters during working hours.

The main barrier to provision of new relay services is funding. If BT or any other agency were to provide such services significant costs would inevitably be incurred. TAG is campaigning for those resources to be provided.

TAG wants properly funded new-style relay services so that deaf people can play a full part in society. We have lots of examples of the differences that the new-style services can make to the lives of deaf people.

What TAG is doing

TAG has been working quietly with Ofcom for a long time and Ofcom is sympathetic to TAG's campaign aims. However, the way forward is complex. Ofcom has commissioned studies of the needs and the available technology and is studying what legal changes are needed to enable the creation and funding of new services.

We believe that it is not TAG's place to say how the services should be funded: that is the job of government. But TAG needs to make government and the general population aware of the problems.

So far TAG has issued a series of news releases (see Appendix 1) and case studies to raise awareness, organised a Parliamentary reception, initiated Parliamentary Questions and an Early Day Motion, and encouraged deaf people contact their MPs sometimes using the new style relay services.

TAG's campaign has received significant media coverage including the BBC News Online web site (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7327245.stm>) where there is an excellent video.

What TAG is asking for

TAG is asking Government, Parliament and Ofcom to ensure that the following are made available:

- **real-time text** that is interoperable and affordable on mobile and IP networks
- **captioned relay** that is interoperable, based on open standards and is available at no extra cost to a normal telephone call
- **video relay** using open standards for fixed, mobile and Internet users
- **internet access to all relay services** using open-standards
- **fair text and video relay tariffs on all mobile networks**
- **deaf-aware sales and customer services.**
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The United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities

The new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is very important to TAG's campaign and for deaf people in general. Many of TAG's campaigning aims will become rights when the convention is ratified. For example, in Article 9 (see Appendix 2) it says:

"To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities, access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas."

The full text of the Convention can be found at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=12&pid=150>

What you can do to help

The key to the campaign is to make sure that the government is aware of what we want and why it is so important to the lives of deaf people.

We are lobbying MPs of all parties while working with government departments and Ofcom.

- If you want to write or telephone your MP, please tell us and we can guide you on what to say.
- If you have a story to tell about how telecoms have changed or could change your life – please tell us.
- if you support our aims send in your details (name, postcode and whether you are deaf as a minimum) and we will send you email updates about the campaign.

Contact: deaftag@deaftag.org.uk