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**Not to be used before 00:01 hours, 29 March 2012**

## **NEW GUIDELINES ON PROVIDING LEGAL SERVICES TO PEOPLE WITH HEARING LOSS**

The Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) will be issuing best-practice guidelines for solicitors and firms it regulates about being deaf aware, after new research showed that legal services were often inaccessible to people with hearing loss.

According to the research people with hearing loss “*often felt like they were in a battle to be understood by their legal advisor*” and as a result can be vulnerable to being mistreated.

The research was undertaken by the Deaf Studies Trust on behalf of the SRA, the Legal Services Consumer Panel and Action on Hearing Loss – formerly RNID – the largest charity taking action on hearing loss. It was spurred by feedback from members of the Deaf community that legal services are not always accessible to them.

Nearly 50 people who are deaf or hard of hearing were interviewed by researchers and key findings include:

- Legal materials are not always well-adapted for the needs of deaf and hard of hearing people
- A lack of preparation and consideration of communication needs can lead to people with hearing loss being made to feel dependent and even ignorant by their own legal team
- Choice of suitable legal advisors for people with hearing loss is often limited due to low awareness of options or feeling rebuffed due to their needs;
- People with hearing loss may not feel confident their legal advisor is fully on their side or working closely enough with them because they demonstrate low ‘deaf awareness’;
- Communication barriers, such as badly maintained loop systems or even poorly-lit meeting rooms can mean people who are deaf or hard of hearing can struggle to know what is going on; and

- Sign language interpreters are not always being supplied by lawyers when requested, and there is confusion on both sides over who should pick up the costs.

A number of actions are being taken forward, including:

- The SRA arranging readily-available advice for legal advisors and law firms about best practice in providing services to consumers who are deaf or hard of hearing;
- Action on Hearing Loss leading the development of support information for consumers, in both written form and British Sign Language; and
- The Legal Services Consumer Panel writing to the Equality and Human Rights Commission to urge it to provide clarity on who pays for sign language interpreters.

**Elisabeth Davies**, Chair of the Legal Services Consumer Panel, said:

*“Deaf and hard of hearing consumers often feel like they have to win a battle with their own advisor before they can succeed in legal action involving another party. Good communication is crucial in any advice setting, but this research shows lawyers must work harder to adjust to the needs of this consumer group.”*

**Jackie Ballard**, Chief Executive of Action on Hearing Loss, said:

*“Poor communication can have devastating consequences in a legal setting. There is some really good practice across England and Wales, but there is much more to do. We are delighted that the Solicitors Regulation Authority is issuing best-practice guidelines on this issue.”*

**Antony Townsend**, Chief Executive of the Solicitors Regulation Authority, said:

*“The legal practitioners and firms we regulate have flexibility to tailor their services in ways that best fit the needs of individual consumers, and this flexibility can be used to great effect in accommodating the communication preferences of someone with hearing loss. The report highlights a gap in terms of easy-to-find best-practice advice for legal services providers when they are approached by new clients with hearing loss, and we are working with other organisations including the Law Society to fill this gap. This research project also sets an ideal marker for us to look at the experiences of other vulnerable consumer groups and how their needs can be better supported by legal services providers. ”*

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**For more information please contact:**

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### **Notes to editors**

1. The [Legal Services Consumer Panel](#) was established under the Legal Services Act 2007 to provide independent advice to the Legal Services Board about the interests of consumers of legal services in England and Wales. We investigate issues that affect consumers and use this information to influence decisions about the regulation of legal services.
2. [Action on Hearing Loss](#) – formerly RNID – is the UK’s largest charity taking action on hearing loss. We want a world where hearing loss doesn’t limit or label people – and where people value their hearing enough to look after it.
3. The [Solicitors Regulation Authority](#) is the independent regulatory body of the Law Society of England and Wales. We regulate in the public interest, and oversee more than 110,000 individuals and 11,000 organisations providing legal services.
4. It is estimated that hearing loss now affects more than 10 million people across the UK – see <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/policy-research-and-influencing/hearing-matters.aspx>
5. The Deaf Studies Trust's research report can be viewed here: [http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/publications/research\\_and\\_reports/index.html](http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/publications/research_and_reports/index.html)
6. The Legal Services Consumer Panel’s letter to the Equality and Human Rights Commission is here: <http://www.legalservicesconsumerpanel.org.uk/ourwork/consumersriskofdisadvantage.html>