EDITORIAL POLICY GUIDANCE

HEARING IMPAIRED AUDIENCES

(Last updated: March 2011)

EDITORIAL POLICY ISSUES

This guidance note should be considered in conjunction with the following Editorial Guidelines:

• Accountability
  See Editorial Guidelines Section 19 Accountability

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

• The key message is for programme makers to consider the intelligibility of their content at all times.

• Make sound a priority. Think of it at all stages of the production, from planning to post-production.

• Unclear speech, unfamiliar or strong accents, background noise and background music can all affect intelligibility. Audibility can be particularly compromised when more than one of these issues combine.

• Reducing background music by one PPM point (peak monitor reading) allows many more people to hear what is being said without necessarily compromising editorial vision.

• BBC’s Audience Services monitors the number of complaints we receive about a programme’s audibility. If a substantial number of justifiable complaints are made, production teams will be contacted and asked to remix the programme for future transmission, and to confirm that any
subsequent episodes in the series are mixed to achieve the best audibility possible.

- Deaf children may use a combination of techniques to interpret output.
GUIDANCE IN FULL

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Introduction

The BBC is committed to ensuring that its programmes and services are as accessible as is reasonably possible to all people, whatever their impairments or disabilities. We want all audiences to have the best chance of hearing our programmes. Under Part Three of the Disability Discrimination Act the BBC has a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that this is the case. What is "reasonable" will evolve as technology develops and this guidance is kept under review. The BBC consults a range of disability organisations regularly.

This guidance shows how we can improve access to our content and services for people with hearing loss. The key message is for programme makers to consider the intelligibility of their content at all times – make sound a priority.

The BBC provides subtitling services and some signed services for programmes and online content to further enhance the access by audiences with hearing loss to our programmes.

More information on subtitling and sign language can be found on the following sites:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/subtitles.shtml

http://www.bbc.co.uk/accessibility/win/hearing/alt/sub_2.shtml

http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/categories/signed/
**Awareness**

Around one in seven of the population is deaf or hard of hearing. Age related hearing loss can begin while people are in their forties and fifties and many people do not realise their hearing is deteriorating.


The National Deaf Children’s Society estimates that approximately 1.6 million children experience hearing loss at any one time in the UK.

Hearing loss results in a decline in the ability to hear certain or all frequencies. There are four key factors that can make it hard for viewers to hear what is being said:

- **Clarity of speech:** poor and very fast delivery, mumbling and muffled dialogue, turning away from camera, people talking over each other, trailing off at the end of sentences.

- **Unfamiliar or strong accents:** Audiences find accents other than their own harder to understand. The BBC is committed to representing as wide a mix of voices as possible so we need to ensure we record all speech with the utmost care.

- **Background noise:** locations with heavy traffic, babbling streams, farmyard animals, in fact any intrusive background noise can make it difficult to hear what’s being said. Hearing for high-pitched sounds is usually worse than for low-pitched sounds. This means that low-pitched sounds like traffic, fans and air conditioning or rumbling background effects and music are more likely to cover up the sounds of speech.

- **Background music:** particularly heavily percussive music or music with spikes that cut across dialogue. The cochlea, which is the auditory
portion of the inner ear, often no longer properly separates out the
different components of sound. This means that speech and music
may appear distorted, blurred or muffled, even when they are
amplified. Turning up the volume will not necessarily improve
intelligibility and may even exacerbate the problem.

Any of these issues can create problems for viewers, but our research shows
that when these factors combine, then many people struggle to understand.
Best Practice

Extensive research by the BBC has given us clear information on what we can do to improve the listening experience for our audiences who have a hearing impairment, without sacrificing our creative or editorial aspirations. Audio should be considered at all stages of the production, from planning to the final dub, as a central part of the programme. Sound plays an essential role in story-telling.

**Pre-production**

- Think about sound before you shoot a frame. Is your location the right choice? What sound problems might there be? Choose your location with sound in mind.

- It is preferable to use a trained sound recordist but if you are self-shooting, make sure you have got proper sound training. (The College of Production website has tips on producing good sound: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/collegeofproduction/tv/sound_matters_danny_cohen](http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/collegeofproduction/tv/sound_matters_danny_cohen))

- Choose the right mics for the situation. Whilst camera mics can be used for some situations, separate mics and tracks give you the greatest flexibility. Ensure they are sited correctly. Does it really matter if lapel mics are in shot if they will deliver the best sound in the particular circumstances?

- Build in time for a sound rehearsal.

**Production**

- A rich mix of international, national and regional accents on our channels is important. Seeing people’s mouths makes it easier to understand.
• Coach presenters, performers, and contributors to keep dialogue clear; not to tail off at the end of sentences and to recap salient points where necessary.

• When possible, stop people talking over each other.

• Record each person on a separate channel where possible.

• Be aware of background noise.

• Ask the person responsible for sound if the takes are acceptable.

• Usually things can’t be fixed in the edit!
Post-production

- Listen carefully to content in the edit.
- If there is any doubt about audibility then rethink how to tell the story.
- “Loudness” is more important than peak meter readings, so listen to the mix. The loudness of location material is different from sound-booth recordings, even though the peak metering may be the same.
- Maintain a clear distinction between background and foreground sound.
- Be especially careful about the use of background sound when the speaker is not in view and therefore it is not possible to read their lips.
- Take care when using a narrator with a voice which might be obscured by background sound, for example when working with a presenter with a soft voice.

Music:

- Think about the role of music in the unfolding narrative. Are you using too much music? Is the background music actually necessary? Can you cut or fade it when words are being spoken?
- Avoid the use of music with vocals in combination with the spoken word.
- Choose music that is not too dynamic, i.e. that does not have a lot of short peaks that would interfere with the speech track. Instrumentation can be important – a 'wash' of strings, for example, is much less intrusive than a solo trumpet. Certain styles of piano music and percussion can be very difficult to mix satisfactorily with speech.
- Music that is specially written to be heard at a low level under speech should be mixed so that the melody is not too prominent.
• Take the music down. A mix which sounds fine in the dub may still cause problems for some viewers. In BBC research, a reduction of one PPM (peak meter monitoring) improved audibility for almost all viewers with hearing loss – with little impact on the creative vision of the producer or director.

• For viewers, theme tune music usually sets the sound level for the rest of the programme, so ensure consistency.

• Get someone unfamiliar with your programme to the edit – they will be able to tell you if there’s a problem you’ve missed. Make this part of your routine.

• Listen back to the final mix on a normal TV or on a PC.

And to help convey information:

• Where information which the audience can act on is communicated aurally, it should also be displayed clearly on screen. For example, where telephone numbers and addresses or details of goods and services are spoken, they should also be shown as well.

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Deaf Children

Deaf children use varying combinations of subtitles, lip-reading, sign language and other visual clues to help them understand television content.
The younger the child the more likely they are to benefit from clear visual signposting.

BBC Children’s has worked with the National Deaf Children’s Society to produce guidelines for makers of children’s output, to ensure their content is accessible and inclusive of deaf children. See here (link to internal BBC site only).

**Promotional Trails**

Programme trails should provide programme titles, time and day information visually as well as verbally.
Further Advice

The BBC College of Production website has an online resource with tips on producing good sound so that content can be intelligible to the biggest audience possible, whilst keeping the editorial vision intact.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/collegeofproduction/tv/sound_matters_danny_cohen

There is also a self shooting sound course available.

http://learn.gateway.bbc.co.uk/Courses/CourseDetails.aspx?CourseID=2730