

Worcester U3A: A Qualitative Survey of Hearing Experiences

Summary

The incidence of hearing loss in the general population increases with age, from around 15% at 55 years-old and reaching upwards of 80% at age 80+ years. The development of age-related hearing loss overlaps the age range of the Worcester U3A membership, suggesting that a significant number of individuals may be unable to get the full benefit from member activities because of issues with hearing.

Seven individuals contributed to the qualitative, interview-based survey. The focus is on identifying hearing experiences when attending speech-based groups within Worcester U3A, whether presentation-led or discussion-based. Participants' quality of hearing varies between the continuous use of hearing aids to having no reported hearing issue. Six of the seven participants attend at least three groups, both speech- and activity-based, broadly similar to the mix offered within Worcester U3A (group attendance of one participant was not noted).

The experience of participants suggests that the following elements make a positive contribution to the quality of the hearing experience:

- **Proximity** – sitting at the front of a presentation or, in a discussion-based group, with seating arranged in a circle or U-shape.
- **Visibility** – maintaining visibility of the face of the person speaking; the speaker turning away or covering their face leads to problems hearing; this is true whether the speaker is a presenter, another member of the group or the leader of an activity.
- **Volume** – the greatest difference between the volume of the speaker and background noise is required; individuals who project their voice, presenters who use a microphone correctly and sound systems that are used effectively all help; background noise from outside or inside the room detracts from hearing well.
- **Clarity** – clarity requires voice projection, good enunciation and a paced rate of speech; background noises, and particularly, background conversations significantly impact on the quality of the hearing experience.
- **Assistance and awareness** – optimally arranged seating, visual aids to augment a presentation, the use of amplified sound in larger groups, presenters who repeat audience questions and individual members who make an effort to speak clearly make positive contributions to hearing. Such positive steps are more likely to be put into practice if there is a good level of awareness.

There are particular issues for hearing when there are competing conversations, for instance, when sub-groups are employed within a larger group session, e.g. language practice, or tea and coffee breaks taken away from a seat. Background conversations have a significant impact on both the volume and clarity of speech heard; separating the distance between conversations, ensuring members in a smaller group are close and facing each other, and using names to catch people's attention, improves the hearing experience.

A number of situations benefit from the use of amplified sound, e.g. with theatre-style seating. Sound systems improve the quality of hearing in groups where the distance between speaker and listener is more than a few metres, and in situations where there is a higher level of background noise.

Individuals who use a hearing aid may prefer an induction-loop system, but not all members with hearing loss have a hearing aid or the hearing aid may not be capable of receiving an induction-loop signal. Consequently, the use of an induction-loop requires augmenting with amplified sound.

Consideration also needs to be given as to the optimum type of microphone to use both with an induction loop system and with amplified sound. The best choice depends on the nature of the group.

Group leaders have a central role in assessing the situation that exists within their groups and in the implementation of initiatives. To maximise the uptake of hearing initiatives, suggestions should be simple and tailored to the needs of group leaders and the type of group. Actively involving group leaders and members in initiatives is essential to their success.

Recommendations are:

1. Adopt the presumption that every member activity involves one or more individuals with hearing loss that would benefit from some kind of support.
2. Promote hearing awareness within all parts of Worcester U3A – members, presenters and group leaders.
3. Support the broader adoption of positive hearing practices by group leaders and presenters.
4. Establish how best to use technological solutions across different situations and assess the implications for cost.

Project team

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