



# Deaf Perspectives on Hospital Access: A Walkthrough at Midland Metropolitan University Hospital



Engaging  
Communities  
Solutions

**healthwatch**  
Sandwell

# Introduction

Healthwatch Sandwell (HWS) is the independent voice of the public in health and social care in Sandwell. Healthwatch Sandwell collect feedback from the public in Sandwell about their experiences of using health and social care services and use that feedback to work with service providers and commissioners to find ways to improve services. One of the ways that we collect feedback is to carry out projects that reflect the priorities of the public and that focus on particular services, conditions or parts of the community.

## Context

The Midland Metropolitan University Hospital (MMUH) opened on 6 October 2024. With such a huge change in patient service delivery locations, there are challenges for patients, visitors and staff wayfinding around the hospital. The usefulness and effectiveness of hospital signage is a key part of the experience people receive.

The term **wayfinding** describes the processes people go through to find their way round an environment. The wayfinding process is fundamentally problem-solving and is affected by many factors, people's perception of the environment, the wayfinding information available, their ability to orientate themselves spatially, and the cognitive and decision-making processes they go through, all affect how successfully they find their way."

Through our work programme 2025/26 listening tour we found that people were dissatisfied with services and care received at the Midland Metropolitan University Hospital, including **wayfinding** to appointments and when visiting people who were receiving treatment.

## Hospital care



**24 % dissatisfied**

**The Midland  
Metropolitan  
University Hospital –  
the first 12 months  
A range of issues  
including:  
Signage**

In March 2023 HWS produced a report **Accessibility: Are health and social care services meeting information and communication needs?** The finding provided insight and detail to highlight that overall services are not sufficiently, or consistently, meeting the Accessible Information Standard. Therefore Sandwell residents with disabilities, sensory loss, or impairments there is inequity in access and receipt of health and care services and inequalities in health and mental wellbeing.

<https://www.healthwatchsandwell.co.uk/sites/healthwatchsandwell.co.uk/files/A.%20Accessibility%20final%20report%20PDF.pdf>

Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospital Trust (SWBHT) also recognised that there were challenges with **wayfinding** especially for people who had semantic barriers, physical disabilities or who were frail.

## Aim and Objectives

This project will look at the experiences of people from vulnerable and marginalised groups who reside in Sandwell **wayfinding** around the hospital. This will include:

- ❖ Communication from SWBHT about “appointment” details
- ❖ Preparation for the visit
- ❖ Getting to the site
- ❖ Getting around the site
- ❖ Arriving for their “appointment”

## Target population and recruitment

- ❖ People with sensory impairments
- ❖ People with physical disabilities
- ❖ People with learning disabilities
- ❖ People with Autism
- ❖ People who have poor mental health
- ❖ People who are frail
- ❖ People who do not speak English

Participants have been recruited through networks, social media platforms and our website. We will work closely with other organisations who will collaborate with HWS to support in the **wayfinder** experience

# Wayfinding Experiences of people who are deaf or who have hearing loss



HWS worked in partnership with **Sandwell Deaf Community Association**

A charity led by deaf people delivering specialist services for deaf people across Sandwell and the Black Country. Working in partnership with Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council as a specialist service provider delivering services to deaf, deafened, hard of hearing and people with a dual sensory loss. We can support people

to access emotional wellbeing and mental health support services.

[https://www.facebook.com/deaf.sandwell/about/?ref=page\\_internal&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/deaf.sandwell/about/?ref=page_internal&_rdr)

6 people took part, 5 people who were deaf or who have significant hearing loss. and 1 BSL Interpreter The group was ethnically diverse, of mixed gender and all over the age of 60.

## Appointment scenario letter

SWBHT supplied a scenario letters for members of the group to **wayfind**. The group decided on the appointment made to see one of the Respiratory Medicine team.

(appendix one).

Feedback on what would be of support for deaf or those who are hard of hearing within the hospital appointment letter:

- ❖ Correspondence from hospitals should be personalised to people with disabilities – the type of disability should be recorded on personal files
- ❖ Information about using public transport, including the nearest stop point for MMUH.
- ❖ More information relating to appointment time – “plan to be early” for example.
- ❖ Directions/observation points for kiosk Medical Day Case.
- ❖ **Information about how to call regarding appointment if deaf or who have hearing loss**
- ❖ What are the timescales for booking an interpreter – concerns about an appointment letter arriving a few days prior to the appointment?





The group started their journey at West Bromwich bus station and were using appointment scenarios provided by SWBHT. National Express works in partnership with local organisations to ensure all drivers and customer service staff receive training on how to support people with hearing impairments.

New buses are fitted with screens and provide customers with visual and audio 'Next Stop' information. There are hearing/induction loops fitted around the driver cab and priority seating area to support customers who use hearing aids. Customers can also make use of journey assistance cards. These cards have helpful messages written on them to support communication while travelling. These can be delivered to you free of charge.

<https://nxbus.co.uk/west-midlands/help-information/disability-awareness-accessibility>

The group identified that there were several buses that travelled within the vicinity of MMUH, on this occasion the bus number 89 was used. The MMUH was clearly shown on with a digital display at the bus stop and there were digital displays on the bus which members of the group found helpful.

There was thirty minutes wait for the bus the bus timetable was not accurate. The bus arrived at a stop close to MMUH but look over forty minutes as the route went around a large housing estate in Smethwick. The outcome was a late arrival for the appointment.

**national  
express West Midlands**

The bus route does not show all of the stops before arrival at MMHU – just these stops listed below.

West Bromwich to Midland Metropolitan Hospital via Cape Hill | Londonderry | Smethwick | Kenrick Park Monday to Friday From 1st June 2025

There are **31** stops in total, the last stop being MMUH.

Members of the group recommended the following improvements that would make a journey to MMUH better.



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Members of the group main concern for deaf or who have significant hearing loss using public transport was that they could arrive too late for their appointment and would have to wait for another appointment after already waiting a considerable time in the first instance.

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## Accessing MMUH

One immediate issue I encountered was the lack of clear signage in display areas, it was not obvious where the respiratory medicine department was located, a significant barrier for people with communication or sensory needs. One of the hospital volunteers kindly provided me with a printed list of all the departments within the MMUH, which helped me identify the location. However, this format could be challenging for deaf BSL users without further support or visual aids. It was difficult to lip read the volunteer but when I asked if they could support speech with gestures they did oblige.

When I approached the lifts, they were out of order, there were no other lifts available to use – only the stairs. This concerned me, especially for people with physical disabilities or with respiratory conditions. Accessibility should be a fundamental consideration in any healthcare setting. I was approached by a nearby staff member who told me that the lifts are frequently out of order. Our communication was basic due to me being deaf, he kindly escorted me through an alternative staff only route. After quite a long walk we arrived at our appointment destination. There was no clear signage or indication that I had reached the right place. A member of staff from the ward eventually helped guide me to the right place. There was no evidence or display informing of provision to support deaf, deaf blind or people who are hard of hearing. When I was ready to leave another member of staff had to escort me to a different area where I could access a lift that was working

### Outcome of the scenario appointment

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The appointment time was 11.30am. Members of the group arrived at their appointment at 12.40, one hour and ten minutes late! Reasons being:

1. The challenges of using public transport.
  2. Difficulties in finding the entrance to MMUH.
  3. The lack of signage directing members of the group to the appointment destination.
  4. Lifts not working.
  5. Staff had limited understanding of communicating with deaf or people with significant hearing loss.
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### Other observations.

- ❖ Arriving via public transport at the main entrance there are no signs for Accident and Emergency (A&E)
- ❖ Confusion as nothing indicating that the Welcome Center was the reception area – we were looking for “reception.”
- ❖ In the A&E Department there are no digital displays/signs indicating when a person is being called. Hospital staff were calling out people’s names but for deaf or people with significant hearing loss we would not understand when it was our turn to be seen, we may miss our turn.
- ❖ We were confused by the signage “Birthing Unit” although concluded that this was maternity department.

# Conclusion

Members of the group recommend that in order for the **wayfinder** experience to be improved for people who are deaf or who have significant hearing loss, SWBHT should make the following improvements:

- ❖ Appointment letters for people who are deaf or with significant hearing loss be made available through a texting service for clarification and in case appointments are cancelled or changed to a different date/time.
- ❖ Appointment letters highlight information about public transport and timescales to get to appointments in a timely way.
- ❖ Clear signage (what local people understand) in the main reception, maternity, and in A&E



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## Get in touch

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Share your feedback on Health and Social Care services in Sandwell by using the "Have Your Say" section on our website.

<https://www.healthwatchsandwell.co.uk/share-your-views>

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