Sound Advice

(How to use Assisted Listening Devices in the Community Centre)

Issue 1 - Oct 2026 – Buckingham U3A Tech Support

The Journey

Erica Barrett, who has severe hearing loss, and Steve Meakin, who has age-related hearing loss, embarked on a journey to understand how to make U3A Open sessions better for those with hearing impairment. This article particularly relates to the Buckingham Community Centre and the U3A – but we hope it will be useful for many other situations.

Erica summarised her frustration, with being unable to hear presenters, as follows:

In the olden days when lecturers / speakers looked at the big screen and spoke facing the audience, clicking their pointer to change the screen, it was easier: facing their audience seemed to automatically make them 'throw' their voices and to instinctively speak more clearly. But now, their heads are bent down towards their laptop (so no lips to watch) and they can see that the picture has moved on, so have no need to look up. Also, as the laptop sheds its own light, the hall is darker than of yore, making lip-reading impossible.

All this, combined with challenging acoustics in the hall and not being able to connect to either the hearing loop and/or Bluetooth, means that anyone in this situation might never come to a talk again!

Our Findings

Ultimately the problem didn't appear to be funding, equipment, legislation or the desire to do the right thing. 'It's just complicated' to see how everything fits together seemed to be the issue.

In this article we hope to explain and provide practical assistance to anyone who has hearing difficulties and uses the Community Centre. We welcome any comments to help keep this updated. Also please feel free to share this document with anyone who might benefit from it.

Summary of what we have learned

- There is a functional Hearing Loop in the Main Hall of the Community Centre
- In parallel to the loop, the U3A have a functioning 'Auracast' transmitter
- We have tweaked the PA system for speech from a live presenter
- We are considering live subtitles, if there is a demand

As a result, we have prepared three sources of information as Appendices:

1. For anyone with hearing difficulties
2. For Venue Organisers
3. For Speakers/Presenters

We'd particularly like to thank the Community Centre team (especially Maria) and the Buckingham U3A Committee for all the support they've willingly given us. Also, thanks to the RNID and the NHS for all the useful data we've been able to access from them.

(Steve can be contacted on 'technical.support@buckinghamu3a.org.uk')

Appendix 1 – Information for Anyone With Hearing Difficulties

- **Hearing Loop** There is an operational hearing/induction loop in the main hall of the Community Centre. This means you can get a direct feed from the Public Address microphones to your hearing aids. Hearing aids should have both a telecoil loop (giving Loop + some surround sound) and Loop only (excluding surround sound). Hearing Loops are the usual way that Public Venues meet Disability and Equality legislation. They are also likely to be around for a long time and can work at the same time as new methods such as 'Auracast, which will add clarity to existing Loop systems.'

  If there is a hearing loop, particularly in a public venue, then you will see this sign. This needs a device with a telecoil receiver. Most hearing aids provided by the NHS have a telecoil.

  Your audiologist will need to set up a telecoil programme on your device. Speak to your audiologist if you do not have a telecoil programme, or if you're not sure. You'll need to switch to the telecoil programme. This is sometimes called the loop programme or 'T'-setting. You can switch it on by pressing a button on the device. You may need to press it more than once to get to the right programme. Check the instructions provided by your audiologist.

Hearing loop Logo

- **Bluetooth and Auracast.** Most hearing devices are 'Bluetooth-enabled'. This doesn't currently mean you can connect to the PA system. It just means you can 'pair' with your Smartphone.

  Auracast is the future and is a new version of Bluetooth. With classic Bluetooth you have to 'pair' with one (or a maximum of two) devices. Auracast overcomes this with no limit on the amount of people who can listen on either headphones or assisted listening devices. At the time of writing no NHS supplied devices are 'Auracast' compatible – but in the future they will be. The U3A has purchased an Auracast Transmitter - which they will be using for Open meetings. This Transmitter will also be available for any Groups who wish to use it.

Auracast Transmitter used by U3a

Auracast Logo

- **Seating.** If you like to lip-read then please sit wherever is best for you. Should you wish to sit on the front row, you could ask the organiser to reserve you a seat. It should also mean the loudspeaker is at its loudest.
- **Induction loop receiver i**f you want to use the hearing loop but don't have a suitable device then we (U3A) do have an induction receiver/tester, with earphones, that you are welcome to use.

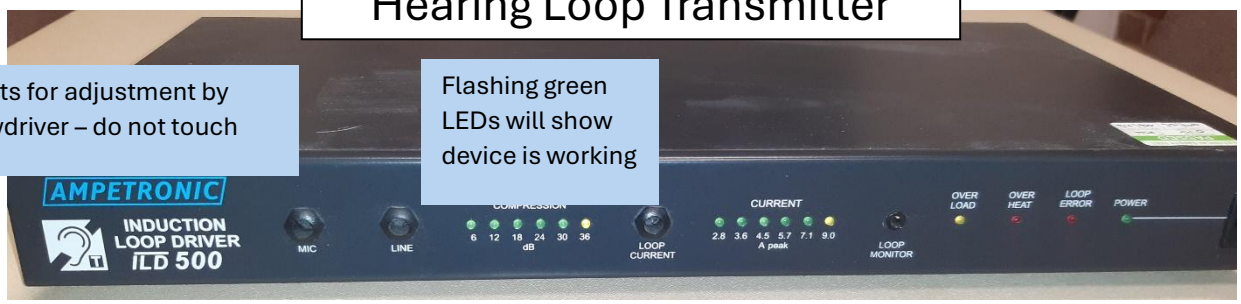
Induction loop Receiver/Tester

- **Subtitles.** These are becoming more and more popular with theatres, tv shows, and online apps such as Teams or Zoom. (Some people find them helpful even if they aren't diagnosed with hearing loss). With Artificial Intelligence it is quite possible, in real time, to connect the PA system to a computer. The computer can then, on a screen, display the automatic subtitles. Care would have to be taken that the subtitles aren't distracting to others and that everyone realises the subtitles can be wrong. We are keen to hear if this would be useful to any U3A members as we have not yet tried it.

Appendix 2 – Information for Venue Organisers

- **Public Address System.** The Community Centre is an excellent multifunction building. With many sound reflective surfaces, it can, however, be 'acoustically challenging'. There are some high-quality loudspeakers in the Community Centre but understanding speech can be difficult because of the sound reflections. For U3A events we find the following works well:
    - We provide presenters with a wireless headset microphone to get a good 'signal'
    - We use a loudspeaker, close to the presenter, so that the sound reinforces rather than overrides them. The tone controls are tweaked for 'Speech' rather than 'Music'. The loudspeaker is placed low to reduce echoes The audience naturally absorbs reflected sound and the empty centre gangway means sound can be heard at the back of the hall as well as the front
- **Hearing Loop**. One of the issues is cables being moved on the mixer and put back in the wrong sockets. This means the hearing loop no longer works (which is a legal requirement) but, unless you have a hearing loop receiver, you wouldn't know. The solutions to this are:
    - **Do not move/unplug the cables on the audio mixer as it could stop the hearing loop working**
    - If, for any reason the hearing loop is not working then see the picture below for the Hearing Loop transmitter. It only has three inputs (at the back) which are:
        i. a mains (kettle) plug for power
        ii. 3 pin XLR for audio input. The output from the mixer to the hearing loop is from the 'CTRL ROOM OUT' by a ¼" jack plug which goes to an XLR plug
        iii. a 'Speakon' connector for the wiring loop
    - If the hearing loop is functioning you will see a bright row of green LEDs flashing on the front of the hearing loop transmitter in response to the volume of the PA
    - Steve has a hearing loop tester/receiver which can be used to listen to the loop around the main hall

Hearing Loop Transmitter



Presets for adjustment by screwdriver – do not touch

Flashing green LEDs will show device is working

1. Standard Mains Kettle Power input Connector

2. Speakon output connector to wire induction loop around entire Main Hall

3. XLR microphone socket input

- **Auracast Transmitter.** This is connected to power by a USB-C cable and gets its audio input via a 3.5mm jack socket. This can be connected by a 3.5mm stereo jack plug to the transmitter and then by two mono ¼" stereo jack plugs to the mixer output

Sound Mixer

This is what the connections to the mixer should look like. The output to the Auracast can use the 'Main Out' connections in parallel to feeding to the amp inputs

Appendix 3 – Advice to Presenters

We've had many excellent presenters for the U3A – and would like to share this best practice, so please (in no particular order)

1. Use a suitable microphone – ideally a provided wireless headset, ensuring it is correctly placed on the face and not hiding the mouth (for lipreaders). If a clip-on mic has to be used, please ensure it is clipped where it will cause minimum distortion.
2. Face your audience as much as possible.
3. Double-check with the audience that they can hear you clearly. All speakers ask 'Can you hear me', but it is preferable to say: 'Is my speech coming to you clearly?' If not, then try readjusting headset/ clip-on mic position.
4. Please give a **very** brief resume of what you will be talking about. This will help the audience to follow the 'flow' of your talk.
5. Use a remote to control your presentation so that you can maintain **eye** contact with the audience
6. Realise that people who need to lip-read will usually sit at the front of the venue.
7. Speak clearly, normally, and into the microphone.
8. Avoid 'being in the shadows' in order that your face can be seen clearly.
9. Remember that if someone raises a question 'from the floor' and doesn't use a microphone then anyone with hearing difficulties won't hear them. Please repeat questions from the floor through your mic so that all can hear the question prior to giving your answer.