Management of Hearing Assistance Systems in Auditoria

Introduction

The *Equality Act 2010* and the *Building Regulations 2010* (Part M: 2004 edition) require that communication aids should be made available in public premises to assist the many people who have hearing impairment, although not all of them use devices to assist themselves. The World Federation of the Deaf sign indicates facilities for deaf people.

Whilst systems such as signing using British Sign Language and captioning exist they can be very expensive to use at every performance. As far as is known previous systems using radio frequencies have been discontinued although some systems using Bluetooth are becoming available. Therefore for most auditoria the choice of a hearing assistance system will be either an inductive loop or an infra-red installation.

Patrons with hearing impairment are often accompanied by someone who can ensure their safety. However to comply with the *Equality Act* it is sensible for the hearing assistance system to also carry general announcements made within the auditorium as well as any voice evacuation instructions. For this reason consideration should be given to providing hearing assistance in other public areas of the venue as well as in the auditorium.

Managing the System

The success of any system requires that a number of key points are addressed:

- The system must be kept as free as possible from noise caused by electrical and/or magnetic interference.
- Whether the audio input to the system is derived from strategically-placed dedicated microphones or from the show mixer, it should be as clean and uncoloured as possible; too much reverberation or echo will make it difficult for the listener to discern what is being said or sung.
- It is important that a designated member of staff regularly confirms that the system is working as expected. All problems identified should be rectified as quickly as possible. However, if any problem is identified and cannot be rectified before the next scheduled performance, prominent notices should be displayed stating that the system is not operational. All Box Office and Front of House staff should also be made aware of the situation.
- The existence of a hearing assistance system and the type of system in use should be made clear in all advertising material.
- It is vitally important that all Box Office and Front of House staff are trained to ensure that patrons are aware of the existence of the hearing assistance system and the type of system in use. This is especially important if the system uses infra-red signalling because the necessary receiver has to be provided by the theatre.
- If it is not practicable to ensure the system covers every seat in the auditorium then it is essential that all Box Office and Front of House staff know the location of seats which are within the coverage.
- All Front of House staff should be trained to assist patrons who may have difficulties with using the chosen system. They should also be aware of any performances when the system will not be operational.
- Touring companies, especially bands and singers, may still insist that inductive loop systems must be switched off whilst they are rehearsing or performing. To ensure that this situation does not arise at the last minute it should be made clear in the venue contract that the system will be in use at all times.

Points to consider when choosing a system

Both inductive loop and infra-red systems have advantages and disadvantages.

Inductive loop system

This sign indicates that a loop system is in use. People who have a hearing aid fitted with a "T" switch can receive enhanced sound.

Advantages:

- comparatively easy to install
- relatively low in cost
- can be discreet for patrons who do not wish for their use of the system to be obvious
- requires little management effort beyond ensuring that it is switched on and working
- does not usually require any additional equipment
- careful positioning of the loop cable during installation should minimise any interference with other audio equipment.

Disadvantages:

- prone to electrical and magnetic noise, especially from lighting control equipment
- does not always produce a good quality audio signal
- can be difficult to arrange coverage of large or variable seating areas
- will interfere with other audio equipment unless care is taken during design and installation
    - touring companies, especially bands and singers, may still try and insist that inductive loop systems must be switched off whilst they are rehearsing or performing. It is essential therefore this situation does not arise at the last minute; it should be made clear in the venue contract that the inductive loop system will be in use at all times unless it has otherwise been agreed in advance and in writing.

Infra-red system

This sign indicates that an infra-red system is in use. People who own or have borrowed or hired a suitable hearing aid can receive enhanced sound.

Advantages:

- generally gives very good audio quality
- can more easily be arranged to cover large or variable seating areas
- not prone to magnetic noise and is less sensitive to electrical interference
- a second channel may be used for example to provide audio description for blind people

Disadvantages:

- usually more costly
- requires line-of-site positioning of the user to work correctly
- requires additional equipment – receivers, chargers, batteries etc.
- where available for loan or hire it requires considerable management effort to administer because –
    - patrons need to book a receiver, usually in advance via the Box Office
    - on arrival receivers need to be given out along with instructions for use
    - once used receivers need to be collected, cleaned and re-charged.