

## Media Release

3 September 2021

### Masks and Deaf, hard of hearing and Deafblind people

We at Deaf Australia support the mandatory wearing of face masks to assist in the prevention of the spread of COVID-19. We do wish to point out when communicating with Deaf, hard of hearing and Deafblind people this presents a significant challenge regardless of communication preferences. Muffled speech, the covering of lips, obscuring of facial expressions are some of the communication challenges experienced by Deaf, hard of hearing and Deafblind people. Not only that, mask wearing can be awkward and uncomfortable for those who wear hearing aids and cochlear implants. It can irritate Deafblind people with eye issues. We have been made aware of examples where human rights may have been violated through the refusal to communicate appropriately with Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing people.

We wish to emphasise the following:

- The States and Territories' governments have highlighted that communication with Deaf and hard of hearing people is a valid reason to remove the face mask while also maintaining appropriate distancing protocols where possible:
  - [Victoria](#)
  - [New South Wales](#)
  - [Queensland](#)
  - [South Australia](#)
  - [Western Australia](#)
  - [Australian Capital Territory](#)
  - [Tasmania](#)
  - [Northern Territory](#)
- We encourage the use of perspex clear face shields to make it easier for Deaf, hard of hearing and Deafblind people to communicate.
- There are several strategies to communicate with Deaf, hard of hearing and Deafblind people. These include and are not limited to:
  - The wearing of clear masks and/or face shields
  - Speech to text apps – with the awareness that it is not always accurate. Masks muffle speech so it may not be accurately translated into text. Additionally, English is often the second language of Deaf people, so this is not always a useful solution
  - Using phones with enlarged text to type in messages
  - Using traditional pens and papers
  - Auslan interpreters and certified Deaf interpreters where longer conversations are involved such as in a legal or medical setting.
- Many places such as convenience stores, supermarkets and cafes already have plexiglass barriers at the counter to protect their employees. These employees should

be permitted to temporarily remove their masks upon request to aid with communication with Deaf, Deafblind and hard of hearing customers.

- These recommendations are meant to work in conjunction with the advice and recommendations of the Chief Public Health Officer/s and are not intended to supersede them.

Please note: It is never appropriate to use a child and/or a family member to interpret. Public officials should always endeavour to book Auslan interpreters (when the Deaf, Deafblind or hard of hearing person requests one) and/or talk directly with the Deaf, Deafblind or hard of hearing individuals using the above strategies.

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### **About Deaf Australia**

Deaf Australia is the Deaf-led peak organisation representing Deaf people in Australia. We promote the advancement of human rights and equality for Deaf people by collaborating with our members and stakeholders in implementing the United Nations Conventions and the National Disability Strategy. Deaf Australia is for all Deaf, hard of hearing and non-deaf people and organisations (not-for-profit, for profit, or government) that use and/or accept and respect Auslan (Australian Sign Language).