Although recent years have seen an increase in awareness of the need to consider wellbeing for staff and facilities users, the need to include those suffering with hearing loss within this seems to have gone largely unnoticed in many areas of the FM industry.

Following the latest PFM live event, however, attendees agreed that the information presented was useful on a number of levels, particularly as some delegates had been tasked either with installing solutions such as hearing loops or maintaining existing systems.

Jointly sponsored by CUK Audio and Williams Sound, in association with the Action on Hearing Loss charity, appreciation was also expressed for the in-depth description of the growing number of potential options to consider when dealing with this issue, combined with advice on how to decide which would provide the best solution to the individual requirements of each person and their facility.

Setting the tone for the highly focused discussion, Action on Hearing Loss commercial services officer Gemma Clare provided a comprehensive overview on the charity’s various supportive activities and how it delivers essential assistance for those suffering with life-changing hearing loss, tinnitus and deafness. Emphasising the importance of the issues, statistics including the fact that 11m people in the UK currently suffer from hearing loss were shared with attendees.

This number is predicted to increase in the future, rising to more than 15.5m people suffering from hearing-related issues, due to a number of factors within society such as inappropriate use of headphones and listening to loud music, along with working or spending time in areas where loud noise is a regular issue.

Ms Clare also explained the effect that people in the workplace can experience...
HEARING LOSS

when suffering from hearing loss, including feelings of isolation, work-related stress, lower productivity, communication challenges and even unnecessary disciplinary processes.

Unsurprisingly, this has further connotations for productivity levels, with those experiencing difficulty in hearing frequently seen to be considerably less productive than their colleagues. Another worrying trend highlighted by Ms Clare is that some individuals can take up to 10 years to resolve their hearing loss issues.

Reasons for the delayed reaction to resolve these include the fact that some people can be slow to realise that there is a problem, as the impact often involves a gradual decline. Early identification of hearing loss will therefore enable individuals to deal with this in a much better way, with positive implications for both their wellbeing and performance within the workplace.

Delegates included a mix of representatives from service providers and independent FMs, including Christine Meldoy from the Dominion Theatre FM team and a long-term hearing loss sufferer, Ms Meldoy provided further insight into the issues she had faced in both professional and social settings, assisting her fellow attendees in gaining additional understanding of the implications.

Those present expressed their appreciation of the various insights shared, which also included the explanation by Ms Clare of the potential effect of cancer treatment: “How many people realise that chemotherapy can impact on the person’s ability to hear?” she asked.

“We’ve all seen people lose their hair as a result of chemotherapy treatment and this can also mean that the tiny hairs within their inner ear are affected, too. These are very important to carry audio messages to the brain,” said Ms Clare.

As the debate opened up to discuss the thoughts and questions from the delegates, one of the first comments stated that consideration should be given to how the human resources department reacts to members of staff suffering from hearing loss. This could mean that it may be regarded as a personal issue and could potentially result in the prevention of wider conversation, for example.

However, discussions between line managers and those suffering from hearing difficulties could still take place, to ensure that employers were complying with the Equality Act and their Duty of Care requirements.

Several of those present had been responsible for the installation or maintenance of audio induction loops and this proved to be another interesting topic of conversation. CUK Audio’s Simon Druce explained to delegates the necessity of considering the options available in order to ensure that the best installation was installed.

“This can be a tick box exercise which doesn’t actually achieve very much, so it’s important to assess each situation to get the best return on investment,” he said. “There are three main options available, for example, including copper wire, infrared and app-based technology for individuals.”

In addition to ensuring the most appropriate system was installed, the need to consider privacy was also included in the discussion. If not positioned correctly, induction loops and microphones could pick up conversations in areas designed for confidential meetings, with the potential to create a number of problems including the breach of the Data Protection Act.

Mr Druce explained that the continuing development of technology had resulted in creating app-based options that were proving popular with the members of younger generations, which included the option of wifi-based apps that offered the possibility of audio descriptions to increase the assistance provided.

Where induction loops were already installed, it was then important to check that the correct planned and preventative maintenance (PPM) regime was being followed, said Mr Druce. This was deemed to be another area where it was important to retain knowledge when key members of staff move on, in order to allow systems to continue to be operated effectively.

Those considering the installation of hearing loops were advised to contact Action on Hearing Loss for a workplace assessment. These have been designed to provide expert guidance on the best way to meet the requirements of each workplace.

With no special requirements involved, the process simply involves conversations between the assessor, managers and employees, including an inspection of the facility concerned, following which recommendations would be made for the best solution.

Following coffee and networking, delegates were then provided with a tour of the Dominion Theatre that included both the stage and back-stage areas. Currently staging the Bat Out of Hell production, this involved a detailed description of the multi-million pound investment required to allow daily performances of the show to take place.

Features include a plunge pool, tunnel and chain-driven traction system to propel vehicles across the stage, where they appear to fall out of sight.

ATTENDEES

Jonathan Dixon, property services manager, Nederlander Theatres
Christine Meldoy, property services assistance, Nederlander Theatres
Paul Gardener, FM for leading London-based Asian bank
Paul Roche, head of facilities, Northern Europe, ERM
Ophelia Bellio, workplace operations manager, Optimizely UK
Adam Phillips, business development director, Wates Smartspace
Paul Oddy, FM account director, Wates Smartspace
Angela Duff, property manager, Blue Fin Building
Andy Bartlett, senior maintenance contracts manager, Debenhams
Anthony Chase, operations manager, Debenhams
Nick Platt, managing director sales and marketing, Salisbury FM
Simon Grinter, head of facilities management, Greater London Authority
Gemma Clare, commercial services officer, Action on Hearing Loss
Simon Druce, sales director, CUK Audio
Ricardo Frias, international sales manager, Williams Sound

Chaired by Dennis Flower, editor, PFM