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Sutton Council has scored a world first after launching a pioneering service for deaf people

For the first time, deaf residents will be able to contact customer services and receive instant assistance through a live connection to interpreters on the London Borough of Sutton's website.

Sutton Council will be the first in the world to use the pioneering system, set up by Significan't UK, to ensure that deaf residents can gain the same access to its services as all other residents.

This will mean that residents can converse through a British Sign Language interpreter, who will get instant answers to their queries at any time in normal working hours without making an appointment.

By simply clicking on a link on the website, customers' webcams will connect to a specialist call centre so that they can have a face-to-face conversation and get a quick response to their queries.

Local resident Karen Hobbs, who contacted the council after using the service, said: "It's absolutely great that I am able to communicate with any member of staff at Sutton Council when I like, without the need to book an appointment or an interpreter. It feels like I am finally equal to hearing people and have the same access to council services as they do, all done in the comfort of my home.

"I really hope more businesses and services such as hospitals, doctor's surgeries, police, solicitors and banks will follow Sutton's lead.

Cllr Ruth Dombey, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Community Engagement and Customer Services at Sutton Council, said: "I am delighted that we are launching this excellent service which will benefit hundreds of local people and hope this will pave the way for other councils and organisations around the world to follow suit.

"We want all our residents to be able to have good access to council services and are thrilled to be able to offer this."

Sarah Murray, Director of Communications at the British Deaf Association, said: "The BDA are delighted to hear of Sutton Council's new initiative.

"We feel that this is a positive step forward in improving access. We hope that other councils and organisations will follow their lead in a bid to provide equal access to services for Deaf BSL users."

According to Jeff McWhinney, the deaf Director of Significan't, the potential impact of the SignVideo service cannot be overstated. He said: "SignVideo BSL LIVE is powerful and liberating technology for the deaf population of Sutton."

"For the first time, thanks to the determination and the commitment of the council, the deaf community in Sutton will be properly plugged-in to their services via the website.

"It is extremely exciting for them to be able to communicate with council staff from their homes or workplaces on equal terms."

There are around 250 deaf people in Sutton and one in seven people in Britain are deaf or have a hearing loss. There are an estimated 50,000 people in the UK who use British Sign Language as their first or preferred language.

The London Borough of Sutton is the only London Borough to have been awarded the Shaw Trust accreditation for accessibility.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

The web interpreter service will be open from 9am – 5pm, Monday – Friday.

Significan't (UK) Ltd

Significan't is a social enterprise, working to use the latest technological advances to improve access to services for the deaf sign language communities in the UK. The company's main service - the SignVideo Contact Centre - has won a number of prestigious awards for innovation. SignVideo is an online real time video call centre that allows deaf sign language users, to communicate with hearing people effectively and naturally, via a fully qualified sign language interpreter.

Jeff McWhinney was appointed Managing Director of Significan't (sign if I can't) in September 2004.

The Shaw Trust

The Shaw Trust is a national charity which supports disabled and disadvantaged people to prepare for work, find jobs and live more independently.

Technical requirements

The council citizens can benefit from the service by utilising their regular broadband connection and a PC. However the following technical requirement should be met in order to receive a good quality service:

PC requirements:

- Windows XP or Windows VISTA or Windows 7
- Web browser : Google Chrome 5, Microsoft Internet Explorer V7 or V8, Firefox 3.
- Web camera

Network requirements

- Bandwidth : 384 kB/s (upload and download)

Technical Support

SignVideo access for Sutton Council is in a beta phase and will constantly undergo the extensive tests and improvements procedures. Therefore, we are always happy to receive the feedback from the service users and provide the support to them.

techsupport@signvideo.co.uk

Please e-mail us for the help and advise, we are aiming to address all technical support requests with as much promptness as possible and usually the users can receive the support in a real time.