

## PaCC Position Statement: Staffing of the Paediatric Audiology department at the Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital

July 2023

### Background

The **University Hospitals Sussex Paediatric Audiology Department** has recently moved to a new, purpose built facility at the Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital (RACH). This is very welcome as for many years the accommodation in the Barry Building has been known to be unsuitable, and the lack of facilities has limited the amount of testing that can be done there.

The Audiology Department serves well over 600 children in Brighton and Hove who have an identified hearing loss. It also assesses children who attend for testing, including assessing whether a hearing loss could be a factor in their presentation of complex needs.

The Audiology department is very behind with the hearing appointments that are due. Children are having to wait for very long times for their appointments. The reduced activity during the lockdowns have contributed to creating a backlog, but with current staffing capacity it appears that the department is unable to keep up with the new referrals as well as providing timely reviews for the existing children on their caseload. It should be noted that once a child is diagnosed with deafness, they will remain on the paediatric Audiology caseload throughout their childhood, requiring regular reviews, and so there is limited turnover of the caseload.

Additionally, parents have reported very long waiting times for Ear Nose & Throat (ENT) appointments, and once seen, very long waits for grommets if needed. This is also having an impact upon the Audiology Department, as children who have a significant hearing loss due to glue ear are being referred to the audiology department for hearing aids to manage their hearing loss while they wait for grommets to be inserted. A local parent says: **“My teenager was referred [to ENT] by GP in July 2022, aged 16, as they had been really struggling with their hearing in college. We were told by GP there was ‘quite a wait’ and then were told by the RSCH Appts service that it would be about 8 months, so March this year at the earliest. It’s now June - almost a year since they went to our GP, and we’ve heard nothing. Now they’re going to be 18 at the end of the Summer we don’t even know if they’ll be switched to the adult waiting list and have to start again.”** There was an intervention to reduce waiting times for ENT after lockdowns, which applied to adults. There has not been an intervention in the paediatric part of the ENT service.

The British Academy of Audiology's Quality Standards (July 2022) standard 5a states: **“All children and young people using hearing aids should have access to services they require in a timely fashion.”** The times given are: “1a. 4. Routine new referrals of children outside of the NHSP are offered an appointment for diagnostic hearing assessment within six weeks of receipt of referral. 1a. 5. Urgent new referrals and NHSP referrals for diagnostic hearing assessment are offered an appointment within four weeks of receipt of referral and being well enough to be test. 1a. 6. When a hearing loss is identified and a decision to fit amplification is made, an initial appointment to fit the hearing aids is offered within four weeks from the date of decision (either for temporary or permanent hearing loss). 1a. 7. Children requiring follow up hearing assessment or hearing aid review should be offered an appointment within six weeks of the previously agreed review date, for example a child due for annual review on 01/01/2023 should be seen for that review by 12/02/2023.”

It is vital for the service user's outcomes and wellbeing that their hearing is reviewed regularly and appropriate adjustments made to their hearing aids. Failure to do this in a timely manner has an adverse impact upon their access to sound, affecting their speech and language development, educational and social opportunities. This is particularly important for children with fluctuating or progressive hearing loss. The Rapid Review into Paediatric Audiology in England, 2020\* states, **“There are many recognised conditions, such as Down Syndrome or children with a cleft lip and palate, where hearing loss can fluctuate or progress. In such cases it is vital to offer regular audiology review to ensure these children are able to access sounds and hear speech to help with their communication and development”**

The National Deaf Children's Society Briefing on Children's Hearing services in England report (April 2023) identifies that, **“...the demands on services generally are increasing. 55% of services reported an increase in children referred who require complex assessment techniques and/or multiple appointments. There were increases in referrals of children presenting with autism spectrum disorder and with tinnitus and/or hyperacusis, which require additional capacity and resources.”** This increased demand also requires additional workforce.

A PaCC member enquired via PALS whether the new and increased facilities would be populated with staffing levels to match. The response indicates that there is currently no increase in staffing capacity and so despite the potential of the new department, there will not be the ability for the Audiology Department to 'catch up' with the significant wait that there now is for appointments, and keep up with an increasingly demanding caseload.

The Rapid Review into Paediatric Audiology in England, 2020 states that “A service with an increased waiting time is going to lead to a delay in identification of hearing loss and so poorer outcomes for the children affected.”

A local parent says: **“G passed his newborn screening but as time went on I was concerned about the sounds he made and lack of speech**

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development. I requested our GP to be referred to audiology to rule out a hearing issue. We were then seen at audiology at seaside view who said his ears were fine and he should be able to hear us speaking but as the tests were inconclusive we were referred to the county for more tests. We waited a couple of months to be seen there, again being told it was inconclusive but would see him again. We waited for a follow up appointment and after another 2 months went by I chased the appointment and was given one for October 2022. It was at this appointment that we were told he was deaf. The audiology team then saw us...and confirmed he was profoundly deaf. I don't think we would have even had this appointment if it wasn't for [two audiologists] putting the appointment in their admin time as I don't think any other urgent slots were available. It was a huge shock for us and the delay in diagnosis meant we were referred urgently for cochlear implant assessment which we have now had. The time between being referred by the GP and diagnosis was about 8 months... The delay in this diagnosis could have an impact on his outcome which is upsetting. But once we finally had his diagnosis the services we have been in touch with and helped by have been fantastic.”

PaCC is concerned that inadequate staffing levels will have an impact upon staff morale and retention of Audiology staff, and a time when recruitment and retention is challenging.

### **Parent Carer Council Involvement**

The **Brighton and Hove Parent and Carers Council (PaCC)** is a pan disability forum for parent carers of children with additional needs. Our core team includes Parent Representatives who represent the views of parent carers of children and young people with SEND on strategic boards, working alongside the leads for education, health and social care.

In representing the SEND community PaCC strongly believes that the audiology department needs to be adequately staffed in order to meet the demands of the current caseload and meet the Quality Standards for the service.

### **Key points:**

- The new accommodation is most welcome. PaCC has previously advocated for a transition to more suitable accommodation.
- It is imperative that the increased capacity for testing in the new accommodation is utilised in order to address the very long waits that children and their families are experiencing, and to ensure that the quality standards recommended by the British Academy of Audiology are met. In order for this to happen, increased staffing is needed.

- Hearing aid users need regular reviews to ensure that their equipment is meeting their needs, to adjust their hearing aids according to their current hearing levels and to monitor how effectively they are able to use their equipment so that appropriate support can be offered.
- Assessments are essential in order to rule in/out deafness in children, many of whom may present with complex needs so that their needs can be met.
- The ENT department does not appear to have the capacity to offer timely appointments or treatments where needed. This is having an adverse impact upon children waiting to be assessed, and a knock-on effect upon the capacity of the Audiology Department.

### **PaCC position:**

PaCC believes that there needs to be an intervention to reduce ENT waiting times.

There is particular concern regarding waiting times for appointments which will negatively impact upon outcomes for the children on the Audiology caseload.

PaCC believes that provision of appropriate staffing levels in the paediatric audiology is of high importance.

PaCC look forward to working with lead professional to progress this project further

PaCC welcome any communication on any of the issues contained in this document. You can contact us by emailing **[admin@paccbrighton.org.uk](mailto:admin@paccbrighton.org.uk)** or calling **01273 234862**

The Parent Carers' Council (PaCC) is a parent-led forum which represents parent carers with children and young people with any kind of physical disability, learning disability, complex or long-term medical/health condition, SEMH (Social, Emotional, Mental Health) issues or special educational need. The group was formed to enable parent carers to work closely together to help improve services and support. It aims to help parents get more directly involved in the strategic delivery of services for disabled children in Brighton & Hove and now has over 380 signed up members. This position statement was developed through discussions with our parent partners via Children's Hearing Services Working Group (CHSWG) and PaCC Steering Group members.

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