

Paediatric Audiology – briefing note to KCC HOSC

The Department of Health Quality Assurance visit in 2009 highlighted that although the staff running the Preston Hall service are skilled and dedicated, the facilities were not fit for purpose. The decision to create three new services across West Kent was clinically driven and based on the desire to provide the best facilities. The expected qualities of the new service are such that a number of staff from other parts of the South East and beyond have proactively approached the team about recruitment possibilities.

Engagement and consultation

Stakeholders and parents were engaged in the decisions around improvement through the Children's Service Working Group (ChSWG) which consists of representation from NHS West Kent, West Kent Community Health, children's commissioners, education, social services, the Kent Deaf Children's Society, the National Deaf Children's Society and parents. This group meets every three months and has been kept informed of all developments. The ChSWG was also involved in the quality assurance visits, giving the contributors the opportunity to discuss the existing service and what they would want from an improved service. During the quality assurance visits, all the parents of children using the service were invited to give their views.

Further consultation can still take place. There are forthcoming consultations about certain children's services, which could be widened to allow parents of children requiring audiology to give their views about the service and raise issues so we can consider creative solutions to them. In addition, a patient satisfaction survey is currently taking place around this service, and we hope that this will give patients and parents the opportunity to raise any concerns or suggestions about the current and future service – improvements have already been made as a result of this survey.

Consideration of facilities in the Maidstone area

There are very specific requirements to the facilities that are needed, including a 15ft by 15ft space which can be sound-treated, with reception facilities that are appropriate for children and people with a disability. These requirements make it impractical to seek a temporary solution.

Serious consideration was given to locations such as children's centres and the acute audiology department at Maidstone Hospital. However, as experience has shown us, it can take years to arrange suitable locations for services, and where the facilities are not owned by the PCT, negotiations can be protracted. It was important we did not miss the opportunity to make wholesale improvements, especially as Preston Hall is scheduled to close in summer next year.

However, we continue to look for suitable facilities in the Maidstone area which will enable the new high standard of service to be provided more locally.

Timing of new service development

The need to make drastic and rapid improvements to the paediatric audiology service was highlighted by the Department of Health quality assurance visits in 2009, and improvements must be implemented before the next visits in 2011.

The speed with which we needed to establish the improved service was, however, exacerbated by the fact that funding was available in the capital programme for 2009-10 to fit out new facilities, which may not have been the case in 2010-11. This meant that it was important to focus on using facilities that West Kent Community Health own and control.

Consideration of health inequalities

The NHS in West Kent is mindful of the need to address health inequalities and we appreciate that people in the Maidstone area on low incomes may now have further to travel until a location can be found. However, the service can arrange home visits where many elements of the testing can be carried out, if patients have significant difficulties in attending.

The new service will be a real 'gold standard' and a big improvement on what is currently available, and that across West Kent the majority of patients will have shorter distances to travel than they currently do. The new service will also be much more flexible and timely in the availability of appointments, and we hope this will compensate for any additional difficulties with transport. Indeed, until this time, patients from the areas of West Kent with the highest concentration of deprivation, Dartford and Gravesham, have been faced with a journey to Maidstone and we are pleased to now be able to provide a service in this area.