

To: Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 18 July 2008

By: John Beadle, Former PPIF member

Subject: Kent Audiology Services July 2008

During the past six months there has been a considerable reduction in waiting times for both new and replacement hearing aids with the result that the government targets of 18 weeks is now being met in most cases. However, this has been achieved, primarily, by the efforts of audiology staff and considerable overtime working. There has been little improvement in facilities and staffing levels.

In west Kent, many patients have had to attend clinics at Medway Maritime Hospital where group fittings of the hearing aid occur in groups of twenty. Facilities provided at Darent Valley Hospital are totally inadequate for the catchment area and thus many patients still have to travel to Medway for both regular and emergency appointments.

The follow-up system for audiology patients in Kent remains poor. "Best Practice Standards for Adult Audiology" published in 2002 and "Improving Access to Audiology Services" published in 2007, both state that patients should be reviewed regularly. This should be at least every three years, preferable less. For digital aids this review is vital to ensure that the aid is providing the best level of assistance. This is particularly necessary for patients with a severe and changing hearing loss. Nowhere in Kent currently provides a pro-active, re-testing programme. Patients are expected to obtain an appointment, via their GP, "if required". This is totally unacceptable for patients who are totally reliant on their aid for normal communication.

Patients should expect a review programme at least as good as that provided for spectacles, with a shorter time scale for those most dependent on their aids.

Unfortunately many NHS managers have the notion that the provision of a digital hearing aid is sufficient to provide an audiology service. With the accepted "life" of a digital aid only three to five years the crisis in this vital service will return unless the overall total service is improved.

John Beadle
Former PPI forum member

4th July 2008