

Audiology Services in East Kent

This paper is intended to give an update on the position of Audiology services currently commissioned by Eastern and Coastal Kent PCT (E&CK PCT) and the future plans of the service.

Waiting lists and times for Audiology have dramatically reduced since the last report to HOSC in December 07. The number waiting is down from 5000 in September 07 to 1091 (all on an 18 week pathway or less) in May 08 and from 96 weeks wait in July 07 to an average 12 weeks from referral to fitting in May 08.

Background and need for change:-

Referrals for Audiology services are made through one of three routes, via ear nose and throat Services, via direct access and self referrals made by patients who are upgrading their analogue hearing appliance for a digital aid.

Historically the average waits for Audiology services in East Kent have been in excess of 52 weeks, peaking in July of 2007 when the average wait was 96 weeks.

In September 2007 East Kent recognised over 5000 patients waiting (see table 1 below) with an average wait of 85 weeks.

The challenge for East Kent was to radically reduce the long waiting list and to bring waiting times in line with the national commitment to the 18 week referral to treatment target.

In December 2007 the E&CK PCT and East Kent Hospitals Trust (EKHT) were invited to discuss the current position and plans for recovery with the HOSC.

Key milestone achievements:-

Significant developments have been made within this service over the last year, especially with regards to East Kent hospital waiting lists.

In direct response to the challenge to reduce the long waiting list the PCT commissioned Hearbase as independent audiologists to help reduce long waiters; they agreed to treat circa 2000 patients by the end of March 2008. Hearbase currently work out of four sites based in Folkestone, Ashford, Canterbury and Dover.

In addition the PCT commissioned a community audiologist to work out of three GP practices (Whitstable, Deal and Ramsgate) to further reduce the backlog of waiters.

March 2008

At the end of March 2008 the number of people waiting for audiology services at EKHT were reduced below the target to 1056 of these only 449 patients were waiting

longer than 18 weeks through their own choice and the remaining 605 patients were all on 18 week pathways.

In recognition of the continued challenge to the provision and sustainability of audiology services in East Kent, E&CK PCT have made provision for an additional £1.7m to be made available through the Local Delivery Plan process to be used in securing additional capacity through the local hospital provider and an increase in community based services. In addition this funding will assist in dealing with an anticipated up turn in demand based on the success of securing reduced waits into the service, a Department of Health initiative that suggest that people over 55 years of age should be screened for hearing loss and the continued number of patients that might take up the opportunity to change their analogue aids for digital equipment.

April 2008

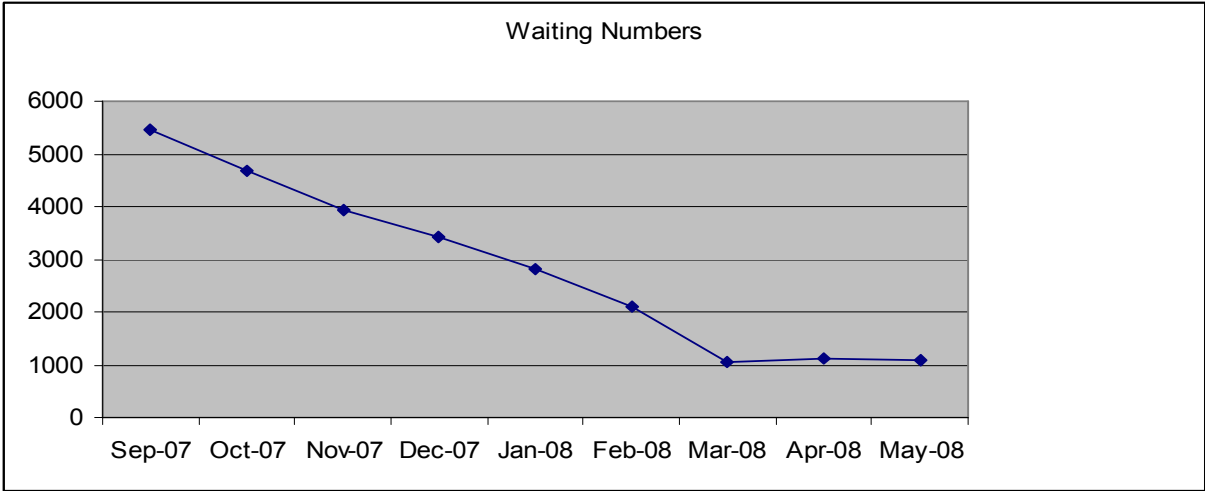
In April 2008 a fourth community audiology clinic was opened at Sittingbourne, to further support the drive for care closer to the home and to bring a much needed choice alternative to swale patients. Historically Swale patients have been referred to Medway NHS foundation trust for all audiology treatment.

May 2008

At the end of May 2008 the number of patients waiting for audiology services at EKHT is 1091; all patients are on 18 week pathway (assessment - fitting) which is in line with the national standard for all elective services. Direct access patients all have their assessment within 6 weeks and wherever possible and medically appropriate patients are often assessed and fitted on the same day. The average length from referral to the fitting of a hearing aid at EKHT is 12 weeks.

Open ear testing is also widely used, again where medically appropriate.

Table 1: Waiting List Progress



Choose and Book

Direct access to audiology at EKHT is now available via Choose and Book and the waits are in line with the national diagnostic target of a maximum of 6 weeks.

Hearbase and the community based audiologist have been given extended contracts and are now receiving referrals via the Choose and Book system. Average waits for these services is 4 weeks patients with a large majority of patients being seen with three weeks.

Performance Management

Throughout this time data collection has improved and the Audiology Service has been performance managed with the PCTs lead commissioner on a monthly basis on progress against the agreed action plan for full roll out of services. The following key performance indicators are also monitored and reported against –

- Number of new referrals received by source
- Number of new patients seen
- Number of bilateral fittings

In addition much work has now been done to unbundle the block contract for work at East Kent hospitals and Audiology work is now paid for on a cost per case basis, this enables a much more detailed understanding of performance as a whole.

In addition to the above a whole system service improvement group has been established that has a membership that includes GP's, Consultant Audiologists, Finance and Practice based commissioning representatives and a representative from HI-Kent.

Future Planning

E&CK PCT are undertaking a base line audit to look at the current referral trends over the first quarter of 2009/09 to assess any increase in demand and to establish where patients are accessing the service. As commissioners we continue to proactively search for interested willing providers to declare their ability and desire to provide services in the future. As we establish the future levels of demand we will be working in partnership with all interested parties and stakeholders to establish a platform for sustainable service across the economy.

In addition we continue to work with Medway NHS Foundation Trust to further establish links and opportunities for Swale residents to be able to receive services closer to their homes and enable swifter access to Audiology services and for GPs to be able to make such referrals through the Choose and Book system.

Alison Davis
Assistant Director Delivery & Performance
alison.davis@eastcoastkent.nhs.uk

July 2008