

Public and private hearing services Policy statement

Our position

Action on Hearing Loss is neutral as to whether a person gets their hearing aids through the NHS or a private provider; we want people to take action on their hearing loss and are supportive of patient choice.

High quality and accessible information is fundamental to giving people this choice and control. People should receive high quality services and the best user experience possible, whichever route they choose.

We provide information to support people in making this choice and are working to improve service quality across both NHS audiology departments and private hearing aid services.

Introduction

This policy statement outlines the main issues for people with hearing loss. It also includes our stand on the issues¹.

We use the term 'people with hearing loss' to refer to people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing throughout.

Background

NHS audiology provision

Audiology departments provide hearing aids free of charge on long term loan to NHS patients, following a referral from a GP.

There are around 200 NHS audiology units in the UK. Most audiology departments are based in hospitals, although some are in community settings or on the high street where the NHS-funded service is contracted to private providers.

Following hearing aid modernisation programmes in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all NHS providers are equipped to offer digital hearing aids.

In December 2009 all audiology clinics in England were tasked to achieve waiting times from assessment to fitting of 18 weeks and these standards continue to be met. Welsh audiology services have been meeting a 14-week referral to treatment target, since 2008. Scotland will see the introduction of an 18-week target at the end of 2011.

¹ Please note that, like many policy documents, this statement reflects the issues relevant at the time of writing. Over time this may be subject to change, such as new legislation, and we may review and amend the document.

Quality standards in audiology have been introduced in Scotland, Wales and England. Action on Hearing Loss is calling for similar standards to be introduced in Northern Ireland. Both Scotland and Wales use a quality rating tool (QRT) and England uses a Quality Enhancement Tool (QET).

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), responsible for quality standards in the new NHS reforms, has proposed developing quality standards for hearing loss and tinnitus, and we will work with NICE to develop these.

For more information on getting hearing aids on the NHS see our [fact sheet](#).

Private dispensers

Private hearing aid dispensers can assess a hearing loss and supply digital hearing aids. A GP referral is not necessary to visit a private hearing aid dispenser. However anyone with more complex problems such as tinnitus, balance or infection should be referred back to the NHS.

Private digital hearing aids usually cost between £600 and £3,500 depending on the model and technical features. Additional costs include battery supplies, new ear moulds for behind the ear hearing aids if needed and any repairs after the warranty expires.

There are almost 1,600 qualified hearing aid dispensers in the UK, including several national companies. Private dispensers can generally offer an appointment within a week.

The Health Professions Council (HPC) is the body which regulates private dispensers' training, skills and conduct. Any provider offering to test hearing and sell hearing aids on the high street must be qualified, or in supervised training with the HPC. The British Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists (BSHAA) is the professional body which represents the independent hearing aid profession.

For advice on buying hearing aids please see our consumer [fact sheet](#).

Recommendations

Provision of high quality and accessible information is fundamental to people taking control of the choice of NHS and private services.

Our factsheets on both [getting hearing aids on the NHS](#) and [buying hearing aids privately](#) are available on our website to support people in making an informed choice.

People should receive high quality services and the best user experience, whether they chose to get hearing aids through the NHS or a private provider.

We are working to improve standards across public and private services. We will also deliver a consumer feedback website with clear guidelines on what to expect from hearing services, whether public or private.