WHO WE ARE

Action on Hearing Loss is the largest national charity working for the ten million people with hearing loss and the six million people with tinnitus in the UK. Our vision is of a world where hearing loss does not limit or label people, where tinnitus is silenced, and where people value and look after their hearing.

INTRODUCTION TO TINNITUS

Tinnitus is a medical term describing the perception of noise either in the ear(s) or head, when there is no corresponding external sound. It is often—but not always—linked with hearing loss. One in ten people in the UK have some form of tinnitus.

Tinnitus is a serious health condition that affects different people in different ways, depending on the severity and duration of the tinnitus, the support provided, and the personality and behaviour of the person.

In some cases, tinnitus can have a substantial negative impact on a person’s mental health, relationships and ability to sleep, concentrate, and work. 600,000 people around the UK are affected by tinnitus to such an extent that it impacts on their quality of life.

There is currently no cure for tinnitus, but there are a number of vital services that can support a person to manage their tinnitus.
RESEARCH AIMS

In 2012, we carried out research in England and Wales to find out about variation in NHS provision for tinnitus patients. In late 2014, we wanted to take this research a step further, to build a UK-wide picture of current NHS provision for people with tinnitus. In particular, our research asked audiology departments whether they offer patients with tinnitus access to four key services:

1) **Specialist tinnitus support**

2) **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy** (CBT), which helps people change their thoughts and behaviour towards tinnitus.

3) **Tinnitus Retraining Therapy** (TRT), which combines sound therapy and counselling to help retrain the way the brain responds to tinnitus sound, so that it is easier to tune out.

4) **Information about products and other services** that could help people with tinnitus.

METHODOLOGY

We sent Freedom of Information requests to all NHS audiology providers in England, Wales and Scotland, and surveyed heads of NHS audiology services in Northern Ireland. The results, collected between September and December 2014, included responses from:

- 116 responses from the 129 NHS Trusts that provide adult audiology services in England
- 13 responses from the 14 NHS Health Boards in Scotland
- 7 responses from the 7 Health Boards in Wales
- 4 responses from the 5 Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland

\(^1\) Calton (2014) *Cut off: Assessing provision of adult audiology services and the impact of budget cuts.* Action on Hearing Loss
FINDINGS

41% of audiology departments offer tinnitus patients access to all four of the services we asked about. This includes: 49 providers in England, 5 in Scotland, 3 in Wales, and 1 in Northern Ireland.

56% of audiology providers offer Tinnitus patients ACCESS TO COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

The most commonly available service was Specialist tinnitus support (offered by 83% of providers), followed by Information about tinnitus-related products and services (offered by 79% of providers) and Tinnitus retraining therapy (offered by 77% of providers). The least commonly available service was Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), offered to tinnitus patients by only 56% of providers.

Alarmingly, six providers (one in Scotland, one in Northern Ireland and four in England) do not offer any service to tinnitus patients at all, or any referral to support elsewhere.

In addition, nine departments (one in Scotland, two in Wales, and six in England) said their tinnitus services have been reduced over the last two years. In two cases it was specified that the reason for these reductions was cuts to the audiology budget.

We also asked providers for examples of innovation that had helped them to improve the quality, capacity and effectiveness of their tinnitus service. Their responses included:

• Direct referrals for tinnitus patients from the GP to Audiology, and (where clinically appropriate) from Audiology to Psychology – without needing to go via ENT

• Setting up a local Tinnitus Support Group

• Training additional staff in tinnitus management
CONCLUSION

Tinnitus can be a deeply troubling health condition, and it is vital that services to support people with tinnitus are available across the UK.

It is therefore extremely worrying that provision is being reduced in some areas, and even more alarming that patients in a handful of areas are being denied access to support altogether. Governments, audiology service providers and commissioners must protect the provision of audiology and tinnitus services.

Our research found significant variation in the provision of services. This is particularly true of CBT, with nearly half of audiology providers not offering access to CBT for patients with tinnitus despite the strong evidence that CBT can benefit patients with tinnitus and the Department of Health’s recommendation that tinnitus services should provide access to CBT for patients who could benefit. National strategies and guidance must be developed and implemented to ensure that a high-quality, comprehensive tinnitus service is available to all patients across the UK.

For more information about our position on tinnitus, please see our policy statement.

41% OF AUDIOLOGY DEPARTMENTS OFFER TINNITUS PATIENTS ACCESS TO 4 KEY SERVICES:
- Specialist support
- Information
- Tinnitus Retraining Therapy
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

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We’re Action on Hearing Loss, the charity working for a world where hearing loss doesn’t limit or label people, where tinnitus is silenced – and where people value and look after their hearing. We can’t do this without your help.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

**Action on Hearing Loss Information Line**

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