

SOUTH TEES HOSPITALS NHS TRUST

**HEALTH SCRUTINY PANEL MIDDLESBROUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL – 21
FEBRUARY 2008**

REVIEW OF WAITING TIMES FOR AUDIOLOGY SERVICES IN MIDDLESBROUGH

Response to preliminary questions asked by Middlesbrough Borough Council

Q1 “What are the current waiting times for Audiology services for people in Middlesbrough?”

South Tees Response: - Patients attending their GP surgeries at present requesting referral for hearing aid provision, can expect to wait in the region of 36 weeks prior to receiving their hearing aid from the James Cook University Hospital in Middlesbrough.

Q2 “Are there different cohorts of Audiology patients, e.g. some requiring ENT or direct referrals to Audiology. Does this affect waiting times?”

South Tees Response: - Yes, there are different cohorts of Audiology patients. Some patients may have been referred by their GP to an ENT Consultant to have their hearing loss investigated but, end up needing to wear hearing aids. These patients are then referred on to Audiology by the Ear Nose and Throat Consultant. In the main this applies to those patients who are under the age of 60, and less likely to have hearing loss caused by age alone and where medical treatment may have been an option for that patient. The main body of patients requiring hearing aids are in the 60 years and over age bracket. These are generally referred direct to the Audiology department by their General Practitioner. Waiting times for all these patients are generally the same.

Q3 “How many patients are currently waiting longer than 18 weeks for Audiology services?”

South Tees Response: - At the end of January this year, there were 467 patients from the Middlesbrough area waiting for hearing aids, with wait times longer than 18 weeks.

Q4 “Are there historical reasons why there are long waiting times? If so, what are they?”

South Tees Response: - There are several factors which have contributed to long waiting times for patients requiring digital hearing aids. South Tees Hospital's Audiology Services were part of a nationwide modernisation of hearing aid services commissioned by the Department of Health. The Middlesbrough service was part of the third wave and went live early in 2004. The Modernising Hearing Aid Services (MHAS) project provided central funding for up to three additional Audiology staff, for all of the departments across the UK involved in the modernisation project. Funding was also provided to meet the increased cost of the digital hearing aids themselves, on the basis of each department's existing activity level. With South Tees Audiology Services being one of the larger departments in the country, we were limited to the

maximum of three additional members of staff in respect of modernising hearing aid services. Increased waiting times for service came about as a consequence of the process of modernising hearing aid services and digital hearing aid provision.

The following were contributory factors to increasing waiting times for patients who required new hearing aids.

- It was necessary to spend more time per patient providing them with digital hearing aids than had been necessary in the past providing an analogue hearing aid service.
- Since the start of the MHAS project, there has been a national shortage of Audiologists, and recruitment of Audiologists to the Trust has proved extremely difficult, during this time and remains so. Despite the Trusts best efforts, the department has carried vacancies for Audiologists throughout this period.
- With the advent of, and the publicity surrounding the availability of digital hearing aids under the National Health Service, the demand for hearing aid provision from the general public has increased by more than was expected

Q5 “What is being done to address this matter?”

South Tees Response: - South Tees Hospital Trust and the Audiology Service have been working closely with local PCT's to address this matter. A waiting list initiative was commissioned by Middlesbrough PCT in 2006/07. In 2007/08 an additional 1,100 patient journeys were jointly commissioned by Tees PCT's. We also understand that Tees PCT's have commissioned yet further capacity from the independent sector, on a temporary basis in order to further reduce the pressure on the South Tees NHS Audiology Service.

Q6 “What else could be done to improve matters.”

South Tees Response: - Provided the additionally commissioned activity volume is sustained at 2007/08 levels, throughout 2008/09 financial year, the Audiology Service at South Tees believes this will provide sufficient capacity to deliver no more than 18 week waits for digital hearing aids for patients in the Middlesbrough area by December 2008.

Q7 “The North East Region was heavily represented in the RNID’s worst ten waiting times. Is there any SHA leadership on this matter?”

South Tees Response : - The local PCTs are in discussion with the Strategic Health Authority regarding the commissioning of hearing aid services.

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