

Update to Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee 15 February 2022

Members were keen to understand the decision making around the audiology contract for a new adult hearing service for age related hearing loss in Oxfordshire. This service includes ear wax removal for those who require it for a hearing assessment, provided they have undertaken two weeks self-management of ear wax in line with the [primary care guidance](#).

Background

The contract for audiology services in Oxfordshire was due to expire in September 2021. Given Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group's (OCCG) understanding of the pressures for some of our community to access ear wax clearance the CCG has made some additional provision for this within that the procurement of a new adult health services for age related hearing loss in the county.

This is not a significant change in service as there never has been a commissioned service for this however there is increasing demand and a known mixed model of delivery for the ear wax clearance. Reference to the NHS website reconfirms that there is a mixed picture of provision nationally; the national advice is available [here](#). This mixed picture affects patients within Oxfordshire as much as other patients across the country.

General practice must provide a range of NHS healthcare services to their population, as set out in the [General Medical Services \(GMS\) Contract](#). In the past some of primary care provided ear wax removal by syringing, despite this not being included as part of GMS. However, provision varied greatly between areas. Guidance about the safety of syringing coupled with increasing pressures on primary care in recent years (even before COVID), meant that ear wax provision became unsustainable, and the majority of practices have ceased providing the service.

In recognition of the pressures this change in service offer made and in support and independence for our older population, OCCG commissioned the current service from third party providers in line with [NICE guidance](#) (as set out in our Thames Valley Priorities Committee Commissioning [Policy Statement 305](#)). All advice is that in the majority of cases ear wax does not need to be removed, based on [research evidence](#). We needed to also ensure that patients are maximising their own self-care, avoiding interventions that could be harmful and address the long waiting times in secondary care. Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has been closed to referral for Ear, Nose and throat and some clinical time was being diverted to care that was better managed elsewhere according to national and international best practice and reflected in NICE Guidance.

OCCG appreciate the distress caused by a build-up of ear wax, especially among older patients. In acknowledgement of this, and where ear wax may be an issue, the revised OCCG protocol of age-related hearing loss now includes earwax removal for hearing assessment, via the safer method of microsuction, provided patients have undertaken two weeks' self-management in line with our [self-care guidance](#) as agreed with the ENT specialists.

Inclusion of this service and OCCG's approach was discussed with Healthwatch Oxfordshire following their report into ear wax removal.

In the small number of cases where this fails to provide relief and, after assessment by the GP, patients may still be referred to the audiology service for specialist advice under the NHS.

Procurement process and decision making

In relation to the procurement for the audiology services research and market engagement was undertaken and Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire CCGs undertook the process for a revised age-related hearing loss service. This was required as the existing service and contract had been in place and required re-procuring. To support access and patient choice, commissioners continued to use an “Any Qualified Provider” (AQP) model that enables as many suitable providers to be available to patients as possible and as long as they demonstrate ability to deliver this NHS service.

Buckinghamshire CCG are the lead commissioner for this service with OCCG acting as an associate; the procurement and contract award therefore had to go through the governance processes at each CCG. The request for information by HOSC is for details on the decision making at OCCG and so details are provided below for OCCG only; the approval of procurement and awarding of contracts have been through the equivalent governance process within Buckinghamshire CCG.

The OCCG Executive Committee approved the audiology procurement at the Executive Committee dated 3 November 2020; further papers went to Executive Committee in March 2021 regarding the extension of the bidding window following feedback from providers which the CCG deemed reasonable considering the pressure that COVID had put on the system. This pushed back the new service start date from 1 September 2021 to 1 October 2021. We then received a further request and agreed to push the bidding window back further moving the service start date to 1 November.

Following the completion of the procurement exercise, a Contract Award Recommendation (CARR) Paper went to the Oxfordshire Executive Committee on 27 July 2021. OCCG approved the CARR. The CARR detailed a start date for the new service of 1 November 2021 however, there were then further delays in Bucks CCG sign off of the CARR pushing the start date back by a further month.