



Insight Report

Hearing lost: the challenge of audiology care
for care home residents

healthwatch
Wolverhampton

Introduction

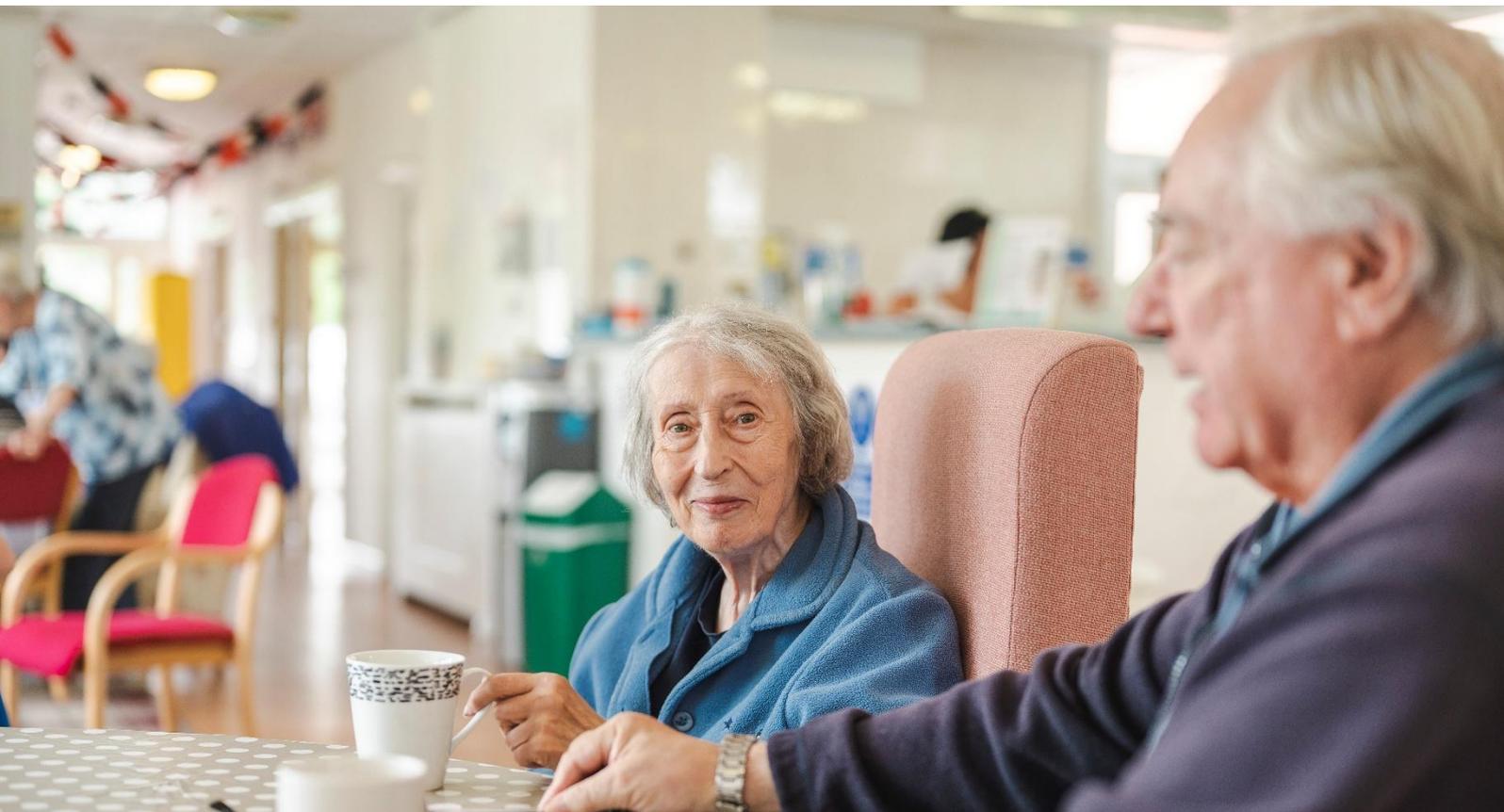
We surveyed local care home managers by phone to gain an understanding of the current state of audiology care for residents. We also asked a series of questions regarding earwax removal services.

The findings reveal gaps in access to community audiology services, a reliance on the private sector, and the need for routine audiology care in the homes.

Background

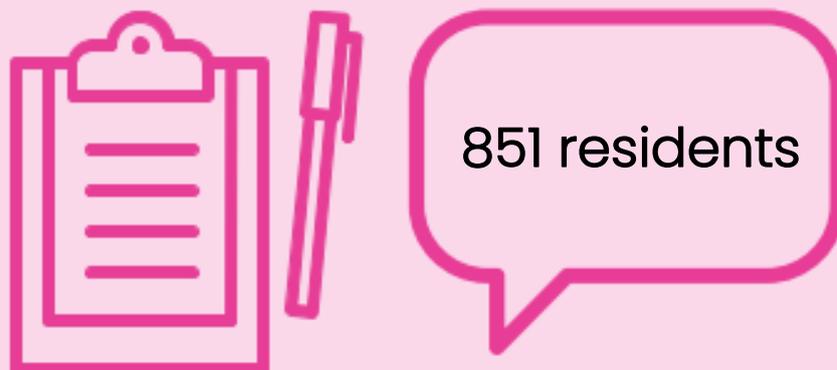
We were asked by the City of Wolverhampton Council Health Scrutiny Panel (HOSC) to undertake a brief engagement work with people around accessing audiology service.

This was a fact finder project to give a basic understanding of any challenges people are facing. We focused on understanding the experiences of people living in care homes, because 80% of residents live with hearing loss and their voices are not always heard. We aimed to gather an accurate, confidential picture of the situation without naming any care homes or residents.



Survey Overview

We spoke with:



22 care homes

259* residents with audiology needs

63 residents who use ear wax removal services

- 22 care homes responded, representing 851 residents and 259 with audiology needs, and 63 using ear wax removal services.
- 65% of the care homes we contacted do not have routine hearing tests available for residents.
- 56% of care homes said earwax removal services are both affordable and accessible for their residents.
- 70% of care homes said they were receiving timely service. 18% said they weren't receiving timely service, and 12% said it depends on the service they use.
- Dementia, mobility issues, cost for private treatment, and lack of routine hearing tests are identified as major barriers for residents.

*One care home was unsure how many of their residents had audiology needs, and thus could not answer the question.

Key Findings

1. Limited access to routine audiology services

There is a need for audiology and earwax removal services to do annual visits to some care homes.

- Private audiology care is the only option for some care homes, which is financially unviable for some. A manager we spoke to said, **“The cost of earwax removal used to be a free and regular service provided by the GP, but this is no longer available.”**
- Routine audiology care is not always delivered. One care home manager noted, **“We are supposed to have 12-month routine visits for all residents, but they are not always carried out.”**

2. Challenges accessing community services

It is sometimes difficult for residents to access audiology services within the community.

- Some residents are unable to visit community services due to advanced dementia and mobility issues. A manager stated, **“It is sometimes difficult for our residents to access community services, usually due to a change in their environment; dementia, a lack of capacity, and a lack of support from families.”**
- Many residents with advanced dementia cannot tolerate leaving the care home. Some managers told us they deem it too unsafe for residents to go out.
- Some care homes do not have the resources to take residents out into the community and must rely on residents' family members.

3. Care homes receiving timely audiology services

Many care homes receive timely service from audiology services; however, this can vary depending on the specific service, family involvement, or whether it is done privately.

- The GP service is sometimes quicker to get appointments and support than hospital services. A manager told us, **“Residents can contact their local GP to prescribe olive oil straight away, whereas West Park Hospital can take some time to get an appointment.”**
- Some care homes choose to go private for quicker appointments for their residents. Another manager said, **“Private appointments are made within a week, whereas West Park Hospital appointments can take up to 2 weeks, but in the meantime, the GP will prescribe Olive oil to prevent any ear blockage.”**

4. Mixed views on earwax removal services

While some ear wax removal services are affordable and easily accessible, others may be more expensive and harder to obtain for residents.

- Some care homes can access earwax removal services easily. One manager said **“The local GP would do the referral for us, and in-house support would be provided if a resident is bedridden.”**
- Some care homes stated that they do not have in-house earwax removal support, so they must rely on outside community services, which can come with difficulties for some residents. One manager noted, **“Residents who are diagnosed with dementia find it difficult to get to their [earwax removal service] location; most are elderly and depend on family for support.”**
- Private audiology services are sometimes not financially viable for many care home residents. One manager stated, **“We have a private service that comes onsite to offer ear wax removal for our residents, it is £55 for one ear and £65 for both ears, this is really expensive.”**

What is working well?

- Some homes successfully use audiology services in-house, but access is limited. One manager said. **“All residents have access to in-house service weekly. An advanced nurse practitioner from the GP will also prescribe olive oil to reduce ear wax build up and place a referral to West Park Hospital if needed; staff from the hospital will also come on site too.”**
- Some homes have access to routine hearing tests. One manager said, **“All residents at our home have access to the GP audiology service every Monday and can be checked regularly by an advanced nurse practitioner.”**
- Some care homes can access free earwax removal services for their residents through GP referrals, local hospitals and private services.

Areas for improvement

- **Regular NHS audiology visits to care homes**, similar to optometry and dental services.
- **Improved provision of community audiology services within care homes**, especially for residents with dementia, mobility issues and residents without family members for support.
- **Support to access audiology services (including ear wax removal)**, for any resident for whom it may be unaffordable.
- **Stronger integration between GPs, audiology services, and care homes** to ensure hearing problems are not overlooked.

Conclusion

Audiology care in homes varies significantly; some care homes receive in-house support, while others cannot access routine hearing tests. Access to timely service is generally positive, but it depends on the type of services being used. Additionally, residents with dementia or mobility issues often find it difficult to access community audiology services. Establishing a dedicated visiting audiology service, along with affordable community and private options for care home residents, would greatly enhance outcomes and help ensure that their hearing needs are addressed in later life.

Audiology service is only one aspect of a holistic approach to hearing wellbeing for people in care homes. As such we would also recommend that the Local Authority continue to work with homes to embed the recommendations taken from a [report from Care England and others](#) that urged homes to improve environments for people with hearing loss.

The report finds:

- Hearing loss often goes undiagnosed and unsupported, leading to isolation, cognitive decline, and increased falls.
- Low hearing aid use among those who could benefit, due to a lack of staff training and maintenance.
- Lack of staff training leading to ineffective or harmful communication practices.
- Noise levels, poor lighting, and lack of technology often make communal areas inaccessible to those with hearing loss.
- Access for residents to audiology services and earwax removal remains inadequate.

The report calls for care homes to:

- Carry out hearing loss audits of physical environments.
- Have clear protocols for hearing aid maintenance and use.

- Provide experiential training for all staff to understand the lived reality of hearing loss.
- Embed hearing loss champions within each care team.
- Make assistive equipment such as amplifiers readily available.
- Improve access to hearing tests, audiology services, and earwax removal.
- Provide better information for residents and families on hearing support tools and services.

About us

Healthwatch Wolverhampton is the city's health and social care champion.

We're here to listen to your experiences of using local health and care services and to hear about the issues that matter to you. We are entirely independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice to help you get the care and support you need.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.

Healthwatch Wolverhampton is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across England.



healthwatch

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