



Briefing | Westminster Hall debate 30 June 3pm

NHS England's Action Plan on Hearing Loss and the adult hearing service commissioning framework

1. This debate has been called prior to the publication of the NHS England adult hearing service commissioning framework. The framework will be launched in Parliament at 2pm on 19 July in the Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House.
2. The framework is an outcome of the [NHS England Action Plan on Hearing Loss](#) [PDF], published on 23 March 2015. The aim of the action plan is to do more on prevention, early diagnosis and support for those who have permanent hearing loss.

The need for action

3. [Action on Hearing Loss](#) has found that one sixth of the population has a hearing loss – 11 million people. That is predicted to rise to 15.6 million by 2035.
4. The action plan says that without hearing aids people are “at greater risk of social isolation and reduced mental well-being... there is a strong correlation between hearing loss and cognitive decline, mental illness and dementia”.
5. [The Ear Foundation](#) has estimated the cost of untreated hearing loss to be £30 billion per year. It has found that hearing loss is associated with reduced income of £2,000 per year on average. Wearing hearing aids halves that loss. At least £25bn in potential economic output is lost each year because of a lack of support for people with hearing loss and deafness.
6. Action on Hearing Loss has found that people wait on average 10 years to seek help after they first notice symptoms of hearing loss. Only a third of people who need hearing aids have them, leaving 4 million people with unmet needs. Yet hearing aids are shown to improve quality of life, and 90 per cent of people continue to use and benefit from hearing aids.
7. Over two thirds of BSL users ask for an interpreter to access healthcare but don't get one. The NHS wastes £14 million each year because people who are deaf or have a hearing loss don't hear their name called in the waiting room, and £76 million in extra GP appointments. For more see [SignHealth's Sick Of It report](#).
8. The [Life Chances Strategy launched by the Prime Minister in January 2016](#) talked about the importance of support for families, education, and health and social care in supporting self reliance. Deaf people still faced many barriers to accessing these services and opportunities.

Hearing aids and adult hearing screening

9. In 2015/16, some clinical commissioning groups proposed limiting access to hearing aids. Following a campaign, most have decided to halt those proposals as the commissioning framework was being developed. But North Staffordshire has implemented cuts and the risk of further rationing remains.
10. In January the National Screening Committee decided not to recommend an adult hearing screening programme. It said a randomised control trial was needed. The decision was unfortunate. It seemed the NSC focused on anecdotes about hearing aids being left in drawers, rather than the evidence about improved outcomes.
11. Moves to ration hearing aids and the NSC decision contradict the recognition of the action plan that hearing loss has an enormous personal, social and economic impact, and more needs to be done on prevention, early diagnosis and support for those who had permanent hearing loss. The challenge is too great to wait the five or so years it would take to conduct a randomised control trial of screening.

Public health campaign

12. The common thread in all the issues worked on by the deafness and hearing loss sector is the need for greater awareness. The public needs a better understanding of the impact of deafness and hearing loss. People who are deaf or have a hearing loss need better awareness of the services and other support available to them, and their rights. Hearing people need better awareness of how to protect their hearing and what to do if they start to experience a hearing loss.
13. The deafness and hearing loss sector urges the Government to work towards a nationwide public health campaign about deafness and hearing loss. By raising awareness it will help to limit the economic, social and personal impacts of acquired hearing loss, particularly as it affects older people.
14. A campaign would encourage people to take control of their life by having their hearing tested by their GP or provider of audiology services. It would thereby urge them not to let deafness and hearing loss become a barrier to them being involved in education, employment, politics, community activity – all elements of society.
15. Deafness has been put firmly on the agenda by the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act and the announcement by the Northern Ireland Executive that it plans to bring forward legislation related to British and Irish Sign Languages. A public health campaign would also demonstrate the UK Government's concern to make sure people who are deaf or have a hearing loss are provided with equal access to society.