

# **'We Hear You'**

## **A Research Report into NHS Adult Hearing Services**

August 2025



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## 1. Executive Summary

Between January and April 2025, Healthwatch Stockport carried out a focused review of NHS Adult Hearing Services in response to ongoing feedback from local residents. The aim was to understand patient experiences, assess service quality, and explore whether people were being offered choice and equitable access to hearing care across Stockport.

The research included Enter & View visits to Specsavers and Beacon clinics, surveys (online and paper), and feedback from community events and local groups.

Healthwatch also engaged with the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Board (GMICB) to understand commissioning arrangements and service oversight.

While many patients reported positive experiences—highlighting friendly staff, efficient appointments, and good aftercare—there were notable concerns. A key issue was the lack of patient choice at referral, with most people not being offered options for where to receive care. There were also inconsistencies in referral pathways, with some patients self-referring and others being told they needed a GP referral.

Communication between GPs, providers, and patients was often unclear, particularly around earwax removal and follow-up care.

Waiting times varied significantly, from same-day appointments to delays of over a year. Some patients were pleased with the quality of hearing aids and support, while others felt they received little guidance on how to use or maintain their devices. Feedback also revealed gaps in engagement with younger people, those with learning disabilities, and minority communities.



Healthwatch Stockport identified key priorities including improving communication, ensuring consistent service standards, promoting patient choice, and strengthening oversight and accountability.

Recommendations include clarifying referral processes, standardising service delivery across providers, and implementing robust feedback and performance monitoring systems. Despite limited formal complaints, the impact on individuals is significant. Healthwatch Stockport will continue to work with commissioners and providers to support meaningful improvements and ensure that NHS Adult Hearing Services in Stockport are fair, responsive, and high-quality for all.

## 2. The Project

### **Project Overview:**

- Title: NHS Adult Hearing Services Research Project
- Timeline: January - April 2025

### **Project Goals:**

- 1.Understand the experiences of individuals referred into the NHS Adult Hearing Services.
- 2.Influence local health and care service commissioning and provision to improve the quality, support, and experience of people using NHS Adult Hearing Services, as appropriate.

### **Project Scope:**

- Enter and View visits took place at Specsavers in Stockport and the Beacon clinic in Woodley Medical Centre.
- Due to staff not being available we were unable to collect any Enter and View information patients at Scrivens Clinics at Marple Medical Practice
- Surveys conducted face to face at community engagement events and online.
- Included feedback from people contacting the Healthwatch Stockport Information and Advice Service.
- Included feedback collected at our Network Event in February 2024.
- Included feedback from members attending groups at Walthew House.
- Included referral process, appointment and aftercare of service.

### **Project Stakeholders:**

- Task Group: Healthwatch Stockport Volunteer Members, Trained Volunteer Enter and View Team, and staff.
- Target Population: Individuals who have been referred to Adult Hearing Services in Stockport.
- Health and Care System: Private providers of NHS Adult Hearing Services in Stockport, GMICB.
- Forums & Networks: Walthew House, Healthwatch Stockport.

### **Project Priorities:**

- 1.Overall experience of the patient journey to access Adult Hearing Services.
- 2.Quality of service provision from providers of the service.
- 3.Equality of access to and choice of services.
- 4.Assurance of quality of service from providers to commissioners.

## Defined Outcomes:

- Improve patient experience where necessary, to ensure patient journey meets patient needs.
- Ensure equality of access to the service.
- Ensure patients are given choice when accessing the service.
- Have assurance from commissioners of the service that quality is monitored effectively.



## Background:

Overall, we have included the following in our data analysis:

- Observations and Feedback from people who we spoke to in the clinics at Specsavers in Stockport and Beacon at Woodley [patients and staff] on our Enter & View visits.
- Feedback from people, families/carers who completed our questionnaire – either online or a paper version.
- Data from our Feedback Centre database.
- Information gathered from GMICB.
- Gaps: People in younger age groups, however the nature of the service it is primarily aimed at over 55's.
- Gaps: Engaging with learning disabled people, we did not see anyone with a learning disability during our visits to the services. None of the people completing the questionnaire indicated a learning disability, although some indicated a disability.
- Gaps: People from minority backgrounds – we promoted the questionnaire through a wide number of social media platforms as well as our website and in personal, however of those indicating their ethnicity, gender and age most were white older women.

### 3. Key Findings From Our Data

#### How we collected the feedback:

The main section of this report is based on qualitative analysis of a sample of self-reported experiences of health and care services shared with Healthwatch, and of responses to a survey as well as Enter & View visits. Where the data is qualitative, we cannot quantify themes with exact numbers. However, all issues highlighted were consistent themes in the data, gathered from local people in Stockport.



A series of questions were developed with our volunteers and Enter and View Members, based on examining the issues we received through our feedback centre which triggered us to research this issue further. These were used to create our feedback questionnaire and the prompts and triggers to facilitate discussion on our Enter and View visits. Copies of these can be found in the appendices.

We also asked the commissioners about the services provided in Stockport, who was commissioned and what services they provided.

#### Where and When:

All the feedback involved people's experience of using Adult Hearing Services in Stockport.

The **Enter and View** Team visited Specsavers and Beacon between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> March 2025.

A **questionnaire** based on these questions was on our website and paper versions were available at events we attended. People with lived experience of using the services were invited to give us their feedback via either of these methods. This can be found in the appendices.

In March we **emailed GMICB commissioners** to ask who the commissioning lead was for the Stockport service and how performance data and complaints data was collected.

#### a. Enter & View Visits:

For the purposes of this report the Enter & View Team planned visits to only the independent providers of the services – Beacon, Scrivens and Specsavers. Due to unforeseen circumstances on behalf of Scrivens their visit had to be called off at the last moment and although the audiologist gave out paper versions of the visit survey none were returned to Healthwatch Stockport and so there is no data from Scrivens.

## General Observations:

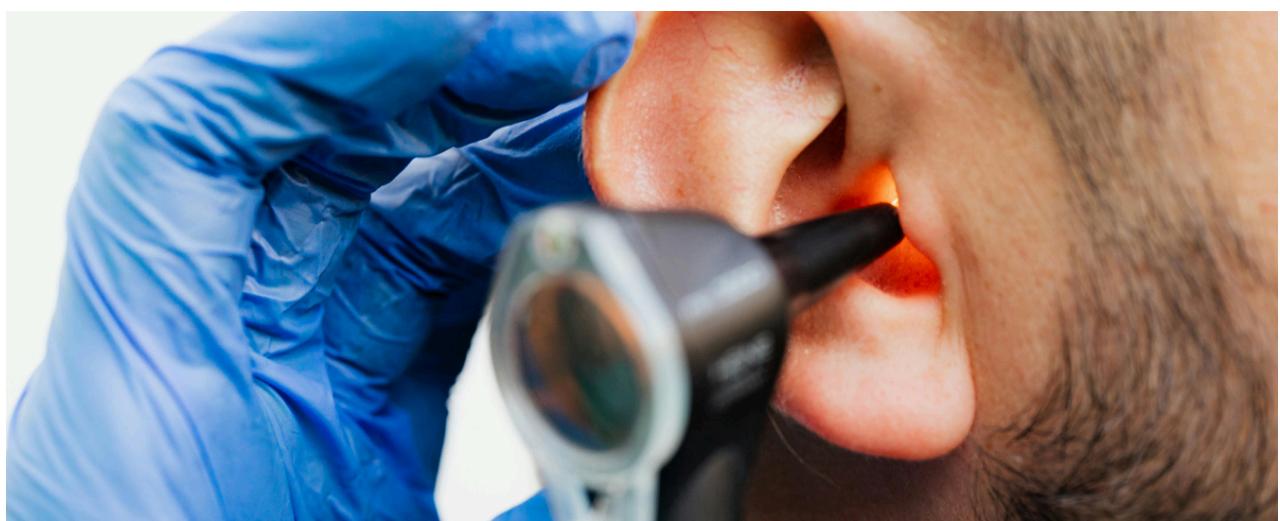
### Beacon

Beacon is located on the corner of a shopping precinct with a nearby car park; along with five disabled bays available. It was noted that the car park and disabled bays were full during the visit. The service is on the first floor with lift access.

There was no sign to indicate the audiology clinic however a receptionist was available to direct any patients and would also let the clinician know of their arrival. The waiting area is also used for two GP practices and other clinics. It was noted that this made it somewhat noisy however it did become quiet after a time. Clear signage to an accessible toilet was present. The manager shared that all patients are asked if they have any additional needs, when the appointment is first made. They can and are happy to accommodate for these as needed however anyone more complex needs would be referred back to the GP.

The waiting areas are bright, well-lit, with natural sunlight and there was plenty of seating available in two alcoves. There was no drinks machine, but water was provided if asked for. A good amount of literature was available for patients to takeaway.

It was also noted that Beacon gain patient feedback quarterly with any negative feedback explored by the Quality Team. Patients are given no choice of hearing aid but are fitted with latest model. If they are happy to they can use an app with it, Bluetooth enabled. Patients first appointment is one hour to enable time for the test, fitting and aftercare information to be given. If ear wax removal is needed they will do it at the appointment. Patients can ring up to order more batteries, tubing but are given a six month supply at each appointment. After their initial appointment, patients are given a quarterly follow up call or appointment. After one year this changes to every six months. Cleaning equipment is provided. If patients might struggle with cleaning they can ring for an appointment. Patients are encouraged to ring with any issues.



## **Specsavers**

Specsavers is located within a large shopping centre in the middle of Stockport town centre. Parking and bus access are available. All require an additional walk to get to the location. The service is located on the first floor, however there are also consulting rooms on the ground floor for the Audiology Service.

There was no sign to indicate where the audiologist clinic was however there is always a member of staff on the door who logs patients arrival and gives instructions of where to go.

The upstairs seating area is shared by opticians' customers, however two chairs are allocated for hearing test patients. It was noted that this area got quite busy and noisy at times. When asked, a member of staff shared that patients could wait outside and can be called in, if this is preferred, or a member of staff can sit with them in a quieter alcove. The clinic is wheelchair accessible.

The waiting areas are brightly lit with lights and seating can be crowded at times, but seating is available. A good amount of literature was noted as being available.

It was noted that staff were friendly, and readily available for patients to ask questions. Names are called loudly for appointments and these ran to time.

## **Staff Insights:**

### **Beacon**

- Two members of staff were spoken to during the visit: the manager, and an audiologist. Both were happy to give their time during the visit and were proud of the service they provide.
- Both members of staff were knowledgeable about the service. The manager commented on the length and quality of the patient's hearing appointment and although they only provide NHS clinics on a Thursday and Friday, there is the Northenden clinic which can offer appointments other days, including the weekend.
- The audiologist explained all the processes and services they can provide.
- Both members of staff spoke of how they have contact prior to the appointment, with the patients and or relatives/carers to find out about any additional needs. They also leave a little longer for the patient to arrive, if late for their appointment. The manager also said he was hopeful the GP would also inform them of any additional needs on referral.
- The manager commented that he only gets local referrals and that he felt patients are not given a choice of where to attend.

## **Specsavers**

- Four members of staff were spoken to during the two day visit. All were Audiologists.
- The audiologists spoke confidently about the service they provide and commented on their ability to accommodate larger numbers of patients. They spoke about their ability to be able to offer NHS patients, requiring hearing a hearing test, free wax removal if needed and would like to offer this to other patients on the NHS outside of hearing tests. One audiologist spoke about additional listening devices, that link to the television, which they can offer through social services for a small fee.
- All staff said that patients with additional needs could be accommodated. One saying that they try their best to include the patient in decisions. All mentioned that patients usually come with a relative or carer. If anyone comes in with a language barrier, a translation service can be used. Anyone with more complex needs are referred back to the GP.
- One audiologist spoke of the challenging long waiting times if a patient needs referring on for further investigation. They refer back to the GP, who then then decides where to send the patient. It was also noted that the GPs can refer patients to them and also people can self-refer themselves (please see Provider response at the end of the report).

## **Patient Insights**

### **Beacon**

- Four patients were spoken to during the visit. Two male and two female aged between 61 and 93.
- Three patients had been referred by their GP, one by their GP and hospital and none were given a choice of provider.
- Two commented that that their wait for an appointment had been 2 weeks or less. One had been longer due to him originally attending Northenden, as he lives in Heald Green.
- All patients said that they were able to get to the location.
- All patients stated that the service provided by Beacon was either 'Good' or 'Excellent' and that the staff were helpful and polite. All felt comfortable to ask questions. One patient commented that the service was 'very thorough' and provided lots of good information regarding cleaning, batteries and how to turn the aid off. One lady was particularly positive about the experience and didn't realise she would get everything done in one visit.
- One patient commented on the phone number that can be called if there are any issues. No concerns were raised.

## **Specsavers**

- Ten patients were spoken to during the two days of visits. Six male and four female aged between 66 and 87.

- Five of the patients stated that they had been referred by their GP (one via Stepping Hill Hospital and one via a telephone appointment only), two said they went straight to Specsavers for an appointment and three did not comment on this.
- Six out of the ten patients questioned were not given a choice in provider via their GP. Five did not comment on this.
- One lady was sent privately by her GP for wax removal and hearing test but was hesitant to pay. She saw a poster in their window and got an appointment after enquiring with the staff. She classed this as not being given a choice of provider.
- One patient stated that he had been two years ago for hearing aids but had not worn them. He came back directly to Specsavers to ask for another appointment and was given one. His appointment during our visit was for ear wax removal and for moulds to be made.
- The waiting times for an appointment ranged from same day (for wax removal) to 3 weeks.
- Patients came via a car, taxi and bus. All had a distance to then walk. One 84 year old lady commented that she walks with a stick and got a taxi from Marple. An 86 year old male said he parked some distance away. His daughter joined him at the appointment and advised him to get a bus back to where he was parked.
- Of the five patients that answered, all stated that the service was 'excellent' and felt that the staff were helpful, polite and they felt able to ask questions. One patient stated that the service was 'very good and the audiologist was helpful' another stated that the service was 'efficient'. He had asked for a copy of his hearing test. This was to be emailed to him.
- Of those who answered, all were happy with the aftercare service. No concerns were raised.

### Positive Aspects:

- **Service:** All patients rated the service either good or excellent.

### Areas for Improvement:

- **Patient Choice:** No patients were given a choice of provider at the time of referral, whether this was by a GP or other provider.
- **Referral inconsistencies:** Healthwatch Stockport understood that all referrals had to be made through a GP, but staff at Specsavers indicated that patients can self-refer.
- **Communication:** Messaging between the GP, the patient and the service is sometimes inconsistent. There was mixed messaging around earwax removal provisions on the NHS for example.

### Patient Experience:



- "Very impressed" – Beacon patient
- "Top service" – Beacon patient
- Service was 'excellent' – Specsavers patient
- Service was 'very good and the audiologist was helpful' – Specsavers patient

### **Constraints Noted:**

The two hour slot given for each visit did somewhat restrict the number of patients that could be spoken with, particularly at the smaller provider Beacon, as appointments can last up to one hour.

As previously mentioned, on the day of the Scrivens visit, Healthwatch Stockport received a phone call to say that appointments that day were to be cancelled due to staff illness. Healthwatch worked with Scrivens to put mitigations in place to enable some data to be collected. Questionnaires were dropped off for staff to give patients, but no responses were received.

#### **b. Online and paper questionnaire**



People were invited to feedback their experiences of using Adult Hearing Services, specifically if patient choice was offered, about the service provider they went to and their experience of using the service.

- There were 34 questionnaires completed, 22 online and 12 paper copies which were collected when out on engagement events or through Walthew House.
- Of the 34 people, 29 had used the service within the last 12 months.
- When it came to choice of provider at point of referral, 10 were given a choice, 14 were not and 10 did not respond to the question.
- Nearly half of the people had been referred to Specsavers, with the others were spread between the other independent providers, home visit providers and NHS hospital provision, although none had been referred to Salford Royal NHS Trust or Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust.
- 16 people rated their experience as good or excellent, 10 as average or poor, and 8 did not respond.
- The narrative feedback we got indicated that there was a large variance in waiting times that people had experienced from within a couple of weeks to over a year, when that person was then offered an out of area appointment within the same organisation.
- This narrative also highlighted variance in the quality of hearing aids, information and support in using and cleaning their aids, and follow up services including tubing and battery replacement. Whilst some people were really pleased with the service they received, others were so dissatisfied they resulted in the patient not using their hearing aids.
- Whilst nearly half of the respondents rated the service as good or excellent the narrative feedback was more negative. On investigation this is thought to be because some of the people who gave good or excellent ratings did not give any narrative feedback.
- There was concern about the lack of ear wax removal services for people in care homes, as this can be one of the biggest causes of hearing issues in this group.

- Demographics – for those who responded to the demographics questions the group generally consisted of people who were over 50, predominantly in the 65-79 age group, only one was male all the others were female. The responses came from across Stockport, predominantly from SK6, followed by SK2, SK7, SK3 and SK1.

### Positive Aspects:

- **Quality of service:** Once people got their appointment most who answered this question were pleased with the standard of service they got.
- **After care:** In many instances patients were happy with the level of aftercare they received.

### Areas for Improvement:

- **Patient Choice:** Less than half of those who answered this question were given a choice of provider, this was less than a third when you looked at the total number of responses.
- **Waiting Times:** There was a large difference in waiting times between providers.
- **Information and advice:** There were again variances in the quality and amount of information given on how to use hearing aids and how to maintain them.

### Patient Experience:



- "Very friendly. Thorough checks carried out before supplying hearing aids. Made sure I was happy and could use the aids properly, offered ongoing support if required." Beacon patient.
- "Did not find them particularly helpful. Did the test said I needed aids told me what my choices were then fitted them, however didn't really talk to me about things like replacing batteries, cleaning or the fact that the information in the book they gave me about the severity of my hearing differed from what I was told at the time." Specsavers patient.
- "I got an appointment within a week and received the hearing aids on the same day as my test. There was no attempt to upsell." Specsavers patient.
- "Initial experience wasn't good when trying to book the appointment and the setting up of equipment. The experience with the lead of the service was very good, experienced and provided a great service." Specsavers patient.
- "Difficult to get an actual face to face appt even when I said my hearing aids were not working properly. Was made to feel a nuisance by the person I saw who did not even look in my ears. Difficult to get new domes and tubes as well. Size was changed but when I asked for more through the post the wrong size were sent." Scrivens patient.

### c. Commissioner lead and performance monitoring

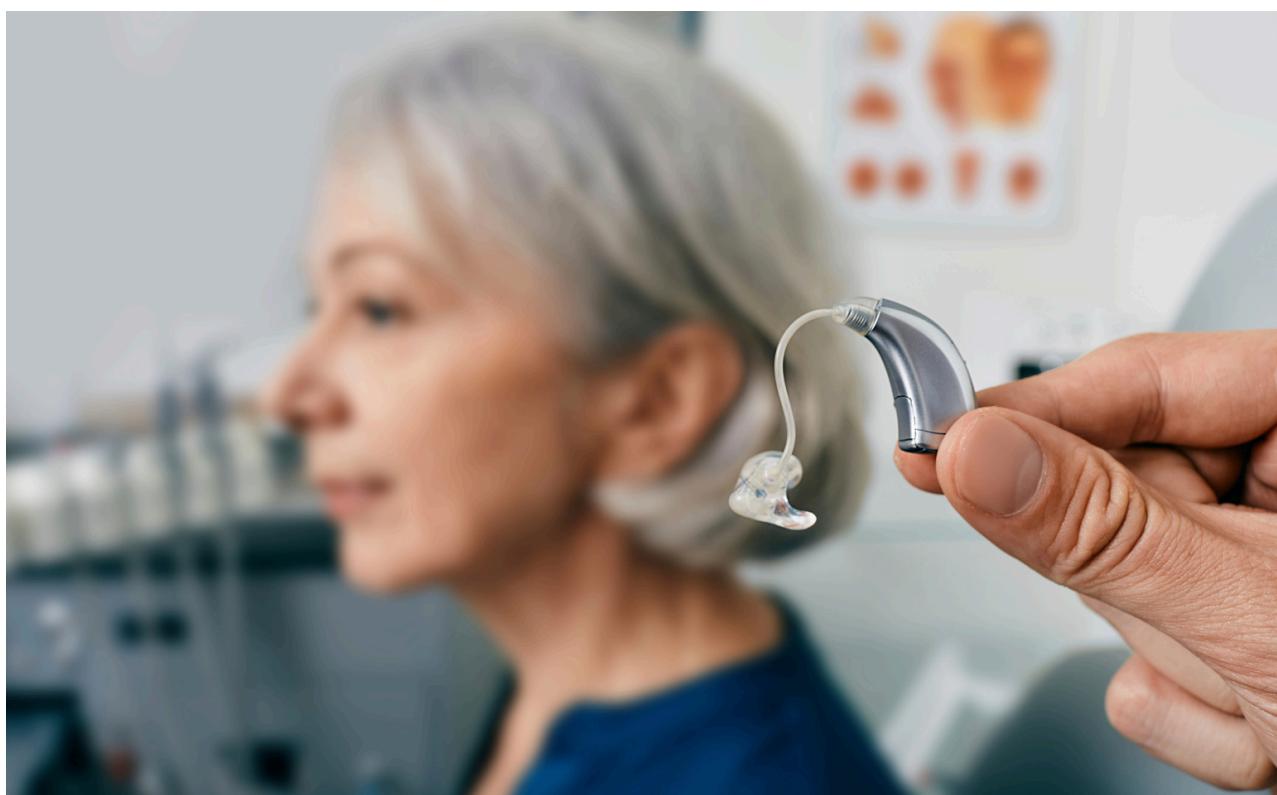
In March the commissioners fed back the following in response to our queries:

#### **Who is the Lead Commissioner for Adult Hearing Services?**

- In the early days of Greater Manchester (GM) developing into a single Integrated Care Board (ICB), a single lead was nominated to cover the (then) individual arrangements for Clinical Comissioning Groups under the service contract, however this arrangement did not survive the changing roles as GMICB formed, except in a couple of cases. There were no named leads in the localities, although there were some individuals with a keen interest in these services, but no-one in this space across GM. There was one person with a GM remit who was involved with the review of Adult Hearing Services across GM, but at that point in time had no direct control over contracts as these were still managed locally.

#### **What processes are their in place for complaints about the independent providers and how are these made known to patients? And does the ICB collect performance data from the independent providers?**

- The response to this was that the picture was very unclear. The person responding said that there had been attempts to allocate quality leads to services, but was unsure if there were any names person attached to the Specsavers and Scrivens, although there was a named person allocated to Beacon as they provided other GM contracted services. As a result they were able to confirm that Beacon completes an annual submission that includes the process around complaints, and they are obliged to let patients know their complaints process in the same way an NHS provider would. Beacon submit quarterly numbers of complaints and a twice yearly report of Patient Feedback including complaints, and the commissioner collects data on Key Performance Indicator's (KPI's) monthly.



## 4. Recommendations / Suggestions for Improvement

### 1. Improve Communication:

1. Ensure that all clinicians, including GP's, and provider staff are communicating the same messages around referral pathway, including the patient having to have ear wax removed prior to the appointment.
2. Provide clear, accessible patient information about the service and how it is delivered.

### 2. Ensure parity across the service:

1. Ensure providers are offering the same service and are not introducing their own variations.
2. Develop, or if one already exists use, a performance monitoring system to ensure accountability.

### 3. Ensure that feedback about the service is captured from all providers:

1. Implement a system to capture compliments, concerns and complaints that providers receive.
2. Use this information to ensure that improvement to service is ongoing.

## 5. Conclusion

1. The oversight of the service for Stockport and in most instances across GM seems to be confused and has no leadership. This in turn means there is no accountability for the services, and we suspect that GMICB would not be able to evidence whether or not the providers were delivering the service they are contracted to provide.
2. Some GP's and other health professionals do not appear to have a clear understanding of the pathway and how it is referred into, and more communication is needed with these groups to ensure equality of service.
3. On the whole, once patients have been referred into an independent provider they are pleased with the services they receive, however again communication is key. Some patients complained about lack of information about how to use and maintain their hearing aids, whilst others reported an excellent aftercare service.
4. Services did appear to provide slightly different care, for example some included ear wax removal as part of the pathway, whilst others paused the pathway until the patient had wax removed. This means an inequality in the provider services, which we find concerning.

### Provider Feedback

Specsavers wanted to add for clarity that in relation to self-referral:

- All of our colleagues are aware that this is not in place as it is something that we have been asking the ICB to implement for over a couple of years now. I think some confusion may have come from conversations with patients who were being seen for aftercare who can initiate this themselves once they are on a pathway and do not need to see the GP for this.



## 8. Appendix 1

These questions were asked of patients by the Enter and View Team

### **Enter & View Survey**

#### **Patient Questions**

- Is this your first hearing appointment with this service today? Yes/No
- How were you referred? GP, Optician, Hospital, Other
- Did you have a choice of provider? Yes/No
- From when you first enquired, how long did it take to get to this appointment?
- How easy did you find accessing this service today? (ease of getting to location, how did you find the building? Does it meet your needs?)

#### **About the Audiologist:**

- Overall, how satisfied were you with your appointment. Excellent, Good, Average, Poor, Very Poor
- Can you expand on this choice?
- Do you feel the staff were helpful and polite?
- Do you feel you were able to ask all your questions and were they answered?
- Any other comments about your experiences of using the service?

#### **About the after care:**

- How would you rate your experiences of follow up/aftercare for this provider? Excellent, Good, Average, Poor, Very Poor
- Can you expand on this choice?
- Do you feel you were given adequate information to help you look after your hearing aids? Yes, Somewhat, No
- Any other comments about the aftercare of your hearing aids?

We also collected demographic information for each contributor, where they chose to give it to us.

## 8. Appendix 2

### Online questionnaire

Q1. Have you used NHS Adult Hearing Service in the last 12 months?

Q2. Did you have a choice of provider?

Q3. Which provider did you use?

- 3.1 Beacon Medical Services Group – Woodley Health Centre
- 3.2 The Outside Clinic (Home Visiting and Care Homes)
- 3.3 Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust
- 3.4 Salford Royal Foundation Trust
- 3.5 Scrivens Ltd – Marple Medical Centre
- 3.6 Specsavers Hear Care Group Ltd – Stockport
- 3.7 Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust
- 3.8 Other (please specify):

Q4. How would you rate your experience?

Excellent

Good

Average

Poor

Q5. Is there any additional information you would like to share?

Q6. Over the next few months, we will be looking at patient experience of this service, if you would like to share your experience in more detail please provide your contact information below:

Name:

Email address:

Phone number:

Q7. Have you used other NHS services in addition to NHS Adult Hearing Services, linked to ear care (ear wax removal, requesting batteries, audiology)

Q8. Which service did you use? Do you have any feedback to share about the service?

Q9. Do you have any other health or social care experiences you would like to share?

We also collected demographic information for each contributor, where they chose to leave it.