

HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 OCTOBER 2023

CHILDREN'S HEARING SERVICES (PAEDIATRIC AUDIOLOGY)

Summary

1. This report is to brief the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) members on actions being taken by Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust (WAHT) to respond to issues identified with the accuracy of some children's hearing tests and to provide assurance on the quality of the service currently being provided.
2. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer from WAHT has been invited to the meeting to respond to any questions the Committee may have.

Background

3. This report relates to tests known as auditory brainstem response (ABR) tests which are provided by WAHT countywide.
4. An ABR test is a safe and painless test in infants and young children to see how the hearing nerves and brain respond to sounds. It gives health care providers information about possible hearing loss.
5. ABRs are carried out when a baby fails a newborn hearing screen, or when a child is too young to do a regular hearing test in a sound booth or has a medical or developmental problem that makes sitting still and responding to the sounds of a regular hearing test difficult. WAHT carries out, on average, four ABRs a week.
6. The outcome from the test is dependent on the test being correctly performed, correctly interpreted and the correct follow up/treatment pathway identified.

Issues Identified with the Accuracy of Some Children's Hearing Tests

7. In October 2022, some inconsistencies in the delivery, interpretation or follow up of ABR tests were identified by the WAHT audiology team during planned follow up appointments.
8. These were raised with an NHS England (NHSE) clinical expert who saw similarities with the Lothian Report - an extensive expert review published in December 2021 which found failings in the standard of hearing tests carried out for children in NHS Lothian's Paediatric Audiology service.
9. Separately, as a result of the Lothian Report a national paediatric hearing service review set up by NHSE was also underway and had identified similar issues in other Trusts.

10. WAHT was not part of the initial cohort as identification rates for the number of children diagnosed with hearing problems following a review of screening data collected between 2018 and 2023, did not fall outside the expected limits.

Action Taken

11. Following the self-identification of potential issues with the delivery, interpretation or follow up of ABR tests, WAHT began a comprehensive internal review of paediatric audiology services, supported by NHSE experts in audiology, to identify those children who might need a further hearing assessment.
12. The initial review has looked at 462 results held by WAHT for ABR tests and additional diagnostic assessment data since 1 April 2018.
13. The review has found further inconsistencies in the test results for some children. To date the review has identified 115 children to have their hearing retested. This number is likely to increase as the review continues.
14. Families affected have received appointment letters and are also being provided with a telephone helpline and signposting to information online. The first appointments are already taking place and being conducted by, or under the supervision of, a clinician from a separate United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) approved Audiology service for added assurance.
15. So far, 7 cases of moderate harm and 16 cases of greater harm have been identified among the cases that have been reviewed.
16. Levels of harm include language and development delay and delay in providing appropriate rehabilitation / intervention, e.g. hearing aid fitting and cochlear implantation.
17. In all cases the families involved have been given a full explanation and apology as part of WAHT's Duty of Candour. All cases have been, or are in the process of being reviewed, and treatment or further management and support provided by accredited staff as appropriate.
18. WAHT has been in contact with other Trusts involved in the national review to understand and learn from their work. WAHT's local review team is also working closely with clinical experts, professional bodies, and patient groups, to ensure WAHT develops a comprehensive understanding of the issues and delivers immediate and longer-term solutions.
19. WAHT acted swiftly on the findings of the initial internal investigation and actions already put in place include refreshed training for audiology clinicians and peer review of new tests being undertaken.
20. Pastoral support and mentorship has also been put in place for the wider Audiology Department at WAHT.

Next Steps

21. WAHT is continuing to recall and retest patients in the initial 2018 to 2023 cohort where advised.
22. Plans are in place to identify the next cohort of children that may need to be reviewed. This is likely to involve children born between 2015 and 2018 and children at high risk (for example, awaiting behavioural testing, under Speech And Language Therapy, or in specialist education).
23. WAHT continues to work closely with an accredited NHS organisation as part of the review and is working towards achieving formal UKAS accreditation as soon as possible.

Advice Provided for Healthcare Professionals

24. WAHT has conducted an initial briefing with health professionals working across the paediatric audiology pathway in Worcestershire, informing them of the review and asking them to contact the Trust if there are any concerns about a child's hearing.

Advice Provided for Families

25. Families of children affected are being contacted directly should their child need to be recalled for a hearing test.
26. Families whose child/ren is/are due a hearing appointment at a hospital can be reassured that paediatric audiology services are safe. Refreshed training has taken place for audiology clinicians and peer review of new tests being undertaken is also in place.
27. Families affected have been advised to contact WAHT's Patient Advice Liaison Service at wah-tr.pals@nhs.net or 0300 123 1732 if they have any queries or concerns. To date five calls have been received.
28. A letter is also being sent to all families whose child has been involved in the review but where no further action is required.
29. Further support and advice is also available from the National Deaf Children's Society, who are aware of the review, at www.ndcs.org.uk. It also runs a helpline which is open Monday to Thursday 9am to 5pm and Friday 9am to 12.30pm 0800 800 8880 or email helpline@ndcs.org.uk.

Purpose of the Meeting

30. The HOSC is asked to:
 - consider and comment on the information provided; and
 - determine whether any further information or scrutiny is required.

Contact Points

Dr Jules Walton, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust
Email: jules.walton@nhs.net

Emma James / Jo Weston, Overview and Scrutiny Officers, Tel: 01905 844964 / 844965
Email: scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk

Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Assistant Director Legal and Governance) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.