

Norman Lamb MP
Minister of State for Care and Support
Department of Health
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
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5 March 2015

Dear Norman,

URGENT – Decommissioning of hearing aids by North Staffordshire CCG

I am writing as a matter of the utmost urgency to call on you to take action to protect the future of NHS hearing aid services in the final days of this Government. Whilst I recognise your position that this is a local issue, the latest action taken by North Staffordshire CCG is highly likely to see this matter referred to the Secretary of State for Health and I feel that we have reached the stage where your personal support for our position must be translated into action.

On 4 March 2015 the North Staffordshire CCG Governing Board passed proposals to introduce a new hearing loss commissioning policy and eligibility criteria. We are appalled at the way this has been introduced by the CCG. As you will know from our previous conversations on this issue we have engaged with the CCG ever since they brought forward proposals to restrict access to NHS hearing aids and were told in December 2014 by the CCG's Clinical Chair, Dr Mark Shapley, that no restrictions would be introduced until at least the financial year 2016/17.

We were therefore deeply concerned when the agenda and papers for the Governing Board meeting of Wednesday 4 March were released to the public on Friday 27 February with the inclusion of proposals to restrict access to NHS hearing aid services from October 2015. Ten minutes were set aside for discussions and the papers had serious omissions (including the absence of an Equality Impact Assessment) and major flaws (including the assessment that the removal of hearing aids from people with mild hearing loss constitutes early detection and effective management). I have enclosed a briefing with fuller details. The proposals were adopted at the meeting.

The policy will mean that no one with a mild hearing loss will be provided with an NHS hearing aid. I know from our discussions that you understand that this clinical term represents a far from 'mild' impact on the individual experiencing it and that it has a wide reaching impact on their wider health and wellbeing and other aspects of their life. The new policy also means that people with a moderate hearing loss are not guaranteed hearing aids and will have to pass the hurdle of an unsuitable and unnecessary questionnaire.

Last year, the Healthy Staffordshire Select Committee overwhelmingly rejected the CCG's proposals to remove the provision of hearing aids from people with mild or moderate hearing loss. Despite the CCG's indications that the committee was made aware of the revised proposals we understand from a committee spokesperson that this was not the case, that the committee has today expressed its dismay to the CCG at the turn of events and that they will be calling on the CCG to appear before them to account for this action ahead of the likely step of referring this matter to the Secretary of State, a power that the CCG was reminded of when they originally appeared before the committee regarding this issue.

Given the urgency of this matter I do not intend to rehearse the evidence regarding the benefit that hearing aids bring to people with mild to moderate hearing aids or the impact that this will have on those affected. I have enclosed our original submission to the CCG's engagement exercise that outlines this in detail. Instead, I wish to request an urgent meeting or teleconference with you to identify any action that you can take to help save NHS hearing aid services.

I recognise that you will have many other issues to deal with over the next few weeks and that the coming election will soon become a focus for you and other Ministers (which we feel partly explains the timing of the CCG's latest action). However, I call on you to ensure that part of your legacy as Health Minister is the protection of NHS hearing aid services, particularly given the positive steps that you and Paul Burstow have taken in the coalition government to see people with hearing loss properly supported through the National Action Plan on Hearing Loss. The positive steps you have both taken could become completely redundant if NHS hearing aid services are allowed to be eroded away following a precedent set by one CCG.

We will accommodate any availability you may have and I sincerely hope that we are able to discuss this issue in more detail over the coming days.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Breckell
Chief Executive

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