



NEWS RELEASE

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HEALTH WATCHDOG HIGHLIGHTS COVID IMPACT ON CHILDRENS EXPERIENCES OF SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY SERVICES

The independent health services watchdog for North Wales – the North Wales Community Health Council (NWCHC) – has today formally released its report about people’s experiences of Speech and Language Therapy services (SALT) in the region.

Following formal concerns raised about aspects of the BCUHB’s SALT service, an investigation had been commissioned and a number of findings and recommendations made. In response to a recommendation that BCUHB review its service user and patient feedback, the NWCHC worked in partnership with the health board to host a series of events with a view to gathering views from patients, relatives and other stakeholders of the SALT service.

During the watchdog’s ‘safe space’ events held virtually and face to face at a number of locations across North Wales, many shared their experiences of SALT services and in particular how the service had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Geoff Ryall-Harvey, Chief Officer for NWCHC said ‘Most of those wanting to speak to us about their SALT experiences were parents of children using the service – principally about delays in accessing the speech and language therapy service. We heard that following the first UK-wide lockdown beginning on 23rd March 2020, sessions for children almost completely ceased until September 2020. For much of this period there was little or no contact between families and Speech and Language Therapists. Later some received services by video conference but some parents told us that services only appeared to restart post-September 2020 because parents were persistent in calling for services to their children to start again.’

‘Many parents told us that they felt their children had lost services at a crucial stage in their development and that this was compounded by the absence of interaction with other children due to home schooling. Some parents felt that their children had lost all progress made in previous months and that the effect upon their child’s development had been devastating.’

Mr Ryall-Harvey went on to say ‘Parents acknowledged that the pandemic had presented everyone, including SALT, with extreme challenges and that it had been necessary to redeploy staff to deal with vaccinations and care for sick patients in

hospital. However, they also felt that more could have been done to continue contact with children using the service, albeit in a limited way, using video conferencing and digital technology.'

'Staffing levels and recruitment difficulties within SALT, both before and during the pandemic, have been a major challenge to providing the service. We believe that it is because of this hiatus in child speech therapy, that most of our contact was with parents of those children.'

Gareth Evans, Acting Executive Director of Therapies and Health Sciences at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board said

'To help us build on the improvement work already undertaken in Speech and Language Therapy services, we asked the Community Health Council to gather feedback from patients, their carers and families across all six counties of North Wales.'

'Despite our best efforts to maintain services and support patients, we acknowledge and apologise for the disruption caused to our patients during COVID-19.'

'In order to keep patients and staff safe, we followed Welsh Government directives to suspend planned care at critical peak times during the pandemic. A third of our Speech and Language Therapy staff were redeployed during the first wave of the pandemic to support essential services such as staffing COVID wards.'

'Once 'Attend Anywhere' technology was available to us, essential outpatient Speech and Language Therapy services recommenced either in person or virtually and we established the highest level of virtual patient activity in the Health Board. Helplines for paediatric patients were also set up to provide a direct link to professionals for families.

Mr Evans went on to say, 'As we emerge from the pandemic, we are implementing our COVID recovery plan which includes extended and flexible clinics, increased remote appointments and reviewing and prioritising patients impacted by the pandemic'.

Speech and Language Therapy is recognised as a shortage profession in the UK and we are redoubling our efforts to recruit new staff, including Welsh speaking therapists to support the Welsh speaking communities we serve. We are also working hard to retain our valued staff with flexible working arrangements to support work life balance and the introduction of wellbeing champions.

The NWCHC is pleased to learn that its report will ensure that the voice of the patient forms an integral part of the overall review of SALT services.

Jackie Allen, Chair of NWCHC added 'I am pleased with the success of another round of 'Safe Space' events and that we were able to allow people to share their experiences in a confidential and structured way. We now look forward to finding out how the Health Board will take into consideration the impact of its services on people's lives and how the findings of our report can improve the patient experience.'

A full copy of the NWCHC report can now be found on its website at <https://northwaleschc.nhs.wales/files/salt-engagement-nwchc-final-report-eng-pdf/>

Note for editors

1 North Wales Community Health Council (CHC) is an independent statutory organisation which represents the interests of patients and the public in the National Health Service in North Wales. It came into being on 1 April 2010 as part of the reorganization of health services in Wales and covers the counties of Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Wrexham and Ynys Môn. The six counties have a combined population of around 675,500.

2 The Community Health Council has six local committees, one covering each of the six counties. Each local committee comprises members drawn from three sources: councillors nominated by the relevant local authority, people nominated by the local voluntary sector organizations and local people appointed by Welsh Assembly Government.

More information

For more information or an interview with Mrs Jackie Allen, or Mr Geoff Ryall- Harvey please contact: North Wales CHC, tel: 01248 679284 or Email: carol.williams63@wales.nhs.uk

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