

Hearing impairment in Torbay

ICB review: April 2025

1. Purpose of the report

Torbay Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Board have requested that Devon Integrated Care Board (the ICB) provide a written statement identifying the numbers of children diagnosed with hearing impairment in Torbay and the predicted changes over the next three years (2025-2028).

2. Statement of Response

The ICB has completed an epidemiological and service level review of relevant provision.

Based on the information available it is concluded that:

- National estimates of the volume of children and young people in Torbay with permanent hearing impairment of around 50, broadly align to the number of children and young people in Torbay with an EHCP or SEN support which relates primarily (41) or secondarily (14) to hearing impairment¹².
- Variation in uptake or demand in newborn hearing, audiology and specialist surgical intervention services are thought to be attributable to improvements in early identification and broadening of the eligibility for surgical intervention (and associated growth in wait lists), rather than growth in need.
- Over the next three years the number of children and young people with permanent hearing impairment is expected to be reasonably static with variation in line with the birth rate in Torbay.

¹ [Decision - Hearing Impairment Units - Revised Decision](#)

² [Statement regarding Hearing Impairment Units - Torbay Council](#)

Supporting Information

Types of Hearing Impairment

Hearing impairment in childhood is broadly identified as conductive or sensorineural (descriptions below). The difference is important to understand because it broadly distinguishes between typical childhood illness and permanent hearing loss.

Conductive hearing loss

- *Conductive hearing loss is when sound cannot pass through the outer and middle ear, it is often caused by blockages or infections, like glue ear.*
- *Around 80% of children will have at least one episode of glue ear by the time they are 4 years old which may cause temporary hearing loss.*
- *Conductive hearing loss is usually temporary, but the duration and impact vary significantly.*
- *Most children with conductive hearing loss will recover without specialist intervention. Some children may need grommets or hearing aids for a period to help with their hearing.*

Sensorineural hearing impairment

- *Sensorineural hearing impairment is when the inner ear doesn't work effectively. The sound vibrations reach the inner ear but don't get translated to signals that the brain can understand.*
- *Around 1 in 1,000 children are born with a significant, permanent hearing impairment and a further 1 in 1,000 children are later identified as having a significant, permanent hearing impairment by the age of 9 years.*

Population & National Prevalence Estimates

In Torbay, based upon the available ONS census data there were c.25,122 children and young people in Torbay. The birth rate in Torbay has fallen in recent years from 1,095 in 2021 to 959 in 2023 (12.4% decrease)³, however, given that this period included COVID longer term trends cannot be assumed.

Based upon the flat application of the national prevalence rate for permanent hearing impairment (sensorineural) we could expect around 50 children and young people in Torbay have permanent hearing impairment. If the birth rate continued to fall, over time, this number would be expected to reduce over time.

In considering the number of children and young people with a particular need the accuracy of any prediction is less good when the population is small and the need is less common. This is important to note because small changes in the numbers have a bigger proportional impact.

Health Provision

The NHS commissions a range of healthcare offers for children and young people in Torbay with conductive and/ or sensorineural hearing impairment. Variation in demand in these services can sometimes drive a concern about changes in the prevalence of need, however, it is important to interpret this information in context and recognise that the impact of COVID may have caused significant fluctuations in patterns of demand which don't reflect a change in need.

Newborn Hearing Screening

³ [Birth Rate to Dec 23.pdf](#)

NHS England commissions newborn hearing screening for all newborns in England which enables early identification of sensorineural, permanent hearing impairment.

Uptake of newborn hearing screening in Torbay has shown variation in recent years and, therefore, the onward volume of referrals for further investigation has varied. This variation is a factor of change in uptake and cannot be used to identify changes in prevalence of need. In Torbay over between 2020 and 2024 an average of 2.2 newborns each year were identified as having permanent hearing impairment.

Nationally, earlier identification of sensorineural, permanent hearing impairment continues to drive improvements in the screening process, including more recently enhanced monitoring of language development by health visitors in the early years. This may mean that children and young people are referred to audiology services sooner and potentially accessing support for longer. This is an improvement in the identification of need, rather than an increase in need.

Audiology Service & Torbay Hearing Support Service

Outside of routine hearing checks in newborns and the early years, if there are concerns related to a child's hearing the most common route is for the GP to refer the child to the local audiology service. In Torbay this is commissioned by the ICB and provided by Torbay & South Devon NHS Foundation Trust.

A child or young person referred to audiology will usually be assessed to understand the nature of their hearing impairment. They may then be offered a range of management strategies or treatment options according to their needs, this might include having grommets fitted or using hearing aids for conductive and/ or sensorineural hearing impairments.

Hearing aids can be used as long-term or short-term options. Short term the use of a hearing aid be offered to help a child with conductive hearing impairments, or to offer some hearing improvement for a child with sensorineural hearing impairment who is waiting for a specialist surgical procedure.

The volume of children and young people accessing the Torbay Hearing Support Service (which is for all children and young people needing a hearing aid) increased by 29% between the period of 2020-2024. Local intelligence suggests that this increase is associated with increased wait times to access specialist surgical interventions, however, numerical validation to support this is limited and trend analysis is problematic owing to the small volumes of children and young people affected.

Specialist Surgical Intervention

Children and young people from Torbay who need highly specialist surgical procedures, such as those used to place implants (i.e. bone anchored hearing aids or cochlear implants) are referred to specialist centres such as the one in Bristol (University Hospitals Bristol & Weston NHS Foundation Trust) commissioned by NHS England.

Nationally, eligibility to access some specialist surgical interventions, like placement of cochlear implants has broadened in recent years, driven by improvements in the evidence base. As a result, more children and young people are being referred to access these interventions, with initial referrals and intermediate support provided by local audiology services until surgery is undertaken. This does not signify a change in need, rather, it signifies technological advancement which will improve the experience and outcomes of more children and young people.