
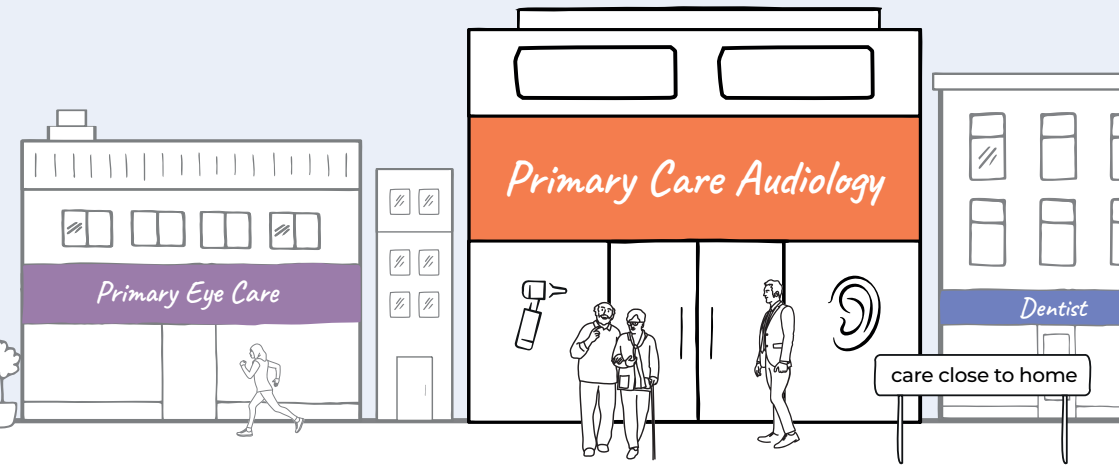




The Association for
**Primary Care
Audiology Providers**

Primary care audiology: accessible ear and hearing care for all

 Northern Ireland



Executive summary

Ear and hearing issues are now widespread across the population. As people live and work longer, demand continues to grow and the need for timely, effective ear and hearing care continues to rise.

Northern Ireland's health service is now at a tipping point. The hospital-based model of ear and hearing care cannot keep up with rising need or public expectations. Major failures highlighted in the latest inquiries into hospital audiology underline the risks of continuing with current pathways. Hospitals and GPs are overstretched, and this leads to delays, barriers to care and poor patient experience.

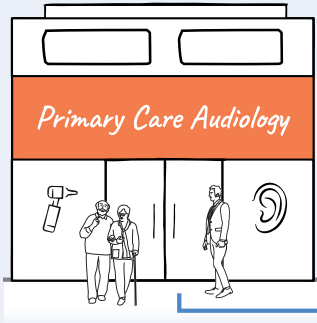
Fortunately, most adult hearing care – including earwax, tinnitus, hearing aid assessments, fittings and follow-ups – can be safely provided outside hospital though the qualified, clinically-registered primary care audiology workforce, with only patients who genuinely need specialist care going to hospital.

Primary care audiology is a proven, evidence-based patient-centred care model which brings ear and hearing care closer to where people live, supports early diagnosis and management, and reduces demand on GPs and hospital Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) services in line with the ambitions of '[Health and wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together](#)'.

Now is the moment to act. By modernising pathways and commissioning NHS-funded primary care audiology consistently across Northern Ireland, more people would receive the timely care they need and deserve, while the health service benefits from:

- ⌚ Faster diagnosis and early support.
- ⌚ Increased hospital capacity for complex ENT and paediatric cases.
- ⌚ Better value for money through lower cost, community-based care.

Improving access to primary care audiology will mean:



Thousands more

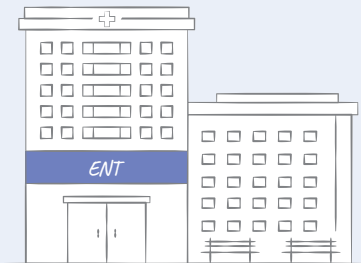
people will have their ear and hearing care needs met closer to home.



72,000

GP appointments saved

per year, enabling GPs to focus on more urgent medical needs.



9,000

ENT appointments saved

per year, freeing up time and capacity for one of the busiest hospital specialities.

Endnote⁸⁰

Key points for policymakers

1. Rising need and avoidable harm – existing NHS pathways cannot meet need

- Hearing loss is rising. Left untreated it drives poorer health, reduced independence and significantly higher long-term costs for the Northern Ireland health and care system.
- Reliance on GP and hospital ENT routes creates avoidable delays, pressures and inconsistent experiences. This model cannot scale to meet current or future need.
- Access to NHS-funded primary care audiology remains a postcode lottery, with many patients facing unnecessary waits or barriers depending on where they live.
- A consistent commissioning approach – including self-referral and clear integration with ENT – would standardise access and reduce unwarranted variation.
- Rolling out NHS primary care audiology across Northern Ireland would save 72,000 GP appointments and 9,000 ENT appointments annually.

2. Primary care audiology works and delivers better value

- Primary care audiology has a qualified and regulated workforce already capable of meeting the majority of adult ear and hearing care needs in Northern Ireland.
- Enabling NHS patients to self-refer into existing primary care audiology services reduces unnecessary GP and ENT appointments and brings care closer to home without any new capital expenditure.
- Clinical evidence shows most adult ear and hearing conditions can be effectively and safely managed in primary care settings.
- Economic modelling demonstrates significant potential savings for the Northern Irish health service and faster access to evidence-based treatment.
- Working alongside ENT and hospital audiology, primary care audiology supports an integrated, futureproof service underpinned by clear professional, quality and training standards.

3. Reforming services will reduce inequalities and support national NHS goals

- Expanding access to NHS primary care audiology empowers patients, improves access and reduces pressure on hospitals in line with Northern Ireland's strategic health priorities.
- Better digital connectivity between primary care audiology, GPs and ENT can streamline referrals, speed up clinical decision making and reduce unnecessary hospital visits.

Conclusion

Now is the moment for Northern Ireland to ensure NHS patients can access high quality ear and hearing care close to home. Primary care audiology provides a safe, effective and affordable way to meet rising need, improve patient outcomes and reduce avoidable pressure on GPs and hospitals. It offers fairer access for patients, better use of clinical capacity, and improved value for public money.

Modern commissioning and strong national leadership are essential to replace outdated, hospital dependent pathways with a consistent, evidence-based primary care model that meets the needs of a 21st century population.

[Learn more and access supporting evidence and data.](#)

