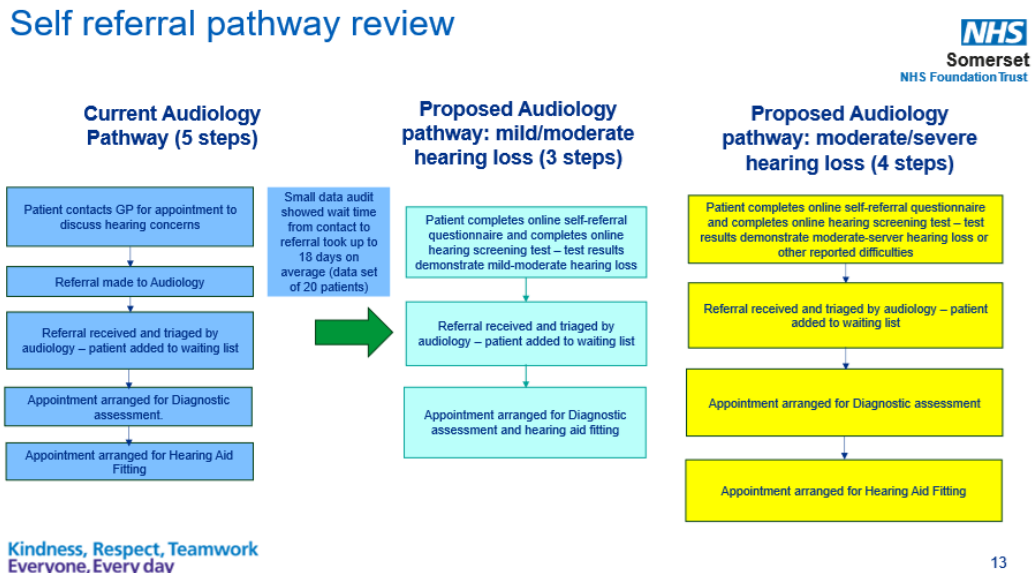


Audiology Improvement Collaborative Case Study

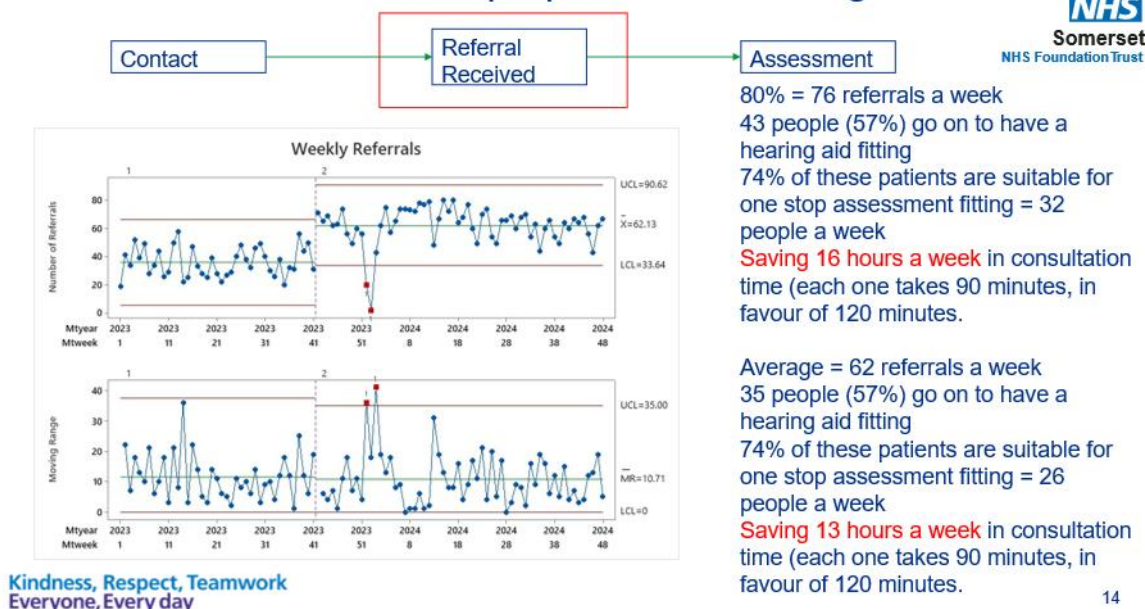
Site Name Somerset NHS Foundation Trust – Adult Audiology Service
Core Components/Principles Somerset's Adult Audiology Service has adopted a patient-centred, experience-based design (EBD) approach to improve access, reduce waiting times, and address the unique demographic challenges of the county. The strategy involves simplifying referral pathways, integrating self-referral options, and piloting innovative triage methods such as online screening. Collaboration with local communities and targeted support for specific populations, such as Armed Forces Veterans, are central to the programme. The approach emphasises demand and capacity management, early intervention, and efficient use of clinical resources.
Our Challenge Somerset faces a growing, ageing, and predominantly rural population. Nearly half of residents live in rural areas, often with limited transport links, pockets of rural deprivation, and digital exclusion. Demand for audiology services is rising due to the increasing proportion of older residents, many with complex needs. The service must balance improving accessibility for both inpatients and outpatients with reducing inequalities and providing long-term support for hearing loss, hearing aids, and tinnitus. Financial pressures and the need to deliver more care in community settings while reducing reliance on secondary care add to the challenge.
What we did (the process) The team reviewed the existing five-step audiology pathway and designed streamlined versions for patients with mild/moderate and moderate/severe hearing loss, reducing the number of steps to three or four respectively. A self-referral pathway was introduced, eliminating the need for a GP appointment and speeding up access. The process was tested in a trial with Armed Forces Veterans within one Primary Care Network, incorporating an online screening test to filter patients and identify those suitable for a one-stop assessment and fitting. Self referral pathway review  <pre> graph TD subgraph "Current Audiology Pathway (5 steps)" C1[Patient contacts GP for appointment to discuss hearing concerns] --> C2[Referral made to Audiology] C2 --> C3[Referral received and triaged by audiology – patient added to waiting list] C3 --> C4[Appointment arranged for Diagnostic assessment] C4 --> C5[Appointment arranged for Hearing Aid Fitting] end subgraph "Proposed Audiology pathway: mild/moderate hearing loss (3 steps)" P1[Patient completes online self-referral questionnaire and completes online hearing screening test – test results demonstrate mild-moderate hearing loss] --> P2[Referral received and triaged by audiology – patient added to waiting list] P2 --> P3[Appointment arranged for Diagnostic assessment and hearing aid fitting] end subgraph "Proposed Audiology pathway: moderate/severe hearing loss (4 steps)" M1[Patient completes online self-referral questionnaire and completes online hearing screening test – test results demonstrate moderate-severe hearing loss or other reported difficulties] --> M2[Referral received and triaged by audiology – patient added to waiting list] M2 --> M3[Appointment arranged for Diagnostic assessment] M3 --> M4[Appointment arranged for Hearing Aid Fitting] end C1 --> P1 C2 --> P1 C3 --> P2 C4 --> M3 C5 --> M4 Note[Small data audit showed wait time from contact to referral took up to 18 days on average (data set of 20 patients)] </pre> Current Audiology Pathway (5 steps) 1. Patient contacts GP for appointment to discuss hearing concerns 2. Referral made to Audiology 3. Referral received and triaged by audiology – patient added to waiting list 4. Appointment arranged for Diagnostic assessment 5. Appointment arranged for Hearing Aid Fitting Proposed Audiology pathway: mild/moderate hearing loss (3 steps) 1. Patient completes online self-referral questionnaire and completes online hearing screening test – test results demonstrate mild-moderate hearing loss 2. Referral received and triaged by audiology – patient added to waiting list 3. Appointment arranged for Diagnostic assessment and hearing aid fitting Proposed Audiology pathway: moderate/severe hearing loss (4 steps) 1. Patient completes online self-referral questionnaire and completes online hearing screening test – test results demonstrate moderate-severe hearing loss or other reported difficulties 2. Referral received and triaged by audiology – patient added to waiting list 3. Appointment arranged for Diagnostic assessment 4. Appointment arranged for Hearing Aid Fitting Small data audit showed wait time from contact to referral took up to 18 days on average (data set of 20 patients) NHS Somerset NHS Foundation Trust Kindness, Respect, Teamwork Everyone, Every day

The service undertook an EBD audit, gathering patient and staff feedback to shape improvements. Data audits assessed clinical time savings, waiting times, and the reliability of triage processes. Weekly referral and outcome data were tracked to measure progress.

What we achieved (the outcomes / data)

The self-referral trial demonstrated significant benefits. For mild/moderate cases, an estimated 16 hours of consultation time were saved per week by moving to shorter, more efficient appointments. For moderate/severe cases, the savings were 13 hours per week. Most patients were seen, assessed, and fitted in a single visit, meeting 6- and 18-week RTT targets without creating a backlog.

Current Referral rates and proposed time savings



Patient feedback was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting improved communication, shorter waits, and the convenience of avoiding GP gatekeeping. In Yeovil, facility improvements will further enhance patient experience as these have not yet been implemented.

Testimonials from wide range of staff groups and patients

Patients noted excellent communication and reduced barriers to accessing care. Staff valued the streamlined process and the opportunity to deliver more timely, patient-focused care. Feedback from the veteran trial reinforced the benefits of a one-stop model and the reduced administrative burden.

Key System contacts

Emma Ralph
Audiology Lead
emma.ralph@somersetft.nhs.uk