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The Scottish Parliament
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Dear Convener,

As part of the First Minister's priorities for the first 100 days of the Scottish Government, yesterday I met with NHS Heads of Service, community audiology providers and lived experience stakeholders to discuss a draft plan to improve audiology services in Scotland.

You will be aware that the Scottish Government accepted the findings of the Independent Review of Audiology Services in Scotland in 2023. While significant work has already been undertaken to respond to the Review's recommendations, I recognise that challenges remain and this requires renewed focus. Audiology services are facing sustained pressure, not just in Scotland but across the UK as a result of demographic changes, and some people continue to wait longer than they should for appointments and referrals; this is not acceptable.

I therefore welcomed the opportunity to present and discuss a draft phased audiology improvement plan with stakeholders. This plan has been developed with Public Services Delivery (PSD) Scotland, and covers governance, quality assurance, and workforce pipelines, to ensure that we have in place a strong foundation from which we can deliver sustainable improvements to audiology services over the long term. There was strong engagement from attendees in discussing the draft plan and I will ensure that their views are incorporated into the ongoing work led by PSD Scotland. In particular, it was extremely valuable to have the insights and views of Heads of Service, professional expertise and lived experience shared in focused discussion, and I have therefore asked my officials to formalise this engagement through creation of a regular Audiology Stakeholder Forum. This will provide an ongoing opportunity for engagement, collaboration and feedback across organisational boundaries – and in pursuit of a shared vision – as the improvement work progresses.

The Scottish Government remains committed to its vision for an integrated and community-based hearing service in Scotland, to support our aim to shift more care into the community and away from hospital settings, as set out in the Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework. However, it is only once we have the foundations in place that we can begin expanding services into the community.

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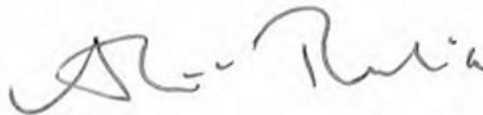


It is important to recognise that the introduction of independent contractors to NHS audiology – as a primary care service – requires legislative amendments which take time to deliver and enact. My Government's focus is therefore on delivery of the proposed audiology improvement plan – and in particular supporting NHS services to work towards a Target Operating Model for audiology – while considering any necessary legislative changes in the longer term. My officials will also work with NHS Heads of Service and Public Health Scotland to strengthen the collection and publication of data on audiology, ensuring greater visibility in areas such as activity levels, referrals and waiting times, and providing a baseline against which we can evidence our iterative improvements. My view is that this will contribute to the necessary foundation to deliver more accessible, consistent and patient-centred audiology services across Scotland.

Lastly, you may also be aware that the Scottish Government has funded the "RNID Near You" initiative for a number of years and this currently provides hearing checks and after-care support for hearing aid users in five NHS Board areas. I am pleased that our Manifesto committed to extending this important service nationally, where alternative arrangements are not already in place, and can advise that my officials are currently working with RNID to identify the next locations for the expansion of this service.

I would like to close by putting on record my thanks to all those present at yesterday's meeting for their engagement in discussions and their strong commitment to improving audiology services in Scotland, both now and into the future.

Yours sincerely



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