



Wheelchair Service Feedback Report

Hampshire, Southampton, IOW

healthwatch
Hampshire

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Background and Methodology

In 2022, Healthwatch Hampshire and Citizens Advice had been receiving feedback about the West Hampshire, Southampton and Isle of Wight Wheelchair & Repair Service which was run by Millbrook Healthcare. We attended the Service User Improvement Board meeting, where board members spoke about some of the problems they were experiencing. We raised an issue with the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB (HIOW ICB) about the effectiveness of these meetings and offered assistance to Millbrook Healthcare to develop and improve them.

By May 2023, we had received no response from the provider and so developed a set of questions to gather feedback about the service. To develop the survey, we worked with people who used the service, finding out what issues and questions were important to them. The resulting co-produced questions explored themes like waiting times, assessments, communication, and the impact that getting the right equipment had on people's lives.

At the end of May, Ross Care took over the service from Millbrook Healthcare.

In June, Healthwatch staff met with Ross Care, and they agreed to help promote the survey on their social media, website and by sending the survey link to their client lists. They also offered a clinic visit so we could talk to people when they came in for appointments. Ross Care displayed information about the survey on their website and social media. After our initial meeting they informed us that they could not contact their service users directly to ask them for feedback as they did not have consent to contact people for this purpose. Their governance team told us: "The consent to share information relates to service activity confirmation and reminders."

Since we would not be able to send out our survey to service users through Ross Care, we changed our approach to this engagement. We developed links with the Solent NHS Trust Therapies Teams and other local organisations, attending clinics and leisure groups to reach out to people who used the service.

Ross Care also agreed to their engineers handing out flyers when they visited people for repairs. We also organised further visits to their clinic at Chandler's Ford.

During this engagement we completed four visits to the Ross Care clinic in Chandlers Ford, two visits to Special Education Needs Schools and two visits to wheelchair leisure/sports groups (Hampshire Hornets Basketball and Move Momentum Dance). To

promote the feedback gathering process we worked with 14 voluntary/charity organisations, 6 Special Education/Resourced Provision Schools and the Solent NHS Therapies Teams. Our visits began in July 2023 and continued until January 2024. The survey closed in January 2024. The survey made clear that we were collecting recent experiences of the wheelchair service as run by Ross Care.

We got feedback from professionals who work with the service, via telephone, email and online survey. This included the Solent NHS Therapies Teams, non-clinical staff at Special Education Needs Schools/Resourced Provisions and staff at local support groups and organisations, such as the MND Association and the MS Society.

We also promoted the survey by a social media campaign and in the Hampshire Healthwatch newsletter. Our partner organisations in the NHS and charity/voluntary sector also helped us promote the survey with their service users. It was available online through a QR code and people could also request a printed version or talk through the questions over the telephone with Healthwatch staff.

We have spoken to 98 service users, parents, and carers. Feedback and suggestions were also provided by 16 professionals who work with the service.

Most of the feedback we received has been through in-person interviews held while people were waiting for appointments or with their children in clinics or leisure activities. This format worked well as it fitted around their busy lives, enabling them to give detailed feedback about their experience of the service. The themes and questions that had been highlighted in the survey were used as prompts for the conversations. Our aim was to give people the opportunity to focus on the issues that mattered to them.

Overview of findings

The impact of getting the right equipment

- The right wheelchair is crucial to every aspect of people's health and wellbeing. Many people spoke about being grateful for their NHS Wheelchair, saying that it had changed their life.

Waiting for Wheelchairs

- Long waits were reported as occurring at every stage of the process (referral to assessment, assessment to delivery, delivery to handover.)
- Waiting a long time for a wheelchair negatively affects people's physical health. It causes pain and discomfort, exacerbates existing health problems, and creates new ones.
- Waiting for a wheelchair also affects people's mental health, stopping them from going out and being social, isolating them from their friends, family and community.
- Waiting for the right wheelchair affects children's family life, and their social and educational development.
- For some people by the time they received their wheelchair, their needs had changed, and it was no longer suitable for them. This issue was felt acutely by children and young people, some of whom had already outgrown their wheelchair by the time it arrived.
- People with degenerative illnesses also felt that the service was not able to respond to changes in their condition promptly enough.
- People said the service did not hold sufficient stock of widely used essential items, such as lap belts, chest harnesses, foot straps and cushions, which had to be ordered in. These additional orders took some time to be received.

Communication and Partnership Working

- Poor communication was a central theme of the feedback received from service users, referrers, and partner agencies. Communication issues included:

- Not enough focus on the 'customer facing' element of the service with people not knowing what was happening with their case for long periods.
- Referrals were not always acknowledged by the service.
- People were not always given confirmation of what had been ordered.
- Most people were not given time scales or updated about how their case was progressing. This meant they resorted to chasing up by regularly calling the office to find out what was happening with their equipment.
- Administrative staff do not seem to have access to information about people's cases, so could not answer their questions or update them.
- Staff promised to call them back to answer questions or queries, but this didn't happen.
- Some people reported having to complain and escalate requests to the Clinical Lead to get what they needed.
- Professionals that worked with the service felt that communication could be improved:
 - It was difficult to contact clinical staff directly.
 - A lack of continuity in staffing meant that they didn't have a reliable point of contact.
 - Parents valued school clinics, they said that they were a very useful resource. They relied on them to manage repairs, adjustments and to get their children's equipment reviewed.
 - Parents said that the Children's Therapies Teams have significant involvement in the 'case management' and 'customer service element' of wheelchair provision for children.

Assessments, Adjustments and Repairs

- Service users said Ross Care therapists and engineers were friendly and polite. They appreciated it when staff listened to their needs and spent time explaining how to use their equipment at handovers. Many people also said they felt that Ross Care clinical staff were knowledgeable and professional.
- Parents and some therapists said not all Ross Care staff had enough experience with paediatric referrals.
- Service users felt that the process for requesting/triggering a review was not clear.
- Most people were happy with the quality of the equipment when it arrived. Some pointed out that organising additional parts and adjustment, meant it took a long time to get a wheelchair that 'fully met their needs'.

- People fed back that getting adjustments to their wheelchair was difficult, they said that there was no easy route to ask for them and that it often took a long time to get them dealt with.
- Some service users reported being put at risk because adjustments were not made, including people falling out of their wheelchairs.
- Almost everyone we spoke to about the repairs service knew who to contact to request one.
- There was a mixed response to the repairs service. Some people said repairs 'happened quickly' and were easy to arrange, while others said they took a long time. Some said they felt repairs could be more consistent and better organised, as appointments were cancelled without informing people, or engineers turned up when they weren't expected. People also reported that their notes weren't up to date which caused problems for engineers doing the repairs.
- Most felt that the engineers were friendly and professional.
- Some people said there wasn't a system in place to prioritize repairs, which meant they were left using wheelchairs that were unsafe while they waited.
- Service users and physiotherapists felt that orders missed 'important additions'.
- Service users, parents, carers and some professionals commented that "it depended on who you got" as to what equipment was issued.
- Teenagers and young adults spoke about it being hard to get the right equipment. Some said the equipment they were offered did not consider their need for independence.
- Service users were interested in getting information and tips about how to maintain their wheelchairs.

Feedback and complaints

- Service users said they are not consistently given opportunities to feedback about the service. They are not sure how to provide feedback and lack confidence that it leads to changes.
- People felt the complaints process was not clear.
- Some people weren't satisfied with how their complaints were handled.

Section One: The impact of getting the right equipment

Service users said having access to a wheelchair is crucial to every aspect of their health and wellbeing. The right wheelchair means that people can maintain their physical health, that children can go to school, grow up, and have fun like other children their age. For people that have degenerative health conditions time is precious and a wheelchair means they can spend time doing activities that they enjoy with their loved ones.

The right wheelchair is about people having independence, hobbies, jobs and being able to live the fulling lives they deserve. Many people spoke about being grateful for their NHS Wheelchair, saying that it had changed their life.

“Oh, it's absolutely brilliant! Getting out and about...just getting into my garden was amazing - the fresh air. I have more freedom and independence. When shopping I can look at what I want instead of having someone pushing me - looking at things I didn't want to look at! It changes your life.” Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“I'm very appreciative of the wheelchair we have been provided for my daughter as it changed everything for us and she's sitting so much better.” Parent of Child Service User, Convoid Cruiser Buggy

It's important to us and to him that he is able to go out with his peers, have independence, - to literally keep up...it's important to him as a young person to just be able to go out to the shops with his friends and not to worry and be able to keep up with them. It seems simple, but it's very important to remove that barrier.” Parent of Young Person Wheelchair User

“My wheelchair is my life. Without it, I would be bedbound, with it I live alone with some support from social services. I am active in my community and useful to society.” Adults Service User, Powered Wheelchair

I had tried to commit suicide. It gave me a reason to live. Freedom and independence. Things like having the smaller chair means I can take the kids to school as it fits in the car easy, and I can lift it one handed. Having the bespoke chair - which suits my active lifestyle - I used to run marathons - the chair has meant I can pursue sports like archery which I really enjoy." "Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

Section Two: Waiting for wheelchairs

Long waits from referral to receiving your wheelchair

People said that they were waiting too long to get their wheelchairs, in some cases over a year. Service users were understanding about there being a waiting list but made it clear that such long waits for essential equipment was having a huge impact on their lives and was not acceptable.

“Overall, I think it is a good service, the waiting times are very long though, the resident I am with today has waited a year and a half.” Carer for Adult Service User, Bespoke Manual Wheelchair

“It has taken 2 years to get a fit for purpose chair, a really drawn-out process.” Parent of Child Service User, Convaid Cruiser Buggy

Service users felt that there were long waits at every stage of the process; some reported waiting over a year to get an assessment. The length of waits to get assessments was also raised by people we spoke to at local Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Association and Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society groups.

“Seemed like a long time from referral to assessment and then more for the equipment. Always me doing the chasing.” Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“The main issue is the time it takes to get anything done, we waited for over a year to get my daughters chair – and by the time you get it it’s no good as they have grown out of it. I feel like it’s not just the wait time for the parts – its wait times for assessment as well.” Parent of Child Service User

“About 3 months from referral to get the assessment for my son.. then in the summer like 6months ago... I’ve heard nothing. Unless I constantly chase them up nothing gets done.” Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair

Several people commented that they had to wait a long time for what seemed very standard parts or additions. They questioned why the service didn't hold more stock of essential equipment that was widely used like lap belts, chest harnesses, foot straps and cushions.

Service Users also wanted to know about how the ordering process worked, for example how long it took for orders to be placed for equipment such as cushions. Was the order put in immediately, or did they have to wait to fit monthly budgets or for bulk ordering?

"Said today about a support for his back, but they said they would need to order it? It's odd that they don't have any in stock? And no time frame given on it." Parent of Child Service User

"How can a service that maintains electric wheelchairs not keep batteries in stock. This is appalling. A battery failure should be deemed an emergency and repaired/replaced same day. We waited 2 weeks!!! This was after waiting over a week for someone to come out and tell us we needed a new battery!" Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

"It would be useful if they held stock of some basic items that are widely used, rather than having to order things in each time" Physiotherapist

"We had an issue with the battery, they don't hold any in stock!!! So that had to be ordered. We are completely reliant on the wheelchair for leaving the house but there is no urgency from wheelchair services we are constantly waiting on them." Adult Service User

Some people also reported that their wheelchair had been delivered to Ross Care, but they waited weeks for a handover appointment. It was very frustrating for people who had waited a long time for their wheelchair and urgently needed it, to be told it had arrived but they could not access it.

“It was 2 months before the fitting appointment, even when the chair was in”
Parent of Child Service User, Buggy

The chair was ready in May – I called 11 times to get the appointment to pick up the chair, I was put on hold – they would go and talk to someone – then just say they would be in touch about it.” Adult Service User, Bespoke Manual Wheelchair

“We waited 3 months; the chair came quickly, but they could not then get a clinician to fit the chair for a further 6 weeks. Kept phoning and got appointment last Monday. I hadn’t been told it had arrived – only found out as I kept calling.” Carer of Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“I waited 8 weeks then I called, and they said it had arrived – but we waited another 6 weeks to get a clinician to fit it. So, the chair was there waiting for her, but couldn’t use it.” Carer of Service User, Manual Wheelchair

The Impact of waiting for a wheelchair

Service users and carers wanted to ensure that the impact of waiting a long time for a wheelchair was brought to the fore. Behind the phrase “waiting times” are people whose lives are limited, and whose health and wellbeing is compromised.

One service user pointed out: “If you need a new pair of shoes to get you around, then you just go out and buy them. I can’t do this – I rely on this service for being able to do everything in my life”.

A parent of a young child explained: “Before I had this wheelchair, I could see how uncomfortable she was, leaning over to one side, it took such a long time to get a new one. Why should she have to sit like that, all uncomfortable – hanging out of the chair, you or I wouldn’t have to sit like that, so why should she?”

Waiting a long time for a wheelchair has a negative effect on people's physical health, it causes pain and discomfort, exacerbates existing health problems, and creates new ones.

"I have the most basic chair I got privately while I wait – but it isn't much good – and not good for my health. I do feel my condition has got worse because of this. I have lost weight since the assessment so I worry that the chair will be too big." Young Person Service User, Standard Manual Wheelchair

Waiting for a wheelchair also affects people's mental health, stopping them from going out and socialising, isolating them from their friends, family and community.

"I had a year in doors waiting for the chair" Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

"My mother-in-law is not able to leave her room nor go out without having to use an ambulance." Carer for Adult Service User

"The key is to process the referral at the right point – so you enter the process when bad enough to get put in for the chair – but not so bad that you are left lying in bed for months. I bought a mobility scooter to get around, as my legs are getting weaker – I will need a chair for longer distances now. Without the scooter I bought, I wouldn't be able to go out. It's important for me to go out and about in the open air – in nature – not just be ferried around in a car." Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

In some cases, service users said that by the time they had received the wheelchair they felt their needs had changed, and it was no longer suitable for them. This issue was felt acutely by children and young people, some of whom had already outgrown their wheelchair by the time it arrived.

“Really long wait times need to be condensed. Unfortunately, so many of our children are being assessed for wheelchairs and then due to such long waiting times by the time they receive their provisions they have outgrown them, and the cycle begins again.” Physiotherapy Assistant, Children’s Therapies Team

“We have some complex children [children with complex needs] who require a high level of specialist postural support and I feel the service is not always equipped to provide what’s required in a timely fashion.” Physiotherapist, Children’s Therapies Team

This meant that children can be repeatedly provided with equipment that is not suitable, or only in use for a short period of time, which is damaging for their overall health and a poor use of resources.

“The problem is, you ask when the existing buggy is not suitable anymore and still then have to carry on using it for months, even a year after that. A lot of parents don’t ask until the existing one has a problem – then they have to wait ages with a chair that’s no good.” Parent of Child Service User

Parents spoke about the huge impact waiting for a wheelchair had on their children’s health and development. As children grow, they need to be consistently supported by the correct equipment. Children waiting in wheelchairs that are too small means they are uncomfortable and in pain. Waiting long periods in ill-fitting equipment can *cause* health problems for children. The physiotherapists we spoke to for this report said that they would put in safeguarding incidents if they felt that a child’s wheelchair was having an impact on their health.

“He (a primary age child) has a curve in his back as his chair was not supporting him right. He may need surgery. This new chair is a lot better – we are just needing to sort the head rest though – its continual adjustment to get things right.” Physiotherapist

“I had called and chased several times and actually raised a uylsyes incident and safeguarding for my patient” Physiotherapist

“My son can’t go out. We have had to use his buggy or I have to carry him, but he is too big now he’s at school. We have to use his old buggy which he is too big for, and the wheel buckles. So, we can’t do family outings.” Parent of Child – has no wheelchair

Waiting for the right wheelchair also affects children’s family life and their social and educational development.

“He couldn’t go to school – he can’t have the stumps down for too long... He needs a manual chair that is the right size, and with the stump rests for the car, as he can’t go out otherwise.” Parent of Child Service User, Manual wheelchair

“It has stopped us going out places, he likes going to the zoo or wildlife parks, but we can’t go to them with the power chair.” Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“It’s been awful. My daughter was in a chair that was too small for her. It has held up our application for a WAV [Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle] and has restricted our going out as a family.” Parent of Child Service User

People with degenerative illnesses also felt that the service was always not able to respond to changes in their condition promptly enough. They felt that more care needed to be taken to anticipate their needs.

“I waited over 6months to be assessed for my power chair then a further 12 months for the chair. Because I took a refurbished second-hand chair. I have MND so I was desperate for the chair. Please don't make us beg for these chairs. Time is not on our side.” Adult Wheelchair Users, Powered Wheelchair

“By the time it arrived my position had changed – it’s the nature of my condition” Adult Service User

Meeting children’s needs as they grow

Children’s needs are continually changing as they grow, and some parents felt that it was hard to get an appointment to get the equipment reviewed.

“The process of getting people to see her (my daughter) is hard. I phoned up saying my daughter needed a new chair ages ago. It took 4 months to get a review. I had to phone up 5 times before I got an appointment. Each time they said they would get back in touch, but they never did.” Parent of Child Wheelchair User, Powered Wheelchair

Clinicians and parents felt that more needed to be done to ensure that children were not left with equipment that was too small or not supporting them correctly.

The parents we spoke to felt that a ‘children’s pathway’ should be established that recognised the services *on-going duty* to meeting children’s needs as they grew up. At present, they felt that the service was focused on getting a single referral for equipment issued and then closing off the case. This meant that parents struggled to ‘get back into’ the service and get reviews, changes and alterations made quickly.

“Need a pathway for children I don’t feel like there is one – pre-emptive – say we will check in with you in 2 years’ time.” Parent of Young Person, Powered Wheelchair User

Professionals felt that the process for reviews and adjustments was too lengthy and slowed down the process. They said that children’s cases were effectively never closed, they were continually needing reviews and adjustments, and the current system did not account for this. At present they had to complete a new referral form for each adjustment, most of this form was reiterating information that Ross Care was already aware of or was not relevant to the alteration they were asking for. They felt that a single page form, giving an overview of what was needed should be sufficient and would save time.

"It is a challenge to re-refer. We must fill in a referral form which is a big form for every adjustment that we need - it's about 6 pages. Would be good to have one form for renewal which is quick. The referral form is good for initial assessments but not for reviews." Physiotherapist, Children's Therapies

"It's frustrating that a re-referral has to be made for each event. I work in Paediatrics where our patients will have a need for a wheelchair for life, but they will require adjustments for growth and postural changes etc. It's time consuming to have to fill out a referral for every change." Physiotherapist, Children's Therapies

Some parents said a powered wheelchair was required for school, but a manual one was used by the family out of school as it fitted in their car and was more flexible. They said that only one of these wheelchairs had all the additions needed to meet their children's postural needs despite both being regularly in use.

"Only allowed one main wheelchair with all the right stuff on it and a spare." Parent of Child Service User

"Only allowed tray for postural issues - not for independence, feeding yourself, doing activities, going out. My daughter has been given one for one of her wheelchairs but is not allowed one for the other chair, I don't understand why this is the case?" Parent of Child Service User

Section Three: Communication and partnership working

Communication with Service Users

Poor communication was a central theme of the feedback received from service users, referrers, and partner agencies. Service users said they did not get information about what was happening with their case. It is clear from the feedback that this caused people a lot of anxiety and frustration, as they said that having a wheelchair that is safe, comfortable and meets your needs is essential to your life, or the life of your loved one.

People felt there was not enough focus on the customer facing element of the service.

“They need to allocate people to do the customer facing stuff – to give people progress reports and be the first contact point. Basically, there is no customer service – need to understand the importance of keeping people informed.” Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“What would help is a point of contact where they knew my child, where they could put you through to who you needed, they were able to give you information. You need to know where you are in the process, even if it is a long time...It could be they have lost your referral or something is wrong – you wouldn't know, as there are months without any contact. Knowing what point you are in the process is important.” Parent of Child Service User

The communication issues that were raised were:

Referrals were not consistently acknowledged by the service, leaving some people unsure if they had been successfully received.

“Spoke to them about needing a new one, waited 7 months and didn’t hear anything. So, then I called in and asked about it as I thought it had got lost. I don’t know if it had got lost, it was about the time they changed to Ross Care. We got an appointment pretty quick after that though.” Young Person Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“Confusing referral process. Old forms on the website. GP and community OT both completed referral forms. Only had a reply when referral was fast-tracked for end-of-life care.” Adult Service User Standard Manual Wheelchair

“You could be forgotten and you wouldn’t even know.” Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair

Some people were not given confirmation of what had been ordered, which caused confusion and misunderstandings when the equipment arrived.

“My son needs a new one as he has outgrown it. I feel it’s not that specific what I’m getting, could be a new base and chair Or same base and a new seat?” Parent of Child Service User

Service users were not given time scales or updated about how their referral was progressing, so they did not know what to expect and what was happening with their order. Waiting for long periods without any contact made people anxious and frustrated, which meant they resorted to regularly calling the office to find out what was happening with their equipment.

“Absolutely shocking with no communication whatsoever. A complete nightmare. Emails are hardly, if ever, answered. Timescales are elastic at best and that is if they give you a timescale at all.” Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“Not kept up to date on referral – I have to call about them periodically.” Carer of Adult Service User, Bespoke Manual Wheelchair

"I had to regularly contact for an update. Nobody made contact with me to keep me informed." Parent of Child Service User

"Communication is non-existent unless I phone them. They tell you it's all in process and what you want to hear, regardless of whether it has any reflection on the truth." Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

"Communication leaves a lot to be desired. I have had to constantly chase for updates on additions to my husband's powered chair." Carer of Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

"I would rather know I'm 5th in the queue than know nothing" Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair

There is a lack of confidence that the service can deliver, as people feel they have to call to chase up requests, referrals and adjustments to ensure they are completed.

"They are slow to do things – had to chase up multiple times to get things done. 45 people are involved in my child's care – I work full time – I'm a single parent – I can't be chasing people to do things that they are meant to be doing." Parent of Child Service User

"Generally everything is led and managed by us." Parent of Young Person Service User, Powered Wheelchair

When calling the service, administrative staff do not seem to have access to information about people's cases, so could not answer their questions. Several people said that they were given incorrect information, which caused further confusion.

“Call up to ask about something, they just say “yes okay we will get back to you”, but they never do. You never hear from them. They don’t seem to have an idea about your case or what is happening with it”. Parent of child service user

“This was over a year ago – from when I made my first phone call. I would phone them again and again and never get a clear answer.” Adult Service User, Powered wheelchair

“I think they are never very clear about things- they don’t know your case [when you phone] and how far along in the process you are.” Parent of Young Person, Powered Wheelchair

“When contacting the office for an update on the progress of the chair I was given multiple reasons for delay. Including it's coming from America, it's in the warehouse and we will call you back. We did not receive a phone call. It was then established that the wheelchair was a reconditioned one therefore the answers on progress were not correct.” Parent of Child Wheelchair User

People said that staff promised to call them back to answer questions or queries, but this didn't happen.

“Communication is appalling. There is no communication, I only hear from wheelchair services when I contact them myself to chase referrals. Often, I am told someone will call back, they never do. The whole process is incredibly stressful due to the lack of communication and accountability.” Adult Service User, Standard Manual Wheelchair

“They are easy to contact – but meant to phone back and they don’t and they make excuses. Not updated on progress – different excuses each time” Carer for Adult Service User, Bespoke Manual Chair

“No one ever gets back to you.” Parent of Young Person, Powered Wheelchair

“When I call up, I just get told – yes someone will get back to you – but they never do” Parent of Child Service User

Escalating requests to get them dealt with

Some people reported having to complain and escalate requests to the Clinical Lead to get what they needed.

“Made a formal complaint and that got me in here today.” Parent of Child Wheelchair User, Manual Wheelchair

“I only get things done when I emailed [the Clinical lead] even then I have to chase constantly.” Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“They said ‘No’ to what we needed for her. I asked to speak to the manager (Clinical Lead) – I basically made a formal complaint and he agreed, and helped work out a solution, but it shouldn’t have taken doing that to sort this.” Parent of Young Person Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“Waiting on manual chair, I need one as can’t get the electric one in the car and I want to be able to take my daughter out. I got sick of waiting so contacted the CEO on social media and only then things got moving.” Parent of Young Person, Powered Wheelchair

Partnership working with NHS Teams and Support Organisations

Professionals from the NHS, support organisations and schools provided feedback for this report, including clinical and nonclinical staff at Special Educational Needs Schools, therapists from Solent NHS Trust and staff from support organisations.

Professionals that worked with the service felt that communication could be improved, for example they found it difficult to contact clinical staff directly,

which caused delays. Professionals from MND Association said that they used to talk to Wheelchair Service staff at Multidisciplinary Team meetings for their service users but that the provider no longer attended these, and this was causing more “delays and breakdown in communication”.

“It's often hard to speak with the clinical team. I am still waiting for a call back regarding a number of problems we had last week. The communication within the service itself appears poor. We had a situation last week where we were expecting 3 children to be seen and the Ross care technician was given the wrong information and only 1 child received what was required.”
Physiotherapist Children’s Therapies

Clinicians also felt a lack of continuity in staffing meant that they didn’t have a reliable point of contact to help organise things and deal with enquiries.

“Staff turnover at the Wheelchair Service is very frequent and it makes joint working more challenging.” Physiotherapist, Children’s Therapies

“High turnover in staff, we had two OTs for years, they both left at the same time, after that we have had no continuity.” Physiotherapist Children’s Therapies

“What would help is having 1 person who is responsible for the clinic having different people each time means communication is difficult.” Non-Clinical School Staff

Staff at the schools told us that continuity is important for school clinics as getting to know the therapists and children means that more appropriate adjustments and repairs can be made.

“One young person had a loose foot plate, it was sorted, but it just came loose again. The issue was that they sat still when in the clinic – but they usually move around in a certain movement that causes it to come loose. They didn’t know this, if they had known the child, or we could have told them – then maybe they would have made an alteration that was more robust”
Non-Clinical School Staff

School Clinics

Healthwatch visited two clinics at Rosewood School and The Cedar School. We also received feedback from parents, therapists and school staff at Special Education Needs Schools across Hampshire, via email, online surveys and telephone calls.

The parents we spoke to about school clinics felt that they were a very useful resource. They said they were busy, and under a lot of pressure so being able to use these clinics to manage adjustments and repairs to wheelchairs was very helpful.

Therapists working out of the schools told us they were a positive aspect of the service.

“[It is good] when we have school-based clinics and we have the opportunity to work together to provide the appropriate level of support and equipment for our children”. Physiotherapist, Children’s Therapies Team

“[It is good] Wheelchair clinics being held in the school and working collaboratively with OTs.” Physiotherapist, Childrens Therapies Team

At Rosewood School and The Cedar School, Children’s Therapies and Ross Care staff worked hard to come up with solutions to meet the needs of students. For example, Ross Care staff had designed and created a set of plastic discs to cover the wheels of a child’s wheelchair as they had been catching their fingers in the spokes. This showed a level of care that was appreciated by children and parents.

At both clinics Children's Therapies Team staff took meticulous notes about what was issued, what children were waiting for and what they needed for the future, so they were able to manage cases effectively.

Staff at the Schools explained that the role of Children's Therapies clinicians should be primarily to put in referrals, arrange for children to attend clinic and help facilitate the clinic, using their knowledge of the children to support it. However, feedback shows that they have significant involvement in the 'case management' and 'customer service element' of wheelchair provision for children.

"I spend about a day a week on the phone with the Wheelchair Service sorting things out" Physiotherapist, Childrens Therapies Team

"We support the wheelchair service as much as we can – but I do feel that we are effectively 'patching up the service' – we are filling the gaps". Staff member, Childrens Therapies Team

"9 out of 10 times they don't send a letter it's our School OT that tells us when the appointment is." Parent of Child Service User

"We write everything down – about what the kids are getting at the clinics, sometimes I get a phone call from Ross Care saying "what did I say I was going to order?" Physiotherapist, Childrens Therapies Team

"They don't really have time to do their jobs properly. Things get missed. Things like orders not being placed – forgetting to do it. Notes not been written up on the system so they forget what was said or agreed". Staff Member, Childrens Therapies Team

Parent's spoke about relying on the staff based in the schools to manage key elements of their children's wheelchair provision, such as organising things and chasing up repairs, reviews, extra items or adjustments.

“It’s a different service for kids – better, as we have the support of the school and the therapists at the school help. Repairs were sorted quickly via the schools.”

“Usually Rosewood school OT/PT team sort things out for us. ”

“Due to my daughter sensitivity to light this was felt to be a medical reason to require a sun hood. On arrival sun hood was found but no brackets were put on the wheelchair for this to be fitted. To me this would indicate the hood and brackets for that particular wheelchair were not ordered correctly. This will hopefully be resolved tomorrow after our school OT contacted [Ross] to expedite this as we were advised it would take three months for the brackets to arrive and approximately another month for this to be fitted.”

Parents felt that having their community therapist attend assessments ensured the right questions were asked and that they got more suitable equipment.

“Without the school team they wouldn’t believe us! With their involvement we have definitely been able to get better kit. We were offered totally different stuff that wouldn’t have been right for us before we involved them. The powerchair and the cushion – totally different from what we would have – without them.” Parent of Child Service User

“I had an incident when my sons chair tipped over with him in it – it was on uneven ground. I had asked for a tray underneath for his oxygen tank, but they didn’t they put it on the back which made it too heavy and it toppled. I spoke to them about it and really had to push to say it wasn’t suitable. The OTs here backed me to get it changed.” Parent of Child Service User

School staff spoke about Ross Care not keeping them updated about when they planned to visit, and which children they wanted to see, so parents arrived for appointments without them being informed first.

They said that on occasions, Ross Care staff came to the school unannounced or had not shown up when parents had expected them too. They told us that schools and parents needed more consistent communication with the service to make the most of the clinics. They also said Ross Care staff needed to keep up to date

notes about the children's provision.

"They often come in without telling us anything or giving us notice. Sometimes the child is not on site even and it's a new chair and needs to be fitted." Therapist

"At one clinic we had 2 parents turn up at the same time, and one had to sit and wait an hour – while the other child was seen." Therapist

"We are a busy, big school – we don't have time to do all the organising. We are doing all the work around it, and parents are having to do the organising as well. In one instance a young person had left the school and they turned up with a chair for him – luckily we were able to contact the parent and he was willing to come in." Non-clinical School Staff

"You never know what's going on – sometimes parents turn up at the school and we have no idea they are coming, other times parents are told to turn up and then no one from Ross turns up. Communication is poor, they can be hours late." Non-Clinical School Staff

"The problem is even when we go through with them and agree the list for the clinic, they come in with different names on the day. So, children added or not on there. It's hard to arrange then with teachers and its very inconvenient, when parents are coming in – either needlessly or missing out on appointments as they have not been told." Physiotherapist, Childrens Therapies

"Ross Care have been in twice unannounced this week. Parents possibly knew, but as they are coming into school, they need to let us know! Today, the pupil was being fed, and it was a really inconvenient time! Also, that pupil is off site lots this week, so they were lucky she happened to be here." Non-Clinical School Staff

Feedback showing how people communicate with the service:

- Most people do not look at the Ross Care website to get information (85% of those asked)
- Most people like to communicate with the service by email (67% of those asked)
- Just over a third had heard of personal wheelchair budgets (38% of those asked)
- Most people had not heard of the Service User Improvement Board (88% of those asked)

Section Four: Assessments, Adjustments and Repairs

Staff at assessments were friendly, polite and professional

Service users said they were happy with how they were treated by Ross Care therapists and engineers, saying they were friendly and polite.

“The staff member who did the appointment was really nice, and my daughter felt very relaxed with the man, he was very good with her. He was very patient”. Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair

People really valued the time Ross Care clinicians spent discussing their needs during assessments. They also valued the time they spent adjusting their wheelchairs when they handed them over.

“I felt I was able to have a say on the equipment and staff were receptive to my ideas and able to explain my issues – which in my experience is not common.”

“I felt OTs listened to my needs, and any questions were answered at the site in person.”

“They remember you which is nice. Treated like a person not a number.”

“[Clinician Name] was very good – I felt she really looked at my needs”

Most people said they felt that Ross Care clinical staff were knowledgeable and professional.

“Clinicians are outstanding – the service is great when you get here [the clinic] – very knowledgeable!” Adult Service User

“Clinicians are outstanding, knowledgeable, instil great confidence”. Adult Service User

“They have a high level of skills and expertise – they recognised my son needed a Consolor Wheelchair, which the other OT’s in London hadn’t.” Parent of Child Service User, Powered Wheelchair.

“Yes, during the assessment everything was explained, and I had to demonstrate that I could use the power chair safely by driving it inside and outside which I thought was very good. Staff very knowledgeable.” Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

Not all staff have enough experience with paediatric referrals

Some parents and therapists said they felt that not all staff had enough experience in dealing with paediatric referrals. One example mentioned by therapists was that more experienced Ross Care staff considered that children would grow while waiting for their wheelchair, so added a small amount to measurements.

This was important as it meant that the equipment would be used for longer or with long waiting times it could make the difference to the equipment being used at all. Some parents told us that they took their School Physiotherapist to assessments with the wheelchair service, as they were knowledgeable and would ensure they got the right equipment.

“Sometimes, I think they forget that children grow!” Therapist, Children’s Therapies Team

“Staff are nice and friendly – but I need expertise. The people that work there don’t seem to know what’s on the market. The different options aren’t given...I did research using a private provider to find out what was out there.” Parent of Young Person Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“They don’t have the experience, when we need anything from them we bring our community OT with us to the appointments we are lucky that we have built a good relationship with them and so we take them with us to make sure we get what we need – without them we would really struggle to get what we need for our son.” Parent of Child Service User

“Staff completing the posture assessment and handover unable to answer all our questions. This may be due to being new or a lack of knowledge but without our OTS present they might not have been answered. IE how to put up and collapse the chair.” Parent of Child Wheelchair User

Getting the right equipment

Most people were happy with the quality of the equipment, but they felt that issues with getting all the right parts, additions and adjustment organised meant that it took a long time to get a wheelchair that ‘fully met their needs’.

Some physiotherapists echoed this saying that orders missed important additions.

“Carry out the work from the assessment and not missing off vital parts of orders (trays, ankle huggers etc).”

“Initial assessments by Ross Care OT's seem to be thorough, however it's then the provisions/accessories/communication afterwards that seems to raise issues.”

Support organisations highlighted the difficulties their members had getting equipment that met their needs.

“Issues we have been facing in the Southampton and Winchester area in the last 12 months including: Delivery of equipment that is not suitable” MND Association Staff

“Measurements taken wrong and people getting equipment that is not suitable for their needs. People don't understand the impact that bad equipment has on people's conditions and their lives.” Local MS Society Group

Teenagers and young adults spoke about it being hard to get the right equipment. Some said the equipment they were offered did not consider their need for independence. Young people wanted to be able to do their hobbies like dance or play sports. They also wanted equipment that they could lift in and out of their cars easily so they could work and go to university independently.

“I feel like they need to listen to me I know what I need. I would have liked to be given options, not just this is what you are getting – everyone is different and I don't think there is any interest in that.” Young Person Service User

“The chair it's too wide and heavy for me to use – I'd be exhausted if I pushed it only for a few minutes my OT followed it up – to see if I can change it about 6 months ago, no update though.” Young Person Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“It wasn't suitable- it was heavy – I couldn't lift it out of the car – I drive, I'm independent so that is really important to me” Young Person Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“I feel we are very restricted on what we can have, with not enough understanding of the individual, their life and what they need. I am an active person I like to dance. I’m young and want to be able to get about – but I felt that... it’s not really considered” Young Person Service User, Manual Wheelchair

A parent echoed this; “What is important to us? How are we going to give our young people as much freedom to do the activities and have the lifestyle they want? To have the independence they deserve.”

Service users, parents, carers and some professionals commented that “it depended on who you got” as to what equipment was issued. With children’s equipment, many parents said there were “grey areas” as to what their children were eligible for, which caused discrepancies, with one member of staff saying ‘no’ and another saying ‘yes.’

“A lot depends on the therapist you get – you might be able to get something like a hood or cover – if it’s a grey area”. Parent of Child Service User

“Inconsistencies in the initial assessment when they said snappy hood and rain cover included but when I went to collect it, they said “no” you need to pay.” Parent of Child Service User

“Differs with who you get as to what is offered in terms of equipment” Parent of Child Service User

Head rests for wheelchairs were an issue that was frequently mentioned by service users and carers. One parent summarised the issue:

“Head rests are only issued for poor head control and not considered for transport purposes – though people need them to travel safely in vehicles. These cost a lot of money, hundreds of pounds, which we just can’t afford.”

When talking to Ross Care staff and Solent NHS Trust clinicians, no one could answer if this was decided at a national level or was an ICB decision. They said this had not always been the case but were unsure why guidelines had changed.

Parents said that schools want children to have powered wheelchairs, so children do not have to rely on adults to help them around the site if they get tired during the school day. However, this meant the children that want to do active hobbies sports found it hard to get a second manual chair that could allow them to do this.

Reviews and Adjustments

Service Users felt that the process for requesting/triggering a review was not clear, which meant that some people were left in uncomfortable wheelchairs that were no longer fit for purpose.

“Have had the chair for 5 years – but members of her family have said that it doesn't look right, she isn't comfortable in it and she is slumped over, with not much head support. We have been saying about it for ages and not been listened too. We asked the manager of her housing to chase Ross up about it”.
Carer of Adult Service User

“The wheelchair was also falling to bits, we were having to get the repair man out every few weeks. You can see there is gaffer tape on the armrest. Then one time we got a repair man who said basically that she needed a new chair, that she wasn't sitting right and the chair was old and falling to bits. We had been asking them for it – but there seemed no direct route to get it looked at. We asked the Doctor but that came to nothing as well.”
Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“Knowing who to talk to, to get looked at for changes, listening about this – not just repairs.”
Adult Service User, Standard Manual Wheelchair

People fed back that getting adjustments to their wheelchair was difficult, they said that there was no easy route to ask for them and that it often took a long time to get them dealt with. In some cases, they felt that they were waiting on delivery of a part, but others said they could not be sure of the reason.

“The problem we find is whenever we have a wheelchair assessment, they are never able to sort all the issues. We collected a new seating, but this didn’t work with the existing footplates so now we are waiting for more alterations.”
Adult Service User

“Have asked for controller on back to be made faster, told rep would do home visit with the computer to sort this. Over 2 years and still waiting!” Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“I noticed my daughter’s feet weren’t in the right position – the foot plates were too small for her feet. Spoke to the OT at the appointment about a referral for it. I’d not heard anything for months at the end of last week I got a text out of the blue saying going to have work done at Rosewood School – was confused as it had been so long, I’d forgotten what it was about, I phoned them and asked. Today though they were going to do it – but it’s not been done I see, still no part.” Parent of Child Service User

There were a number of occasions when service users were put at risk because adjustments were not made, including people falling out of their wheelchairs. Several people said that they felt that there needed to be a clearer pathway for urgent adjustments to wheelchairs that were unsafe.

“He keeps sliding back down and it hurts his back. I can’t lift him so I have to keep calling his carers in to adjust his position using the hoist. He is leaning to one side. As the day goes by he gets lower and lower in the chair. He got this chair 6 months ago, after Christmas after 2 years of waiting. He is moving all the time trying to get comfortable in it. It hurts his back. A month or two ago it got a lot worse – he fell forward out of the chair. The clip on the waist belt is broken. I called the service when he first started to slide in it – and was in a lot of pain. They said over the phone they would send an appointment. Then I waited 3 weeks and called again – it was getting steadily worse. Him sliding

out of it – and having to lay in bed every day. I really stressed that it was urgent this time. Urgent takes 10 weeks.” Carer of Adults Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“Referral in now but I’ve had this one less than a year. The old chair was at the end of its life. Had an assessment and discussed what I needed, and they came to us with this. On getting it, it isn’t right for me. It’s harder to get up the slopes – and I keep spinning back into the road. Contacting Ross was easy, but it has taken 3 months to be seen about this. I don’t have an appointment today and I’ve just turned up today to try and get it sorted.” Adult Service Users, Bespoke Manual Wheelchair

“It was unsuitable – no padding on the stump rests and they were set too far apart. It takes ages to get things sorted. I’m put on the waiting list. No option of an emergency or priority appointment. A hell of a long wait. I have fallen out of the chair twice – once in the first week and the 2nd time I ended up in A&E. I feel more sturdy stump rests would have helped.” Adult Service Users, Manual Wheelchair

People spoke about being left in uncomfortable wheelchairs while they waited for adjustments.

“My daughter was having bad back pain, we had everything checked out, MRIs and everything, I kept telling them it was the back rest on her wheelchair. They didn’t believe us, said it looked fine. Then the specialist said it was the chair. It took ages to sort, I was calling and trying to get people to listen.” Parent of Young Person Service User

“I was on this horrible medication for the pain, it really hurt me. But now the chair is finally sorted – I don’t have to take the medication anymore, as my back is fine”. Young Person Service User

"My daughter was left for some considerable time, nearly 3 years where her feet were left dangling as the footplates were too far down, initially being advised the wrong tools brought to the appointment, then waiting a considerable time for another appointment only to be advised they couldn't shorten the lengths to the footplates. The alteration was finally done recently with no fuss at all." Parent of Child Service User

Case Study: Five months for additions to a child's wheelchair

As told to us by a parent:

 "Back in July (2023) Ross Care knew my son was having this operation to amputate his legs. The referral was made in July. I got given this manual wheelchair, it's not the right height – I can't push it without crouching. It doesn't have the stump boards he needs, and they knew he needed them in the summer. It's now Christmas and we still haven't got them.

I've been calling them and chasing – they just don't answer, or they hang up on me.

The office doesn't talk to the OTs or the engineers. My notes are never up to date so every time I call I have to re-explain things to different people. All I asked for was an appointment – but I just butt up against the office, no information goes anywhere, even when I do get through. I've been calling and calling and on Friday I just said I've had enough I can't do this anymore. I only got this appointment as I made a formal complaint.

My son's leg has become infected, and he needs the stump boards to elevate it – I called and called again – but nothing happened. No way to make this a priority because of the infection.

It's important to me that my son gets what he needs – he's a teenager, who this has happened too. He needs a manual wheelchair that's the right size and with the stump rests for the car as he can't go out otherwise.

Now he's recovered from his operation, he's more mobile and he wants to do things himself – he needs a chair that enables him to do this. He can't go to school. He can't go out.

Getting through on the phone is always difficult. It would be good to get straight through to the workshop or OTs. [Clinician Name] helped – I got through to her, and then got to come in today.”



Repairs

Almost everyone we spoke to about the repairs service knew who to contact to request one. Also, most people felt that the engineers were friendly and helpful.

“The engineer who came with the new wheelchair then booked the appointment for the camber change to make the most of the new equipment.”

“I found the man doing the work very well trained and very helpful and polite nothing was too much for him to do.”

“The engineer who came out first time refused to wear a mask here, despite me being high risk (my carers all wear masks). There seemed to be very bad communication in the weeks after this. [Clinician Name] who came out second time to replace the battery was fantastic, very kind and understanding. He explained adaptations could be made to my electric chair which I had never been told about or offered before. He explained I also could of and should have a restrictor on my manual chair, which no one had ever told me before, to stop it tipping. He was very professional, and I am grateful to him for this.”

There was a mixed response from people about the repairs service. Some people were happy with the service, saying that repairs were easy to arrange and happened quickly.

“When the nuts came off they came right over and dropped them off that day – I think for easy stuff they are quick.” Carer for Adult Service User

“Repairs are usually done as promptly as possible at a convenient time.” Adults Service User, Powered Wheelchair

“New arms for the chair – seemed to happen quickly. The residential home organised this with Ross.” Carer for Adult Service Use, Manual Wheelchair

“Repairs I felt were done quickly – phone up and say what is wrong and they come to your house and fix it.” Adult Service User Bespoke Manual Wheelchair

“The repairs were brilliant – they come quickly and if they can’t come they keep you informed. Give me a call on the day to make sure that I can visit my sister that day.” Family Member of Adult Service User

Several therapists from Solent NHS Children’s Therapies Team also commented that they felt the service was “very good at dealing with urgent repairs and that these usually happened the same day.”

However, some people said that the repairs service wasn’t well organised. For instance, appointments were cancelled without informing people, or engineers turned up when they weren’t expected. Poor internal communication between staff at Ross Care had meant their notes were not kept up to date, causing engineers to bring the wrong tools or miss things that needed to be done, which meant they had to visit multiple times.

“Repairs generally good, but sometimes they come without tools or with the wrong stuff. They brought this cushion for my daughter, but no Velcro to fit it so I had to get that.” Parent of Young person, Powered Wheelchair

“Came out 4 times as wrong parts. It’s not the engineers fault – he’s lovely – I usually get the same one – its that he hasn’t been given the right details for the job.” Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“I spoke to several different people on the phone who each told me something different. They didn't turn up for an appointment and then turned up the week after with no warning, and no appointment was booked.” Adult Service User

Some comments we received said the repairs process was not consistent, with some repairs happening quickly, while others took a long time. This could relate to the complexity of the repair and the parts needed, but people were not informed of this, or given timeframes for completion.

“My son is 21, He has been waiting for new wheels for months. No one has contacted him – no timeline given” Parent of Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“Repairs are done variably, I have at some points waited months and others short times – there is no consistency.” Adult Service User

“While on holiday I had a real problem with the wheels and the service was great, they got hold of a local company in the area we were staying, and it was fixed within 2 days. It was great. It’s strange as now I can’t get an appointment to get it fixed/adjusted. I’m like 20mins out of their area and at Uni and they won’t come out and fix it. I have lectures – I can’t be in 9-6 all day. The attitude is you’ve got nothing else to do but wait in all day.” Young Person Service User, Manual Wheelchair

"I had this last chair for 2 years and had a lot of repairs. It's been hit or miss getting appointments for repairs. Once they arrive, they are good though and usually get it sorted. The break broke and I can't fold it to fit in in the car. This meant that I had to stay local, and limited what we could do. Took a few weeks to get it fixed." Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

"Repairs – have not been hugely quick. Broken footplate – took 3-4 weeks to get fixed, which really limited what he could do."

Some people felt that there was not an adequate system in place to prioritize repairs, which meant they were left with wheelchairs that were unsafe while they waited.

"There was an issue with the breaks, the wheelchair would still move even when the break was on... It's frustrating with the break issue as nothing seems to be happening." Carer for Child Wheelchair user, Manual Wheelchair

"When I phoned slightly panicked because the motor on the wheelchair was smoking and really hot. I was told it wasn't an emergency because the wheelchair was moving with power. If anything else electrical was in the state I would not be using it, let alone sitting on it! Fortunately for the service, it didn't catch fire. I was told this by a senior member of the office team, who would not let me speak to an engineer or anyone with any understanding of wheelchairs." Adult Service User, Powered Wheelchair

"Problem with breaks – both the schools and I told them about them – front break and back break. They came to the school and saw him but didn't fix it, why? To come in and then not fix them! We then waited 3 months to get this fixed – it should have been a priority. As it was a safety problem – even with the breaks on my son would just go – it was dangerous. When they did come after chasing and 3 months – it took the man 10_mins and it was fixed." Carer of Child Service User

A couple of people said that they had been given temporary equipment after a repair and not received their old equipment back after many months.

“The break failed on the old chair so the maintenance chap said that I needed a new one. I was given a temporary chair that I had for a year, I think they have forgotten that it is a temporary chair.” Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

“Today I am coming in for servicing – to pump up my tires as they go flat, they are not suitable for the high usage I used them for. My old ones were rubber but they were taken away during a repair – I was given these temporary ones and the others never returned. Repair 6 months ago. The repair was quick but only half done. I’m put on the waiting list. No option of an emergency or priority appointment.” Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

Maintenance of equipment

Feedback suggested that service users were interested in getting information and tips about how to maintain their wheelchairs. Several people said that staff at Ross Care had spoken to them about having a maintenance check once a year on their wheelchair to keep it working well. It is unclear whether this is something that the service offers as standard.

“Would be good to get real life tips on wheelchair upkeep. Like if you go out and get the wheels all muddy – what’s the best way to clean and upkeep on the chair to keep it working well. Advice on the maintenance of chairs.” Parent of Young Person Wheelchair User, Manual Wheelchair

“This is a new wheelchair fitted in Feb, a bit of a surprise that it broke. They have explained that we needed to get it serviced a few times a year. They will come out to do it.” Carer for Adult Service User, Manual Wheelchair

Section Five: Feedback and Complaints

Feedback

Some people reported recently being given the Friends and Family Test form (FFT) to complete after their appointments. However, service users felt they were not consistently given opportunities to feedback about the service. There was confusion about the feedback process in general, with people not being sure how to provide feedback. For example, if there was an online form with set questions or you emailed using the contact form. At the time of writing (Jan 2024) the Hampshire Wheelchair Service's website had a short section about giving feedback, saying you could fill out an FFT online, however no link to an online form was provided.

The service is hindered from being proactive in seeking feedback as it does not get consent to contact service users for this purpose.

Without demonstrating a process of how feedback will be used and communicating the changes that it has inspired, service users lack confidence that their feedback has been useful. Several people commented that although they had given feedback, they did not feel that it had had any impact on the service.

Quotes on feedback

- "This is the first time I have been given this."
- "This is the first time I have ever been offered a survey with feedback."
- "This is the first opportunity sent out in 3 years of dealing with w/c service."
- "This is the only time, ever."
- "I have given feedback whenever possible, but this has not improved services over the years."
- "Never been mentioned really."

Complaints

People weren't aware of the complaints process, how to raise one, if there was a form they filled in, and what to expect from the process. When talking to people about problems they had tried to resolve, some were unsure if they had made a complaint. They spoke about 'complaining' over the telephone or via email but were unsure if this was formally recognised.

When looking at the service's website, there is one paragraph about complaints.

"If you have not received the level of service you expect from us, then we want you to tell us as soon as possible. By doing so, you can help us get to the bottom of the problem quickly and effectively. We take your concerns and complaints very seriously, and they are always treated in the strictest of confidence. We will investigate your concerns as quickly as possible, and work with you to find an appropriate solution." (Jan 24)

This does not give people a clear idea of how they complain (email, telephone, via a form), to whom their complaints should be addressed and what people should expect from the complaints process (e.g. acknowledgement, who is investigating, time frames for resolution, how to escalate the complaint if they are unhappy with the outcome).

"I think the wheelchair service is bad. I have two boys that use powered wheelchairs and we have had issues the whole time. I have had to put in I've lost count of how many complaints the problem is you can change the wheelchair service name, but it is the same, nothing changes it's just more issues." Parent of Child Service User

"I have made complaints over the years but have not been happy with how they have been dealt with, as I saw no improvements, and received no feedback" Adults Service User

"It was hard to make a complaints – I asked about how to do one and they seemed to say they didn't know how. I did it over the phone first of all – but they took no notice. I contacted them by email – they said they would process it – but again I heard nothing. So, I called again and threatened to

take it higher and only then did someone contact me.” Parent of Child Service User

Questions From Service Users

While carrying out this engagement, service users raised several questions about service and its commissioning. We would like to be able to answer these questions for them, so would be grateful if the ICB and Ross Care would include answers to these in their responses to this report.

Questions	
1)	<p>The service’s eligibility criteria states that “when a powered wheelchair is issued, a back-up manual wheelchair will also be provided” but does not mention the ‘add ons’ that might make the 2nd chair functional.</p> <p>For example, service users said they had a tray to support them in one wheelchair but were not eligible for the same in their other wheelchair.</p> <p>If people have two wheelchairs and need to be consistently supported in the correct position by their equipment, why do they only get one wheelchair with all the postural support required?</p>
2)	<p>Trays are commissioned only for postural support – not because people need them to eat independently and be involved in normal day to day activities. Why is this the case?</p>
3)	<p>Is there a set timeframe for the length of time between an assessment and an order being placed?</p> <p>People wanted to know if the way the budget was allocated to the service meant that orders are not placed straight away.</p>
4)	<p>Should people have access to a second opinion if they disagree with what is offered at their assessment?</p>
5)	<p>Are there set timeframes that providers should be adhering to for each part of the process (referral to assessment, assessment to delivery, delivery to handover)? If so, what are these standards?</p>

6) Service Users said that head rests are only issued for poor head control and not considered for transport purposes, though people need them to travel safely in vehicles. Why is this, and is it a national or local decision?

Recommendations

Waiting times

Anticipate changes in people's needs by setting out a process for reviewing equipment. This should include –

- Scheduling in reviews particularly for children and people with degenerative illnesses, whose needs are continually changing.
- Having clear guidelines for what might trigger a review so service users and engineers attending repairs can help identify cases early.
- Having a set process by which people can request a review.
- Keep service user notes up to date to ensure key items aren't missed off orders.
- Ensure that any necessary 'add ons' are included in orders.
- Hold more stock of equipment that is widely used (such as lap belts, chest harnesses, foot straps and cushions.)
- Have an effective case management system that allows for monitoring referrals as they progress through the service.

Communication with service users

Ross Care should review the 'customer facing' element of its service. We recommend that Ross Care should develop a clear set of standards regarding the communication people can expect to receive as they progress through the service. Our feedback show these should include:

- Acknowledgement that a referral has been received by the service.
- Confirmation of what has been ordered (including additional items).
- A realistic timescale for when the equipment will be delivered. Be clear that service users will be contacted if there are any changes to the timeline.
- Keeping people updated if timescales alter. Giving accurate reasons why the timeline has changed.

- Keeping notes up to date about what has been ordered, timescales, any issues that arise.
- Ensuring administrative staff have access to up-to-date notes on cases, so they can answer questions accurately, and act on requests for information quickly and with empathy by calling people back if this was agreed.
- Improved accountability for people's cases by having a Lead Professional on each case.
- Developing a system for people to gain access to clinical staff to discuss issues.
- The set of standards (confirmation of what is being ordered, giving a timescale and updating on any changes to the timescale) should be replicated on any additional equipment that is ordered.

Communication with professionals

To improve communication with various professionals, we recommend that Ross Care should -

- Improve access for clinicians to discuss cases or concerns (via telephone and email).
- Designate a Lead Professional who is responsible for liaising with specific agencies/schools. In the case of schools, a clinical contact at Ross Care, who is accountable for organising and managing the clinic. These professionals should be easily contactable by telephone and email.
- Improve the communication around school clinics by ensuring school staff are advised in advance when Ross Care are visiting, which children they are seeing, and what times they would like to see specific children. Consideration needs to be given for times when the child may not be available such as mealtimes. The school also needs to be advised if parents are attending these appointments. If Ross Care need to make changes to what has been agreed, they should contact the school and parents to notify them and confirm alternative arrangements.
- Ensure staff take more comprehensive notes at school clinics, so they have confirmation of what they have agreed to order.

Children and young people

To improve the service delivered to children and young people, we recommend that Ross Care should –

- Consult with Solent NHS Staff to develop a children’s pathway. Putting in place a system that recognises and facilitates an on-going duty to meeting children’s needs as they grow. These guidelines should include things like; committing to regular reviews and adopting a short ‘review form’ for adjustments to children’s wheelchairs to speed up the process.
- Ensure all staff can access training to develop their knowledge of paediatric referrals. More experienced staff could support colleagues to develop their expertise further.
- Take time to discuss young people’s needs and aspirations during assessments, so they feel listened to.

Getting the right equipment and maintenance

To improve the equipment and maintenance aspects – we recommend that Ross Care should –

- Ensure staff can be clear and consistent as to what people are eligible for and why and explain a transparent criterion for service users.
- Provide information on how to maintain wheelchairs, and on annual maintenance checks (if these are offered.)

Adjustments

To improve the adjustment process, we recommend that Ross Care should –

- Improve the process of adjustments to wheelchairs, by having a by having a clear process by which people can request a review of their equipment.
- Create an effective way of prioritising and ‘fast tracking’ urgent adjustments for people whose equipment is unsafe or damaging their health.

Repairs

To improve the repairs process, we recommend that Ross Care should –

- Ensure Engineers have up to date information when going out on repairs, so things don't get missed leading to multiple visits.
- Ensure people are informed promptly if their appointment has been cancelled or rearranged.
- Ensure there is an effective system for recognising and responding to urgent repairs.

Feedback mechanisms

All providers have a duty to gather feedback from service users. This means having consent to contact them about their experiences, analysing their responses, acting on the issues raised and highlighting how their feedback has helped shape the service. Aside from gathering feedback, people need to have confidence that it will be used constructively. Therefore the service needs to make and publicise changes, which will help develop confidence in the service.

To achieve this we recommend that Ross Care should –

- Seek consent to speak to service users about their experiences, so they can contact them directly about giving feedback.
- Ross Care should engage with people in a variety of ways to broaden participation, such as online anonymous surveys, talking to people at clinics and working with schools and community organisations.
- Utilise the existing text service to send 'quick questions or links to other feedback mechanisms. (This is currently in use in many NHS services and so could be easily replicated.)
- Publicise and develop its Service User Improvement Board. This will require working collaboratively with service users and utilising their experience (including any negative feedback) .as a way of helping the service make improvements. Feedback gained by the introduction of new engagement methods should be regularly reviewed by the Service User Improvement Board

Complaints

To improve the complaints process we recommend that Ross Care should –

- Have a clear complaints process that is displayed on the website homepage for the local wheelchair service. This should include; how to make a complaint (email, telephone, face-to-face, via a form), to whom their complaints should be addressed and what people should expect from the complaints process (e.g acknowledgement, who is investigating, time frames for resolution, how to escalate the complaint if they are unhappy with the outcome). This should include a form to complete, with an option to complete in hard copy or over the phone.
- Ensure all staff understand the process and can explain it to service users.
- Follow up on complaints asking if they are satisfied with how they have been handled.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the service users, parents and carers who spoke to us. We would also like to thank the professionals who facilitated us engaging with their service users, particularly the Childrens Therapies Teams, Hampshire Hornets, Move Momentum and staff at Rosewood School and The Cedar School. We would like to thank staff at Ross Care who helped facilitate our clinic visits and handed out our flyers.

Invitation

We would like to extend an invitation to Ross Care to meet with Healthwatch Hampshire to discuss the report following its receipt, and for us to meet for an update on progress made on the recommendations in 6 months time.

Future collaborative work

We have discussed the content of the report with Ross Care and have agreed that this Healthwatch Hampshire report provides a valuable base for a next stage of collaborative working with the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board and

Ross Care to help shape the Hampshire Wheelchair Service and improve patient outcomes. The comments we have included are directly reported from what people told Healthwatch Hampshire.

References

West Hampshire, Southampton & Isle of Wight Wheelchair Service Eligibility Criteria for Provision of NHS Wheelchairs: A Guide for Referring Practitioners (April 2021)



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