

Feedback on Posture and Mobility Services provided by Opcare

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# Report Details

This is a detailed report outlining the findings of the work completed by Healthwatch Calderdale and Kirklees regarding Posture and Mobility Services (Opcare), the organisation commissioned by the NHS to provide wheelchair services.

# Background

In July 2016 Healthwatch was contacted by a parent of a wheelchair user, who had made a complaint to Opcare on behalf of her daughter. She was concerned that there were other parents experiencing similar problems so Healthwatch signposted her to the review section of its website and encouraged her to leave feedback on the service. She did this and also shared the information with other parents, carers and service users, who also completed online reviews.

In October 2016, Healthwatch was approached by organisations working with parents and carers of children with disabilities who wanted their service users to have opportunity to give feedback on Opcare. Healthwatch also was contacted by individuals via its signposting and NHS Complaints Advocacy services, who wanted to talk about their experience of Opcare’s services. This feedback prompted Healthwatch to engage with people further on this subject.

# Approach

Staff from Healthwatch arranged to meet support groups for parents and carers of children and young people with disabilities. Healthwatch facilitated focus groups to give people the opportunity to have their say on their experience of using Opcare’s services. People were asked a range of questions, specifically:

* What are the top five gaps in the service?
* What is working well?
* What is not working well?
* What could be improved?

An online survey was also created so that people could still give feedback if they couldn’t attend the focus groups or if they wanted to remain anonymous. The survey asked the same questions as the focus groups but also had ‘star rating’ sections for covering staff attitude, confidence in technical staff and access to premises.

Healthwatch also created case studies from some of the more detailed stories we heard from people and these have been included at the end of this report.

In total we engaged with 91 parents/carers of services users and service users using the methods listed in the table below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Method of engagement** | **Number of participants** |
| Survey | 27 |
| Focus groups | 38 |
| Online reviews | 22 |
| Telephone/email | 4 |

Table 1: Methods of engagement detailing participant numbers

Additionally, we spoke to 4 professionals who either work directly with people who use wheelchairs or support those who do.

# What we found:

Some people had positive things to say about Opcare’s services, however most comments were about difficulties people were experiencing. We asked people to identify five key service gaps, which are listed below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 5 key service gaps | |
|  | |
| **1** | **Opcare does not routinely offer assessments to children and young people.**  Children are not being regularly assessed and reviewed to identify whether their wheelchair meets their size and needs. The responsibility lies with parents and carers to get in touch with Opcare if they feel their child needs to be assessed and only then are they put on a waiting list to be seen. However, many parents/carers are not aware that it is their responsibility to contact Opcare for a review. This means that problems can be missed and, because of the lengthy waiting times, children and young people have no option but to use unsuitable wheelchairs, often resulting in pain, discomfort, poor posture and unnecessary injury. |
|  | |
| **2** | **There are unacceptably long waiting times for service users to be assessed.**  Parents, carers and service users told us about being put on waiting lists for assessment, leaving them waiting months for an appointment and then being put on a further 2 or 3 waiting lists for measuring and fitting appointments. This means that some people are waiting over 12 months for a suitable wheelchair. |
|  | |
| **3** | **The majority of people we spoke to are unhappy with the repairs service.**  People spoke of their concern regarding length of time it takes for repairs to be carried out and also the fact that wheelchairs are being repaired, in excess of their life span, instead of being replaced. |
| **4** | **Communication: People want to be provided with clear, accurate information and they want their voice to be heard**  Whether people are waiting for repair, assessment, or for delivery of a new wheelchair they want to be kept informed with accurate facts. People often feel that they have to chase up appointments, phone calls and visits and struggle to get the right information about how long they will have to wait.  Additionally, people feel Opcare doesn’t take their concerns seriously and even when an ill-fitting wheelchair is having a serious impact on the health and wellbeing of the service user, and health professionals support these concerns, people don’t feel they are listened to. |
|  | |
| **5** | **Equipment not fit for purpose**  Parents, carers and service users told us that equipment is often not fit for purpose as the wheelchairs and seating systems provided often are not suitable for the environments in which the service user, their family and carers wish to use them. The equipment is therefore not promoting independence and inclusion.  People were also very concerned that many of the wheelchairs provided were providing inadequate posture support. We also heard of instances where poorly fitting wheelchairs and seating systems were causing necessary injuries such as pressure marks. We also heard of cases where unsuitable equipment had had more serious consequences such as admission to hospital (Accident & Emergency and Intensive Care) and surgery.  There were also concerns raised by many people that wheelchairs were being repaired rather than replaced due to financial constraints. |

## What is working well?

**A small number of people were impressed with the speed and efficiency of the repairs service and technical staff.**

The main themes and comments are shown below:

“…major repairs carried out quickly”

“…new part fitted immediately”

“technical staff really great and knowledgeable. Visited child at school so I didn’t have to go to them”

“They are usually prompt and come when they say”

“Engineers are sent out quickly; they know staff and service users at the Trust” (Next Step Trust)

“If technical staff come out to repair one child’s wheelchair (at school), they will also look at other children’s wheelchairs” (without appointment)

**Some people seem happy with face-to-face interactions with Opcare staff**

“Staff at Posture and Mobility Services are friendly and courteous”

“When I attended a meeting at their office in Elland, the staff were really friendly and polite”

“I feel Opcare provide a good service and all the individuals I have had contact with during the repairing process have been helpful and courteous”

“Great staff and all of them compassionate and caring and able to deliver outstanding customer service in a timely manner”

**A few people are happy with the process for getting a new wheelchair and with the wheelchair they receive**

“Straightforward process for obtaining an electric and manual wheelchair”

“We got the basic manual wheelchair delivered at home after a GP referral”

“The new (seating) mould is fantastic. It’s the best she has ever had”

“Had quite a long wait to get a wheelchair but once it had been done, someone from Opcare gave me a call to check whether everything was OK. That was good”

**We also heard about instances where people had initially received a poor service but after contacting Opcare, and sometimes complaining, they then received an excellent service. This shows there are occasions when Opcare has listened to their service users and has responded to their concerns.**

“Success story. After bringing our situation to attention of my local Member of Parliament, I now have an appointment for my daughter for a new wheelchair the after waiting for four years”.

## What is not working well?

### No regular reviews/assessments for growing children

Parents/carers tell us they are incredibly frustrated by the fact that there is no regular, routine assessment in place for their child to ensure that the wheelchair they are using is suitable for their size and needs (see case studies 1 and 2).

Members of staff at a school and day care centre spoke about how they have felt obliged to take on the role of ‘reviewer’ themselves, recording any wheelchair issues which they, staff, service users or parents/carers experience, and speaking to Opcare on behalf of the people they work with.

### Poor communication

People told us how they struggle to get information from Opcare and wanted it to be much clearer about when service users could expect their matter to be dealt with:

“Very little communication between Opcare and parents”

“No progress reports for waiting lists”

Additionally, people complained that making phone calls was time consuming and yielded no reward. The quote below provides an example of how one parent wanted Opcare to communicate:

“…give accurate information/timescale about when a problem can be assessed. Keep individuals informed if an agreed timescale cannot be kept”

People told us that conversations on the telephone are often very difficult; they feel Opcare staff are defensive, unhelpful and sometimes rude. Staff were described as uncompassionate and lacking in empathy. People struggle to get the information they need which leaves them feeling frustrated and at a loss as to what to do next:

“(I) was told wheelchair would be ready pre-Christmas. I chased them mid-February – spoke to someone who answered the phone who was completely unhelpful and uninterested. It turned out the chair hadn’t been ordered…couldn’t tell me why, or when it would be available”

Some people feel their views are just not listened to and even when health professionals and consultants have written supportive letters to Opcare, people feel this has made no difference at all to how Opcare dealt with their issues:

“Communication not good at all, after a lengthy conversation of issues, Opcare was not taking on board anything I said”

“Not listening to other professionals’ suggestions”

This has sometimes resulted in formal complaints being made which people told us are not always handled well.

People also mentioned that there was poor communication between Opcare and other NHS health professionals involved with the service users:

“No communication between occupational therapists, physiotherapists and Opcare”

Parents/carers and service users also felt that reception staff were not knowledgeable about the service so were unable to help them with their enquiries.

“Reception staff are not knowledgeable about the service”

Parents and carers would like to be involved in the service user group which Opcare has set up but don’t feel it’s accessible for all; the meetings are always in Elland in the evening and this makes attendance difficult for parents and carers who live in North Kirklees who have young children and rely on public transport.

Several people also informed Healthwatch that they had no idea where Opcare’s premises were.

### Waiting times

**People spoke of the frustration they felt during long periods when they were on a waiting list at various points when being assessed for a new wheelchair.**

“How would they feel if the chair they rely on all day has become unsafe or uncomfortable and they have to spend all day in it”

“…waiting time for appointments 18 months”

“My daughter has been on this waiting list for well over a year”

“When you do make an appointment, there is an exceptionally long wait – by the time you make the appointment there is already a problem with the chair”

“My daughter was poorly seated for well over 2 years….Despite lots of phone calls, emails, complaints to the service this was not acknowledged and we were constantly told that she was on a waiting list”

“Waiting lists are now more than 12 months for special seating clinics which is much worse than in the old service where 3 clinics a month were held for this seating and has been reduced to 1 per month”

“I moved to the area and attempted to get an appointment with Opcare in February of 2015, it took until November 2015 to get me an appointment with the service and this was (with) a lot of pestering and badgering as it seems they kept losing my case”

One parent spoke frankly about the despair she felt throughout a very lengthy wait for assessment and how she feels about having to put in other requests for assessment in the future.

“This is a service I will need to use for the foreseeable future and I am absolutely dreading having to start the process all over again when my child outgrows her current chair”

### Repairs

One member of staff in a school told us how some of the technician’s turn up with hardly any tools and say they’ve only have 2 weeks training.

“I could see him scratching his head thinking how do I fix this bit back on. It’s not their fault – they’re not given the right training and tools to do the job. Also, they don’t carry spare parts so often the technician has to take photographs of the wheelchair repair that needs doing, then go back to the office to order the part. This delays things further and some children have to miss school because their chair is unsafe to travel in. It’s disheartening”

People were also unhappy about the wait time for repairs and that an appointment

time isn’t always given.

“The waiting time for repairs is poor, not able to give a time means our adults have to wait in all day”

“I booked an appointment for a repair twice but nobody turned up, nobody got in touch to cancel. I then have to spend time making more phone calls to chase things up”

“(We need) quicker repair times and a time when they are due to call out”

“Sometimes the time it takes to assesses an issue and then resolve an issue/complete a repair can be very frustrating”

The length of time it takes to get a repair can be substantial and this can have a huge impact on children and adults because they can’t take part in their normal day-to-day activities; we were told about children having to miss school because their wheelchair isn’t safe to travel in and about adults who are stuck at home waiting for a repair to take place

Wheelchairs being repaired/upgraded when they need replacing, rendering them unsafe, uncomfortable and failing to provide adequate posture support was also a theme that was frequently mentioned. One parent said that her son of twelve had has his wheelchair frame for six years. Although the wheelchair chair is due to be updated, she has been informed by Opcare he will have to keep his current frame. This parent was worried that this solution will not be suitable as her child will be entering adolescence and growing, whilst using a wheelchair frame that he has had since he was a young child. Another adult service user spoke of how she had made Opcare aware of problems with her seating and its negative impact on her posture only to be given numerous different cushions over a two-year period before Opcare decided her current wheelchair could not provide the seating system she requires (see case study 3).

### Equipment not fit for purpose

People raised concerns that service users’ needs change so much between assessment and receiving their new or adjusted chair, that their new or adjusted wheelchair then doesn’t fit properly. Delays in adjustments and repairs also meant that wheelchairs were not fit for purpose. We were told of service users who were uncomfortable in their wheelchairs, children who were unable to concentrate at school due to this discomfort and of an adult who felt her ability to work was being compromised by her poor wheelchair seating.

“Chair not fitting correctly when received due to waiting time of three months”

“A new chair arrived (after 10 months) and straight away we noticed that it looked too small and that the back was tilted…we raised a concern but were told it was fine…no one came to look (at the wheelchair). The physiotherapist and occupational therapist also say the chair is not right. We are now waiting for an appointment to reassess. Our child has now been in a chair that is not right for 18 months”

One parent commented that the only purpose her child’s wheelchair fulfilled was for safe transport on the school bus and the school day. The child could not use his wheelchair for family days out.

A significant number of people also mentioned that in many cases the wheelchairs provided did not provide adequate posture support for people with complex needs who require specialist wheelchair seating. These people usually require help with posture throughout the day and night (24-hour postural management) so it is essential that their wheelchairs, alternative seating and night positioning provide this support. People spoke of the discomfort caused by poor posture from sitting in unsupportive wheelchairs.

“For the last few years her posture has been at risk due to her wheelchair having poor footplates and a seating system that was not ideal.    This as you know puts her independence and functioning at risk which is crucial to her whole mental health, physical health and well-being”

“A wheelchair with no support was presented to me. My son needs specialist seating, not a standard wheelchair…my son has three crush fractures on his spine, plus curvature of the spine. He needs support (in his wheelchair) but they can’t see that as professionals.”

“My daughter’s legs are too long for the footplate position and there is no further room to lower it, the sides are too narrow for her frame”.

“On a young person who requires 24-hour support with postural care this was a damaging seating system”.

One parent said that her son’s current poor wheelchair posture was limiting his movement. She said when her son was supported and restrained in his wheelchair, the range of movement in his arms and hands is greatly increased and his head control significantly improved.

Another parent told us that the consequences of her son having to sit in a wheelchair that did not provide adequate posture support was having serious health implications:

“Wheelchair is compromising health, scoliosis is becoming fixed, surgery is now needed. Abdominal pain, struggling with bowels”

### Funding and Commissioning Issues

Parents/carers and service users told Healthwatch that they had been informed by Opcare that it was not possible for the service to provide them with new wheelchairs due to “funding”, “no money” or “budgets”. One service user stated:

“Every experience I had had is they Opcare just do not want to give people a wheelchair or seating options as it is money”

People said that there were also unsure as to whether Opcare offered the NHS voucher scheme, which gives service users a wider selection of wheelchairs from which to choose. Others felt that where the service user needed a specialist wheelchair that was not routinely provided by the NHS, there was a lack of support for Individual Funding Requests for funding from a Clinical Commissioning Group, which can only be submitted with clinician support.

Opcare has informed many of the parents we spoke to that it is struggling to meet demand. Specifically, it has stated that volumes are 50% above the indication in the tender.

Opcare is receiving more referrals per month (in one case more than double) than it is commissioned to process. This leaves the organisation in an untenable situation and unless commissioners urgently review the contract they have with Opcare the difficulties which service users are experiencing will continue.

Many of the people were spoke to understand that this is a problem for Opcare and would like to see this addressed.

“Opcare is struggling with their contract and they are not sufficiently funded to meet patient needs. This is having a great impact on the holistic health and wellbeing of patients!”

One parent stated that she would like “more funding to be made available to Opcare from the Clinical Commissioning Group”.

### Accessibility of clinics

Staff and service users in North Kirklees have been made aware that Opcare is paying to have a room at Eddercliffe Health Centre in Cleckheaton but it never uses this. Having a clinic based here would make the service far more accessible to people in North Kirklees, rather than having to travel to Elland.

When the Clinical Commissioning Group announced that Opcare would be delivering wheelchair services it stated that there would be community-based clinics, close to patients’ home and in North Kirklees this would be the Eddercliffe Centre.

### Order delays

People mentioned that Opcare staff often told them that items were are on order when they were not. They said they would rather be told the truth, even if the waiting time was going to be lengthy.

“…had an assessment for a wheelchair and was told it would take six months to arrive. After 6 months we rang and the wheelchair had never been ordered”

### Choice of wheelchair

We also spoke to several people whose perception was there were “limited options for wheelchairs” and “limited choices for specialist seating”:

“Choice of wheelchairs (not the cheapest, what is best fitted for child)”

### Parent/Carer and Service User Ratings of Opcare

Parents/carers and service users were invited to give Opcare a star rating to reflect their experience of its overall service as well as for components of its service. A high numerical rating indicated a good service experience, whilst a low score showed a poor service encounter.

Results from our online reviews and survey indicate that parents/carers and service users collectively gave Opcare a star rating of 2.1 out of 5.

The following ratings were obtained from our online survey

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Average rating (out of a maximum of 5 stars)** |
| Access to premises | 3.4 |
| Communication | 2.3 |
| Staff attitude | 3.2 |
| Confidence in technical staff | 3.1 |
| Confidence in admin support | 2.9 |
| Helpfulness | 2.7 |
| Flexibility of appointments | 2.3 |
| Waiting time | 2.0 |

Table 2: Ratings of components of Opcare service

# Opcare’s Perspective

At the time of writing this report, we asked Opcare to tell us what it thought about the feedback we’d received about its services so that we could include its perspective, but unfortunately nobody from Opcare was available to comment.  At the end of August 2017, we were told that Opcare and the Clinical Commissioning Group were producing a statement to summarise the current position, which would include information relating to a contract extension and some additional, non-recurrent funding for Opcare’s wheelchair services. This statement will sit alongside our report once it is available.

# Next Steps

Healthwatch is supporting Opcare to undertake further stakeholder engagement. This will ensure that the voices of all Opcare stakeholders are heard. Healthwatch will continue to discuss with the Clinical Commissioning Group and Opcare how the service can be improved.

# Case Studies









