

Wheelchair services

What is patient choice of Any Qualified Provider?

We are committed to extending patients' choice of Any Qualified Provider. This means that when patients are referred for a particular service, they can choose, where appropriate, from a range of providers that are qualified to provide safe, high quality care and treatment – and select the one that best meets their needs. Initially we have agreed to focus on a small number of the services where patients say they want more choice. This includes wheelchair services for children.

Why do we think that extending choice of provider for wheelchair services will benefit patients?

The Government recognises that current wheelchair service provision is not as good as it could be in some places. Users and carers have indicated that they are often dissatisfied with the service they receive, and they would like to have greater choice and control over how and when they receive their chairs. In 2009/10, wheelchair services cost the NHS approximately £100 million to operate, but several reports highlight that the services are fragmented, highly variable, sometimes have long waiting times, and are not always focused on user needs.

There are some examples of more responsive and flexible services. For example Whizz-Kidz is a charity that provides disabled children with essential wheelchairs and other mobility equipment to help them lead fun and active lives. They explain their support of Any Qualified Provider and the opportunities it provides to give children the equipment they need, more easily, quickly and efficiently:

“Any Qualified Provider will remove the barriers to faster, better wheelchair services by enabling organisations like ours to work collaboratively with the NHS to provide unmet needs, shorten waiting lists and drive innovation.

“The NHS will benefit from cheaper, more integrated services; children will benefit from better equipment and shorter waiting lists; Whizz-Kidz will benefit by developing as leaders in this field, spreading best practice and being successful in our goal to help make children's lives better - and in turn, their families and communities.”

The Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Association, a charity that supports people with MND and funds research into the disease believes that the Any Qualified Provider mechanism has the potential to offer people real choice and drive quality. “At its best it could end the heart-breaking waits for vital pieces of life-enhancing equipment such as wheelchairs and ensure that providers deliver a timely and appropriate service.”

How might this work in practice?

By offering people choice in health and care services such as wheelchair services, in the years ahead we expect to see more services being offered by a much wider range of NHS, private and voluntary providers.

The Motor Neurone Disease Association and Whizz-Kidz are already working with the NHS to improve wheelchair services.

Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Association

- The Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Association is a charity that works to support people with MND and fund and promote global research into the disease
- There are 500 people with Motor Neurone Disease (MND) waiting for an NHS wheelchair at any one time, and wheelchairs will be required in 80% of MND cases.
- People with MND in 30 counties across England have experienced, or are currently experiencing unacceptable challenges in access to wheelchairs.
- The charity operates a wheelchair service for people with MND, operating out of Oxford.
- Any client seen in the Oxford MND Centre can have access to wheelchairs owned by the centre and have an assessment by an Occupational Therapist there. If the Care Centre has an appropriate wheelchair in stock and local NHS provision will entail a delay in comparison to the time scales offered by the Care Centre, then the Care Centre chair is provided and the NHS wheelchair service is informed.
- The result is that users receive wheelchairs faster than they would via normal NHS provision
- The vast majority of users receive a suitable chair within a week – MND patients can face a wait of several weeks on the NHS

Whizz-Kidz

- Whizz-Kidz is a charity that was set up in 1990 to provide disabled children with essential wheelchairs and other mobility equipment to help them lead fun and active lives.
- Disabled children in Tower Hamlets were facing waiting times of over two years for powered wheelchairs.
- Whizz-Kidz started working with NHS Tower Hamlets in 2007 to help them deliver a more child focused wheelchair service for the disabled children in the borough. Since that time, the partnership has grown and the charity continues to deliver the wheelchair service for children and young people up to 25 years old. Co-located with the PCT's adult service, Whizz-Kidz therapists – experts in paediatric mobility – assess all children and young people referred to the service and prescribe mobility equipment that take account of their educational, social and clinical needs, enabling them to lead independent, full and active lives.
- Working together Whizz-Kidz and NHS Tower Hamlets have cleared the waiting list and increased the number of children who benefit. Whizz-Kidz have been able to provide high specification and more appropriate equipment than could be purchased by the PCT alone.
- User satisfaction has improved and children receive wheelchairs, on average, within six weeks of referral.
- Expanding Any Willing Provider to wheelchair services would enable organisations like Whizz-Kidz to provide similar services to disabled people in other areas helping them to lead a better quality of life

Next steps: how are we taking this forward?

We have asked the NHS to help us test a small number of services that patients have told us might benefit from extended choice of provider from April 2012, and wheelchair services is one of these areas. In the first instance we will focus on wheelchair services for children, but will explore the wider benefits for adults as part of the programme.