

College of Audiology: Joint statement

Background

In February 2019, BAA, BSA, BSHAA and NCHA issued a joint statement setting out how the organisations would explore whether a potential College of Audiology might help achieve a powerful voice and bring positive influence and benefits to the issues that matter to audiologists and the populations they serve. In that statement, we committed to consulting widely on the shared principles, to do so transparently and welcome challenge. We were therefore pleased to welcome AIHHP into the group shortly afterwards.

Over the last 9 months we have made positive steps forward through consultation within the sector, and received overwhelming support to work collectively for the benefit of the sector as well as some robust, honest and fair challenges on how a potential College would work in practice.

At each stage of this process a working group comprising leaders from each of the five organisations has openly discussed feedback and how best to respond to constructive challenges on the basis of the principles set out in our initial statement.

Responding to feedback, the working group agreed that the time was right to broaden oversight to a wider group representing the diversity of the audiology community. We have drafted a proposal to develop a steering group to have responsibility for determining the way forward and overseeing a project group tasked with taking work forward. This proposed structure will ensure any potential College would be:

- independent, evidence-based, open and transparent – free from undue influence of any nature;
- accountable to the Charity Commission against a robust charter and operating rules, demonstrating the highest levels of probity (and hence credible to the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges);
- focused on public benefit – i.e. whose goal is improving outcomes, care and access for people with hearing loss and balance issues as well as speaking up for population hearing and balance health.

The full working draft of our collective proposal as of 13th November is available [see annex].

BAA announcement

On the 14th November the BAA Board unfortunately announced that they were no longer able to support College discussions. Each of the remaining organisations involved in the discussions to date expressed their disappointment about the announcement which they were not made aware and did not expect given ongoing discussions on the working paper noted above.

Response

The four organisations have now reflected on the BAA Board's announcement and reviewed the work that was completed up to that point. We have taken the collective decision to publish our draft proposal and proceed with engaging the wider hearing sector, whilst reaching out to BAA Board and wider membership to be part of these discussions, and to

play an active role in helping shape the proposed steering group so that they continue to share in oversight of the ongoing discussions for the whole sector and the population we serve.

Our aim has always been to put the best interests of the sector and ultimately the people with hearing and balance issues whom we serve at the heart of discussions. It has also been the view to date that if we are to aspire towards acceptance as a respected College by peer Colleges across health, such a College would have to represent the whole breadth of a profession, act with total transparency independent of any one particular influence and be underpinned by the principles of a charitable charter. To date our conversations have followed these principles whilst being restricted within the audiology community. We are now ready to seek the all-important support from groups representing those who rely on the care provided by audiologists. We aim to share progress with the Hearing and Deafness Alliance to seek their views on the existing proposal. If supported by the wider and diverse members of the Alliance, we anticipate taking the next steps towards forming a steering group with broader representation.

With growing evidence of the importance of good hearing, and timely access to hearing care, it becomes all the more important for the sector as a whole to overcome our differences and concentrate on those things which unite us. The audiology sector is small and covers a wide diversity of practices, organisations and specialisms, and we believe it is in the best interests of the people served by this sector to find a way of embracing this wide diversity under a common umbrella.

Annex – draft statement prepared on 13th November.

College of Audiology Exploration - update

Background

In February 2019 the AIHHP, BAA, BSA, BSHAA and NCHA started a consultation with members and the sector on exploring whether a College might be a viable option to enhance the status of the profession for the benefit of patients, clients and individuals – including those who do not currently seek care – whom audiology ultimately serves.

The first phase of the consultation included inviting people to take part in a survey, the results of which were analysed into themes. From these themes key drivers were derived which led to spectrum of ideas from “do nothing” to “form a Royal College” which were then used to carry out initial phases of an options appraisal. In addition, the concept of a College of Audiology was discussed at a joint event on 25 March in Bristol and a sector stocktake workshop on 4 October in Birmingham. The October Stocktake workshop was successful in providing feedback to help shape the development of the drivers, the options appraisal process, the need for firmer proposals to fill some of the gaps and the governance of the process moving forward.

October Stocktake workshop

In summary, the key messages emerging from the stocktake workshop are that:

- the overarching purpose for taking the work forward is to find the best way for the audiology profession to maximise health benefit for the public and those who need and rely on hearing and balance services;
- it is essential that if a College is to exist it should be independent, free of undue influence and publicly accountable;
- the clearest and most consistent support at the October workshop was for a uniting voice for audiology, which should be ‘big tent’;
- although the work produced to date by the working group included patient/ service user benefit implicitly, this needs to be much more explicitly referenced moving forward, specifically in the context of evidence-based outcomes in hearing and balance;
- establishing a College of Audiology should not be assumed to be a foregone conclusion;
- the core principles to be embodied within the terms of reference should focus on:
 - being consistent with the ideals demanded of a putative College charter, including charitable status, public benefit goals and adherence collectively and individually to the 7 standards of leadership in public office (the Nolan principles);

- reaffirming that the whole project is being driven by the present and future needs and interests of the public and service users;
- recognising that the way forward needs to reflect the contribution and diversity across the full breadth of audiology;
- ensuring full transparency, being evidence and science based, and high-quality including ethical, trusted leadership at the heart of the future arrangements;
- ensuring clear lines of accountability in all decision-making.

The current working group met on 31st October to review the feedback received at the 4th October event and subsequently. At the meeting the role and motivation of each organisation was discussed in detail and a potential way of organising future work and governance arrangements, in order to secure the trust of all parties, was explored in depth. The outcomes in the form of proposed next steps are set out below.

Proposed Next Steps

The current working group proposes that a new Steering Group (SG) is established with broader membership to set the direction, with a new Project Team (PT) formed to undertake the work determined by the SG. It is proposed that the SG then lead the work and provide the mandate for the PT. The SG would include both individuals from national professional bodies and individuals determined by functional representation across a wider range of the hearing and balance community to include;

- patient/ service user representation;
- audiologists working for an NHS provider;
- audiologists working for an independent sector provider (providing NHS or self-funded care); X
- audiology research;
- audiology educators and trainers;
- medical / audiovestibular medicine (AVM)/ Ear Nose and Throat (ENT);
- paediatric audiology;
- balance services.

The interrelationship and ways of working between the SG and the PT is illustrated in the graphic below.



Unlike the current project arrangements in which the team is determined by organisational membership, the SG will be determined by functional representation across a wider range of the hearing and balance community.

Principles and governance arrangements

The above structure would necessitate a new level of governance to ensure clear accountability between agreeing strategic direction and delivering specific tasks within a transparent work programme.

The new SG would be established to set the direction of further work and provide a mandate based on the feedback to date with the key uniting themes that any potential College should be:

- independent, evidence-based, open and transparent – free from undue influence of any nature;
- accountable to the Charity Commission against a robust charter and operating rules, demonstrating the highest levels of probity (and hence credible to the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges);
- focused on public benefit – i.e. whose goal is improving outcomes, care and access for people with hearing loss and balance issues as well as speaking up for population hearing and balance health.

The SG would authorise a restructured PT to undertake an agreed schedule of work directed to achieving the agreed goals.

The PT would be accountable to the SG for delivering agreed goals, which would include gathering, analysing and reporting evidence to enable the SG to make informed decisions about next steps and further development of the strategic direction.

The SG would be accountable to the wider audiology community and other stakeholders including public and users of hearing and balance services either directly or/and through third sector representative charities. The PT may also call upon subject matter experts to support them in gathering and evaluating relevant evidence.

To move forward we propose that the current working group focus on developing a governance framework, including the following key deliverables for consultation and ultimate approval from the audiology community and its stakeholders:

- terms of reference for the SG in order for it to meet the objectives set out in feedback from the audiology community to date (see uniting themes above);
- underlying principles to be adopted and code of conduct expected of SG members;
- proposed membership of the SG;
- process for recruitment to the SG;
- proposed relationship and accountability between the SG and the wider audiology and stakeholder community;
- responsibility and interim working arrangements for the PT;
- proposed timetable for establishing the SG and implementing the new arrangements.

In the interim phase, the working group would also draft proposals for the working arrangements, responsibilities and accountability of the future PT. Final decisions would be made by the SG once it is in place.

It is recognised that it will take time to identify and recruit SG volunteers, to ensure the right skills, experience and commitment are in place to take forward this complex piece of work and to meet the conditions set out by stakeholder feedback to date (see uniting themes above). At this stage the working group expects to have completed the preparatory phase to be ready to begin recruitment in early 2020.

All arrangements will be made with full transparency and consistent with Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles) and charitable ambitions. Individuals serving on the SG, PT or contributing as subject matter experts will all be required to declare interests following a consistent, published process drawing on best practice for addressing potential conflicts of interest. This goal of full transparency is to safeguard this work from any undue influence over direction or decisions.