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For Action by:
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Action required by: Immediately

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Enclosure(s): Guidance on the Argumentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Pathway

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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Directors of Therapies and Health Science
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6 June 2019

Dear colleagues

WHC/2019/018– Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Pathway

1. Please find attached the guidance relating to the provision of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) equipment. This pathway is the result of a year's collaboration between partners. The new pathway seeks to ensure that people who need communication equipment and support will access that support as close to home as possible from the local speech and language therapy services in their health boards; with streamlined access to the National AAC Specialised Aids Service for those who need high technology, complex equipment.

2. In order to meet this requirement health boards will deliver the local services as set out in this pathway followed by involvement of the complex equipment service if required.

3. The introduction of local health board services including speech and language therapy assessment and intervention, with provision of low technology equipment will be supported by additional funding, the detail of which will follow separately.

    Action
4. Health Boards should ensure that this guidance is brought to the attention of all staff involved with the provision of communication support and provision of AAC equipment.

Yours sincerely

RUTH CROWDER

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A Healthier Wales: Pathway for the Provision of Communication Equipment and Support in using that Equipment

1.0   Introduction

1.1   This pathway will support people, in Wales, who have difficulty communicating verbally and who can be assisted by communication equipment. The provision of equipment and support will enable them to live and communicate as independently as possible, and participate in their communities and society. The service will enable people using the equipment to communicate in all aspects of their daily lives, in order to achieve what matters to them.

1.2   Welsh Government adopted the Social Model of Disability in 2002, which separates disability from impairment. The Social Model is a positive approach to disability and focusses on removing the barriers to equality.   Communication [Freedom of expression] is a basic human right and is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**.** To this end, individuals with communication impairments may require augmentative or alternative equipment to realise their communication potential.

1.3   The most appropriate equipment should be provided to meet an individual's needs, what is appropriate for one, may not be appropriate for all. Service provision should be as close to a persons home as possible. In order to meet this requirement health boards will deliver the local services as set out in this pathway followed by involvement to the complex equipment service if required.

2.0   What is Communication Equipment?

2.1   Communication equipment is any equipment that enables a person to communicate by conveying a message in addition to or instead of speech. It may be used by people who have no speech or whose speech is not sufficient to communicate effectively. The purpose of this equipment is to support a person to communicate in their daily life and help them achieve personal outcomes. Communication equipment is defined for the purpose of this pathway as either 'low tech' or 'high tech'. The equipment required may change over a person's lifetime.

2.2   **Low Tech Communication Equipment** may be simple or complex and should be personalised and fully adaptable to meet the needs of the individual. Low tech simple equipment may include physical resources, which can be paper based and printed. Simple communication equipment is usually used for a specific activity and has a finite amount of vocabulary.

2.3   More complex low tech equipment may include a large amount of vocabulary, organised in a pre-set format with structured guidance. This may be designed for speech and language development, as well as functional communication needs. Some equipment has limited technological features and limited recorded speech messages. It may have printed images/symbols or text linked to the messages, allowing the individual to select the chosen message to speak. Some communication

equipment provides a sound source as a substitute for voice. Learning to use low tech equipment can be as difficult as learning a new language and requires to be taught.

Low tech communication equipment might include:
- Pen and paper or dry wipe board.
- Flash cards.
- Communication books with letters, words, pictures and/or symbols (which may include a multi-page communication book with the vocabulary arranged in topics).
- Tangible symbols (e.g. real objects, miniature objects or parts of objects).
- A communication board with the alphabet or pictures arranged in a grid format.
- Colour coded eye pointing frame.
- Artificial larynx or a voice amplifier

This is not an exhaustive list.

2.4   Creating personalised low tech communication equipment which is fit for purpose requires staff skill and time as well as access to, for example: specialised software, colour printer, laminator. It also requires identifying and organising personal vocabulary to meet the individual's needs. Where this has been developed electronically, this should be stored for future updates or necessary access and shared with colleagues at points of transition (e.g. change of school or care team). Colour coding of vocabulary may also be used and can enhance an individual's efficient and effective use of the low tech system.

2.5   The provision of low technology equipment is via the local health board team supporting the person with communication needs. The local speech and language therapist will assess the needs of each individual and make an appropriate clinical decision. If equipment is needed, s/he will then either provide that simple or complex low tech equipment directly or liaise with the complex high-tech communication provider as appropriate. The process may require trials of alternative equipment options in order to ensure the correct sustainable solution.

2.6   **Complex High-Tech Communication Equipment** is based on computer technology providing communication vocabulary, images, symbols, text and/or an on-screen keyboard. They are multi-featured, often with synthesised voice output, alternative access options, add-ons, accessories and mountings. All complex high-tech communication equipment consists of hardware (internal computer/ tablet/sound amplifier) and programmable software (operating system and specialised communication software / apps) adapted to meet the individuals needs

2.7   Some mainstream hardware and software which is widely available, such as a tablet device, may be appropriate to use as communication equipment in certain situations. Access to Wi-Fi is usually necessary for setting up equipment, intervention, update and back up for complex high-tech communication equipment.

2.8   The provision of complex high-tech equipment will be via the National Specialised Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) service which is part of the

Electronic Assistive Technology (EAT) Service. In addition to communication equipment, some individuals may also need to access environmental and / or specialist computer access which are also provided as part of the EAT service. This allows an holistic, once for Wales, equitable service.

3.0   Communication Equipment Management

3.1   People using communication equipment require it to be safe, effective, in good working order and suitable for their individual needs. Assessment and provision of equipment should be timely and meet the Welsh Government Referral to Treatment times.

3.2   Organisations, both Local Health Boards and the National Specialised AAC/EAT Service, who provide support for people using communication equipment should have a robust system for equipment management for both high tech and low tech communication, in accordance with appropriate regulatory guidance. This could include an electronic catalogue of equipment and a record or database of the people supplied with the communication equipment in order to track, maintain and review that equipment provision.

3.3   Equipment management should include procedures for:
- Procurement of equipment.
- Safe and secure storage.
- Ongoing monitoring and maintenance which accounts for changes to regulation or safety alerts.
- Safety checking in accordance with relevant health & safety legislation.
- Loan, both short-term and long-term.
- Maintaining and updating software as required.
- Backing up and saving personalised vocabularies.
- Decontamination and infection control.
- Retrieval/recycling/re-issue of equipment.
- Decommissioning of equipment.

4.0   Support for People Using Communication Equipment

4.1   People who need and use communication equipment may require support to enable them to achieve their communication potential and their personal outcomes. Providing a package of support for a person who is losing or has lost the use of their voice or has difficulty speaking frequently involves working with the person's family, friends, carers and at times a wider circle of support. This is in order that the person gains maximum use and benefit from using the communication equipment.

4.2   Support advice, information and training should be provided for anyone else with whom the person interacts including but not limited to family, friends, formal and informal carers, and staff working with them. That support should meet the specific needs and wellbeing outcomes of the person using the communication equipment. This support may be accessed at different levels: universal, targeted and specialist; in different ways and at various stages depending on the needs of those involved

and is particularly important at times of transition (such as changing or leaving school or changing care team) or in fast progressing conditions.

4.3   The person may require support to:
- Participate effectively in the assessment process.
- Ensure they receive the most appropriate communication equipment following assessment and identification of communication needs.
- Ensure the communication equipment is prepared, adapted, and updated appropriately.
- Ensure they develop the skills to operate their communication equipment.
- Ensure they maximise their language and communication potential.
- Use their communication equipment to achieve their personal outcomes and what matters to them.
- Help them meet their continuing communication needs and aspirations, also taking responsibility for letting it be known when changes occur and with access to an appropriate review process.

4.4   The network of support e.g. family, carers, friends, teachers and employers may require support to learn:
- How to communicate and interact with the person using the communication equipment.
- How to set-up and maintain the communication equipment on a daily basis.
- How to help the person develop their communication skills using the communication equipment.
- Who to contact in the event of any difficulties.

4.5   Professionals are required to:
- Develop and maintain relevant knowledge and skills in relation to communication equipment and support, such as assessment and currently available equipment
- Prescribe the most appropriate communication equipment to meet individuals' needs.
- (For Local health board professionals) Recognise when involvement from the National Specialist equipment service is appropriate.
- Ensure cost effectiveness by utilising any bank of AAC equipment, trialling equipment to ascertain and confirm its suitability for the individual.
- Ensure there is a process in place to manage and maintain the communication equipment and carry out appropriate risk assessments.
- Be alert to any safety messages from regulatory bodies and ensure these are acted upon.

4.6   The knowledge and skills required to fulfil these tasks are set out in relevant specialist and generic competency frameworks which may be developed locally such as the IPAACKs (Individual Profiling of AAC Knowledge and Skills).   Other frameworks may be developed throughout Wales or at local levels. All procedures should be compliant with current and future regulations and guidance

5.0 The Pathway

5.1 The pathway of support for a person starts with the identification of a need for support to communicate effectively, followed by a referral to local services. The local speech and language therapy service will assess the needs of each individual and make an appropriate clinical judgement, followed by trialling and provision of equipment where appropriate and recommendation of support strategies, which may include appropriate intervention, training and review. Where the need is for 'low tech' or less complex equipment this must be provided as close to peoples homes as possible by the local speech and language therapy service, normally from the local health board or trust: but local arrangements might include partner organisations. An effective sustainable system for procuring, maintaining and storing low tech equipment in local services will be required. This should include any assessment, demonstration of trial equipment.

5.2 Where complex high tech equipment, which requires the expertise of specialist staff is required, this will be provided via the national specialist AAC service which is part of the Electronic Assistive Technology (EAT) Service, currently provided as a commissioned service by Cardiff and Vale University Health Board. The person with communication needs retains active communication and support from their local health team as required. The staff from the National Specialist AAC service will work with the local team to ensure personalised and high value interventions are provided to meet the individuals need. The process may require trials of alternative equipment options in order to ensure the correct sustainable solution.

5.3 NOTE: The intention of this pathway is that if a person is directly referred to the National Specialist AAC service without the involvement of a local speech and language therapy service or to other elements of the EAT service and a communication difficulty is subsequently identified, the EAT staff will normally request that referrer to refer directly to the local speech and language therapy service for initial assessment (ideally copying in the local SLT service) in line with this pathway. This will ensure that the National Specialist AAC /EAT service is not assessing people who will only require low tech equipment or who are not yet ready for high tech equipment, However, clinical judgement should always be used in these instances to ensure the an individual in these circumstances is not disadvantaged by processes and unnecessary handoffs.

Diagram 1: Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Pathway

Recognition of Need

* Early identification of communication difficulties that AAC might help
* Consent obtained
* Referral to SLT (if not already involved)

Assessment Period

* Local SLT/multi-disciplinary assessment process
* Discussion with local AAC specialist (if available)
* National complex EAT service involved as required
* Trial of AAC equipment/system - loan for agreed length of time with support as required
* Evaluate/review outcome of trial
* Identify type and amount of support required
* Person-centred goals written collaboratively with the user

Communication equipment not required

Provision of Equipment

* Long term loan provided from local and/or national sources
* Local funding arrangements available to access for low-tech communication equipment
* National funding arrangements available to access for complex, high-tech communication equipment
* Equipment is procured in keeping with relevant procedures and timescales
* If high-tech equipment is provided, a low-tech backup should be in place

Support

* Equipment is set up for individual user, including any necessary adaptations, access, mounting and integration with other technology
* Training provided for individual and network of support
* Equipment management procedure is in place to ensure equipment is tracked, safe and fit for purpose
* Information is provided to the user and network of support on how to look after the equipment and what to do in the event of any issues

Re-entry to cycle as needs change

Review

* Progress reviewed after a period of consolidation including discussion with the user as to whether intended outcomes have been achieved
* Any necessary changes are made

Ongoing Care

* Relevant point(s) of contact is/are provided if needs change, further support required or if there are any issues with equipment
* Joint policies between local and national services in place for follow-up/discharge
* Individual and network of support takes responsibility for equipment
* Feedback from the individual on outcome and experience is gathered by relevant local or national service