

## Co-producing innovation and improved access to ear checks for children and young people who are autistic and/or have a learning disability

Co-production support partner for a project with NHS England

Children and Young People who are autistic and/or have a learning disability don't always have access to ear and hearing checks, or the checks are not appropriate to meet their needs. Between 2021 and 2025, we worked with NHS England to change this, co-producing an approach to ear checks that prioritises the needs of children and young people. As part of the NHS Long Term Plan, the Ear Checks Programme seeks "to ensure that children with learning disabilities have their needs met by eyesight, hearing and dental services, and are included in reviews as part of general screening services and are supported by easily accessible, ongoing care".

Throughout the project we have worked with a broad range of people from across the sector including: audiologists; residential special school staff; adults and young people who are autistic and/or have a learning disability and/or have a hearing impairment; parents and carers; people who work in healthcare and public health roles.

### 2021

Through a series of online 'Sharing Ideas' events, we came together with a range of stakeholders across the seven NHS regions to gather views and generate ideas about what was needed for truly accessible ear checks for children and young people who are autistic and/or have a learning disability.

These conversations provided the basis for the rest of the programme, informing the structure of the checks, and the support available for those providing them.

14

events

7

regions

216

people involved



## 2022

Building on the ideas from the 'Sharing Ideas' events, we began collaborating with 15 pilot schools and colleges across the country. We shared adaptable resources and supported schools to co-produce with their students to develop an approach to ear checks that works for them. This ranged from the production of familiarisation videos, to adapting the structure of the checks to suit student need.

## 2023

We began a series of online 'Hearing Health' events. These events brought together a range of interested groups including parents and carers, education professionals, people with lived experience, healthcare professionals and decision makers.

Through these events we established a 'Hearing Health Collective', a community of people with a shared interest in improving hearing health for children and young people who are autistic and/or have a learning disability. Together we shared learning from the pilot phase of the programme, and discussed how this can inform local practice.

104

people involved

11

sessions

## 2024

We began the year working with the 'Hearing Health Collective' to develop an animation to explain the different scenarios that could happen at the ear checks that could support the process of familiarisation. This was shared with students from a pilot college, who provided feedback and ideas to make it even better.

In October we were excited to hear NHS England announce plans to roll out free eyesight, hearing and dental checks for children at residential special schools from the following year.

## 2025

As the programme has begun to be rolled out, we turned our focus to look for ways to embedding a co-produced approach across the NHS regions. As well as advocating to ensure that the needs and preferences of children and young people remain at the heart of the Ear Checks Programme.

We came together with parents and carers, education staff, healthcare professionals, adults with lived experience and parent carer forums to discuss ways to advocate locally. This included producing a template letter to be sent to MPs and Integrated Care Boards highlighting the importance of accessible ear checks in local residential special schools.

We were also able to see the Ear Checks animation finalised, and available to watch on the Seashell Trust's website. We hope that this animation will help students feel more comfortable and familiar with the ear checks.

Although our formal involvement wrapped up at the end of July 2025, we are excited to see how the Ear Checks Programme progresses.



Illustration from Ear Checks animation we have developing with the 'Hearing Health Collective'

## Awards

In October 2024 the programme won two awards at National Association for Special Educational Needs Awards (known as Nasen Awards). Co-Production Collective at UCL won Co-Production Initiative of the Year sponsored by Seashell Trust and Ruth Thomsen of NHS England won Leader of the Year sponsored by IG Escapes for her tireless work on the programme.

In December 2024 the programme was also proud to be shortlisted at the HSJ (Health Service Journal) Awards in the category of 'Reducing Inequalities and Improving Outcomes for Children and Young People'

"Working with Co-Production Collective has really shown us that co-production can benefit everyone. Whilst centring the children and young people at residential special schools was always at the heart of the Hearing Checks Project, the Co-Production Collective has supported us to understand how to enact this in a genuinely inclusive way. Working together has helped our team at NHS England to learn more about a valued-based way of working that seeks to include everyone, be authentic, and to challenge the status quo."



**Ruth Thomsen, Scientific Director Medical Directorate,  
NHS England**



The team: Back row Sarah O'Brien, Niccola Hutchinson-Pascal, Sheraan Hillman, Jack Stancel-Lewis. Front row left to right Chloe Apter, Rosie Stanbury