

## Adult Hearing Loss & Tinnitus Research

### Executive summary: roundtable event – Tuesday 15 December 2020

#### Introduction

In December 2020, the Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC) convened a roundtable discussion on adult hearing loss and tinnitus research. Designed and delivered in collaboration with key partners, and held via Zoom, the event brought together a wide range of stakeholders from right across the hearing loss and tinnitus sectors – including research commissioners and funders, academic experts, clinicians, national policy makers and people with personal experience of these conditions.

The aim of the event was to discuss research priorities and how we can collectively work together to further develop the capacity and capability of research on hearing loss and tinnitus. The focus was also on identifying specific short, medium and long term actions for improving outcomes for people with hearing loss and tinnitus.

The meeting was opened by Lord Bethell, the DHSC Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Innovation, who highlighted the devastating impact that hearing loss and tinnitus has on people's lives, and he emphasised the role research and innovation can play in developing and evaluating future therapies. The Minister concluded his speech with a call to action: explaining how the purpose of this roundtable event was to develop a joint plan for how we can all make progress and prioritise hearing loss and tinnitus research in the future.

#### The roundtable agenda

The half-day event was structured into two parts:

- The first part aimed to set the scene for the day – describing the current research system, and summarising previous initiatives that have identified future research priorities and needs
- The second (main) part of the event focused on three substantive issues/topics, and consisted of a brief overview presentation on each, followed by detailed group Q&A and discussion
  - 1) Hearing loss, tinnitus, and healthy ageing
  - 2) Understanding the causes of, and risk factors for, hearing loss and tinnitus
  - 3) Infrastructure and training

A copy of all the roundtable papers, including the agenda, and supporting materials (background discussion, information on research funders and commissioners and slides presented on the day) are set out in a separate document.

#### Discussion summary – substantive issues/topics

A short descriptive report covering each agenda item (and the following group discussion) will be available as a separate paper at a later date. Key points arising from group discussion of the three substantive issues/topics include the following:

##### Hearing loss, tinnitus and healthy ageing

There was a strong feeling during this discussion that there was an over-reliance on potentially out of date studies (e.g. MRC National Study of Hearing) and that it was time for a new National Study of Hearing and Tinnitus. All participants agreed this was a priority for the field. In addition, deep pheno-genotyping of patients with hearing loss is needed but this infrastructure

will be expensive so investment will be needed. Where possible this should link in with existing initiatives such as UK BioBank and NIHR BioResource.

Co-morbidities was a key theme that was raised many times throughout the discussion. Everyone felt that more attention was needed to understand the association of hearing loss and tinnitus with disease clusters and co-morbidities. One of the key areas within this was a need for a better understanding of the relationship between hearing loss and dementia. More broadly, how we could encourage health ageing. When considering co-morbidities, it was also highlighted that we need to understand how we can improve access to hearing services for people in vulnerable groups e.g. learning disabilities. Currently, we do not address co-morbidities as efficiently as we could as our clinicians tend to work in specialty silos. We need to work more closely together and focus on bringing together clusters of expertise for a more holistic approach.

#### Understanding causes and risks for adult hearing loss and tinnitus

Some concern was raised by discovery scientists that many funding programmes excluded animal research and that by doing this it may separate fundamental researchers from clinical researchers. By assessing funding breakdown, we can see how research is broken down and how to support researchers to work together. To improve support for hearing loss and tinnitus, everyone felt that they needed to be higher up the political agenda as that would help raise awareness and drive larger research initiatives.

#### Infrastructure and training for research into adult hearing loss and tinnitus

A key message throughout the event was the need to improve capacity in clinical services and research delivery. Understanding more about the breakdown of funding allocations and how we can improve researcher successes will support the development of the workforce. We need to break away from the rigid career development pathways and create a clear plan and trajectory on how to build the workforce. There is currently a large drop-off of early career researchers so considering how we could support young researchers to develop in their (clinical) academic career was considered a priority.

#### **Next steps**

A working ('task and finish') group has been established to consider and take forward priorities arising from the roundtable event. Involving key partners and stakeholders with responsibility for potential actions, the group will provide a forum for collaborative and joined-up working. The group will co-produce plans and actions for the short, medium and long term, and agree how to work together to implement and disseminate/communicate next steps.

The group has just been established and produced this summary of the roundtable event as its first task. Work will be carried out over the remainder of this year (May 2021 onwards), and further papers/plans will be published when available.

#### Current research opportunities

The working group will be focused on assessing future options for boosting the future capacity and capability of research on hearing loss and tinnitus. It will look to do so by working within, and building on, the current UK research and funding architecture.

These research topics are of ongoing and active interest to the research funders/commissioners and other partners in the UK, and they make substantial investment in research in these areas. Further details on how to access these opportunities are available in the roundtable papers (see the pages relating to information on research funders and commissioners).