

A National Manifesto for Hydrotherapy

MARCH 2021

Supporting Organisations

- **The National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society**
- **Aquatic Therapy Association of Chartered Physiotherapists**
- **The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy**

Introduction

Hydrotherapy, also known as aquatic physiotherapy, represents a vital component of care for people with a range of debilitating health conditions. Hydrotherapy pools, through their warm and buoyant water help reduce the load on the joints and can make stretching and movement more effective. Furthermore, the properties of the water can help restoration of strength and the re-education of important functional movement for individuals, helping some to go on to tolerate equivalent movement when attempted on land. Hydrotherapy can provide a safe and controlled environment for important rehabilitative exercise delivered by trained physiotherapists. It also helps to provide important respite from the pain and discomfort associated with disease and, for many, has a hugely beneficial impact on both physical and mental wellbeing.

Despite the clear and tangible benefits they can provide, hydrotherapy pools have traditionally been chronically underfunded and undervalued within the NHS. Considerable variation exists in the availability of aquatic physiotherapy services across the country, meaning that for many people there is no viable means of easily accessing this form of care. Hydrotherapy pools that do exist have come under increasing pressure in recent years, with a number of services having closed, or been put at risk of closure.

Findings from a national Freedom of Information (FOI) request carried out amongst English NHS Trusts in Autumn 2020 has revealed how the impact of covid-19 has exacerbated these pressures further. A fifth of Trusts that responded said that they were unsure if their local hydrotherapy pool would reopen after the pandemic had passed, with one Trust going as far to indicate that a decision had already been made to close the service. As a result, there are very real concerns that, without concerted action, the already parlous state of hydrotherapy care available across the NHS will deteriorate further in the coming months, to the detriment of the lives of all those who rely on it.

Aquatic physiotherapy is also all too often overlooked in the context of NHS hospital redevelopment plans. There are unfortunately numerous examples of new hospital sites or the redevelopment of existing sites neglecting to factor in the potential of a local hydrotherapy pool, meaning that important opportunities are lost to address the chronic shortage in service availability.

It is against this backdrop that a call to action has emerged urging the safeguarding of existing hydrotherapy pools and for steps to be taken to ensure that as many people as possible are able to benefit from these services in the coming years. Set out below are six clear and feasible manifesto commitments which we hope will act as a rallying call for all stakeholders who have a vested interest in the continued delivery of aquatic physiotherapy care across the NHS. Through their implementation, we will help to transform the UK into an aquatic physiotherapy world-leader and make tangible improvements to the care and quality of life for millions of people living with long-term conditions.

Manifesto Commitments

- 1. Ensure everyone within the UK has reasonable access to an NHS supported hydrotherapy pool within their local area with clear, clinically appropriate referral pathways into the service**
- 2. Halt the further closure of existing hydrotherapy pools and ensure aquatic physiotherapy services are considered in any hospital or community redevelopments / new builds**
- 3. Take forward a coordinated research programme that can help to maximise the utility of aquatic physiotherapy care for the widest amount of people**

4. **Embed aquatic physiotherapy care within key relevant national guidelines**
5. **Develop a recognised aquatic physiotherapy service provision audit tool that can support a consistent evaluation of local implementation and patient outcomes**
6. **Promote hydrotherapy pools locally to raise wider awareness and to support them becoming increasingly self-funding, in partnership with patient and community groups or stakeholders**

Commitment 1: Ensure everyone within the UK has reasonable access to an NHS supported hydrotherapy pool within their local area with clear, clinically appropriate referral pathways into the service

Being able to access a hydrotherapy pool and the physiotherapy support that comes with hydrotherapy sessions can have a transformative impact on an individual's physical and mental wellbeing. Controlled exercise in warm and buoyant water is recognised as a core component to the management of a range of debilitating and long-term conditions, including cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and neuro-degenerative diseases that affect millions of people across the UK. Despite this, the quality of access to hydrotherapy services remains variable, with some parts of the country having no available pool within a reasonable travel distance.

This inequality in access must be reversed to ensure that all those who would benefit from aquatic physiotherapy are able to do so. **Commissioners in areas which currently have no local hydrotherapy pool should take steps to review their local arrangements and develop plans for addressing this shortfall in access as a priority. Any review should involve close collaboration and involvement with a wide range of local stakeholders, with an emphasis on ensuring that appropriately trained aquatic physiotherapists are placed at the heart of service provision, with facilities catering to as many different patient groups as possible.**

Commitment 2: Halt the further closure of existing hydrotherapy pools and ensure aquatic physiotherapy services are considered in any hospital or community redevelopments / new builds

Hydrotherapy pools that do exist across the NHS have come under increasing pressures in recent years, as local budget-holders have often seen them as relatively easy targets to make cost-savings, due to a perception of them being inefficient to run. Even when a decision hasn't been taken to overtly close a pool, many have suffered gradual disinvestment, effectively winding down the quality of care that's available for local patients. There have been several recent examples where a decision has been taken to close a pool without an adequate comprehensive equality impact assessment having been carried out, and with insufficient stakeholder consultation.

Unfortunately, the unprecedented impact that covid-19 has had on the NHS is likely to exacerbate the pressures on hydrotherapy pools yet further. A fifth of Trusts in England have indicated that they are unsure if they will be able to reopen their local service after lockdown, jeopardising the care available to millions of people across the country. Recent experience has also demonstrated how aquatic physiotherapy is either an afterthought or something that is completely overlooked when it comes to the building of new NHS hospitals or redevelopment of existing sites, whether in a secondary or community care setting. **It is vital that steps are taken to protect existing NHS aquatic physiotherapy services and that any local access review is carried out in conjunction with a full and comprehensive equality impact assessment exercise, involving the full range of affected stakeholders. The development or redevelopment of any NHS hospital site should also adequately factor in the potential to widen access to aquatic physiotherapy as part of the planning process.**

Commitment 3: Take forward a coordinated research programme that can help to maximise the utility of aquatic physiotherapy care for the widest amount of people

Despite the wide range of reported benefits for individuals accessing hydrotherapy care, there remains a conspicuous absence of academic research that supports their positive impact on health and quality of life outcomes because few studies have been conducted in this area, and of those that do exist, none has examined the long-term health benefits of hydrotherapy. As part of the consideration of the inclusion of hydrotherapy within the NICE Spondyloarthritis Clinical Guidelines for instance, the Guideline Development Group were only able to identify five Randomised Control Trials and seven observational studies which were useable for the review, and all of these were perceived to be of low-quality, old, and not pertaining to delivery of aquatic physiotherapy care within an NHS environment.

In order to effectively articulate the clinical and cost-benefit case for investing in hydrotherapy care, it is essential that new, high-quality research is carried out into the area, ideally through NHS settings. This research could be taken forward by a new multi-stakeholder working group to support the case for widening access to hydrotherapy care, as well as helping to identify the most effective types of aquatic physiotherapy interventions across different disease areas, maximising the benefits for the most amount of people.

Commitment 4: Embed aquatic physiotherapy care within key relevant national guidelines

Embedding clear and proactive recommendations within relevant national clinical guidelines that support the delivery of aquatic physiotherapy care represents a key means of shaping local commissioning and service delivery decisions. At present, aquatic physiotherapy remains mostly absent from most relevant clinical guidance. Where it does feature, it is largely in the context of recommendations that are non-instructive, orientated instead towards vague 'considerations' for involving aquatic physiotherapy within an individual's care. This has often been a direct consequence of the limited evidence available for aquatic physiotherapy, without which those responsible for developing guidance are unable to make firm recommendations about its use.

As new and more robust evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of aquatic physiotherapy care becomes available in different disease areas, respective clinical guidance should be reviewed and updated to reflect the opportunity for better incorporating aquatic physiotherapy within them.

Commitment 5: Develop a recognised aquatic physiotherapy service provision audit tool that can support a consistent evaluation of local implementation and patient outcomes

At present there is no nationally-endorsed benchmarking tool that allows local hydrotherapy providers accurately to measure the quality of service delivery and the impact that services have for those accessing them. Some individual services across the country have carried out local benchmarking exercises, however. Having a consistent, single national benchmarking resource would encourage many more areas to audit their services, helping to generate valuable data that can in turn inform future care delivery. Generating audit data would also provide an important resource that could be utilised in potential local access review situations, helping to demonstrate the importance of maintaining funding for the service.

Relevant stakeholders should work to develop a national hydrotherapy service audit tool that is endorsed by policymakers and which is supported through the sharing of best practice examples.

Commitment 6: Promote hydrotherapy pools locally to raise wider awareness and to support them becoming increasingly self-funding in partnership with patient and community groups or stakeholders

Aquatic physiotherapy services can often be under-appreciated and poorly recognised within a local area, even by those working in other parts of the same organisation. Several examples across the country have demonstrated however how proactively championing the care that a hydrotherapy service delivers can

improve the way in which they are perceived by colleagues and reduce the risk of commissioners identifying pools for cost-saving reviews. In parallel, there have also been innovative examples of how some NHS hydrotherapy pools have maximised their usage through being made available for self-help groups in a variety of disease areas, as well as being used for broader commercial activities, helping to generate valuable income for the local provider and moving the service to a cost-neutral footing.

Guidance and collateral should be developed that can support those working in hydrotherapy services to help champion their service and to identify opportunities for generating income to make local pools increasingly self-funding.

Further Information

For further information on this document, please contact jill@nass.co.uk