

ADHD Funding in the

NHS: Plans, Budget and Waiting List

Challenges

Neurohaven

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List Challenges – 19 June 2025

NHS Budget Allocations for Mental Health vs ADHD

The National Health Service (NHS) in England allocates only a small fraction of its budget to mental health services. In 2025/26, mental health funding is set at **£15.6 billion**, which is about **8.7% of the NHS baseline budget**[pulsetoday.co.uk](https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk). This share has actually *fallen slightly* from the previous year, despite rising demand, leading to criticism that mental health is under-prioritized[pulsetoday.co.uk](https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk)[pulsetoday.co.uk](https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk). Notably, an analysis by Lord Darzi found that mental health accounts for **over 20% of the disease burden but under 10% of NHS spending**[pulsetoday.co.uk](https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk). Within NHS budgets, **ADHD services for adults are not even counted under the main mental health ring-fence**. NHS guidance explicitly directs that spending on ADHD should be reported in a separate ledger category, not included under Mental Health Investment Standard (MHIS) or learning disability budgets[england.nhs.uk](https://www.england.nhs.uk). In practice, this means funding for adult ADHD services is often siloed or handled locally, rather than protected as part of mental health growth targets[theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

What is being spent on adult ADHD? Precise national figures are hard to pin down because of inconsistent data, but some indicators exist. The cost of ADHD medications on the NHS has been rising rapidly – reaching **£104 million in 2022/23** just for stimulant and related drugs[pharmaceutical-journal.com](https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com). This reflects growing numbers of patients treated (233,000 people received ADHD prescriptions in England in 2022/23, more than double the number eight years prior)[pharmaceutical-journal.com](https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com)[pharmaceutical-journal.com](https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com).

However, medication costs are only part of the picture. A significant portion of NHS spending for adult ADHD has been going to assessments and diagnosis, increasingly via the *Right to Choose* scheme (where patients are referred to independent providers due to long NHS waits). Unofficial estimates suggest that NHS England's spend on outsourced adult ADHD assessments has surged – for example, one report indicated that total spending on private ADHD assessment providers was around **£250+ million in the last financial year**, following a ~40% jump in demand (though this figure isn't formally published in NHS

accounts). By comparison, specialized NHS adult ADHD clinics (within mental health trusts) have historically been small and few, meaning **most areas have minimal dedicated funding for adult ADHD** beyond what they scramble to find locally [cambridge.org](https://www.cambridge.org). In short, while mental health in general is underfunded, ADHD services receive an even *tinier slice* – often reliant on ad-hoc local budgets or outsourcing, with no clear national funding stream.

Government Plans for ADHD Services: Achievable or “Pie in the Sky”?

Acknowledging the crisis in ADHD care, health leaders have started to formulate plans – but these are early steps, and their realism is in question. In March 2024, **NHS England launched a cross-sector ADHD Taskforce** to improve care for people with ADHD [england.nhs.uk](https://www.england.nhs.uk). This taskforce is drawing on experts from health, education, and justice to understand the challenges behind surging demand and patchy services. According to officials, the taskforce will report interim findings shortly (mid-2025) and a final report by late 2024, focusing on recommendations for a more “needs-based” approach to ADHD support across systems hansard.parliament.uk. Alongside this, NHS England introduced an *ADHD data improvement plan* and, for the first time, published national ADHD waiting list figures in May 2025 [healthcareleadernews.com](https://www.healthcareleadernews.com). These data revealed the enormous scale of the issue: an estimated **2.5 million people in England have ADHD**, and **approximately 549,000 people are currently waiting for an ADHD assessment** [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com). Simply quantifying the problem was a “first step” after years of inattention. In the words of ADHD UK’s chief executive, it took 25 years after NICE’s first ADHD guidelines for the NHS to even estimate the affected population – a reflection of “abject failure” in managing and resourcing ADHD services to date [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

Beyond the taskforce and data gathering, **there is no dedicated national funding pot announced specifically for adult ADHD in the NHS**. The Government (now working on a new 10-Year NHS Plan) has signalled broad support for mental health and neurodiversity,

but mostly in general terms. For instance, ministers cite the overall mental health investment standard (requiring local budgets to grow at least in line with NHS growth)[pulsetoday.co.uk](https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk) and mention that improving community services is part of the long-term vision[england.nhs.uk](https://www.england.nhs.uk). They have not, however, set any concrete targets or major cash infusions for expanding ADHD clinics. In fact, one critique is that **ADHD was excluded from key NHS waiting-time improvement targets** – it's not covered by the 18-week referral-to-treatment standard (despite being a legitimate clinical need) and was left out of past NHS recovery plans to cut waits[theguardian.comcambridge.org](https://www.theguardian.com/cambridge.org). The only specific funding related to ADHD that has emerged publicly has been on a smaller scale or in devolved regions. For example, Wales announced **£13.7 million** in 2023 to improve neurodivergence services and reduce autism/ADHD waiting times gov.wales. In England, some local integrated care boards (ICBs) have invested modest sums to tackle backlogs (e.g. one region funded extra clinics to eliminate >2-year waits), but these efforts are piecemeal.

Overall, the **“plan” so far consists of** commissioning reviews, gathering data, and encouraging local innovation – necessary groundwork, but no guarantee of new capacity. **Is it achievable?** Critics worry that without substantial funding and staffing, these plans may amount to rhetoric. NHS Providers (the association of NHS trusts) warned that mental health services are facing *“soaring demand including for ADHD and autism assessments”*, yet resources are not keeping up[pulsetoday.co.uk](https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk). The interim measures – like improving data, or using digital tools (for example, some trusts use computerised tests like QbTest to streamline ADHD assessmentshansard.parliament.uk) – can help at the margins. But they **do not solve the fundamental mismatch**: thousands more people are seeking ADHD evaluations than the current system can handle. As one MP bluntly put it in a recent parliamentary debate, every timeline for new services keeps slipping and *“again and again, dates for care have been pushed back”* – prompting scepticism that promised improvements will materialize on schedulehansard.parliament.ukhansard.parliament.uk. Without concrete commitments to fund and staff “dozens of new ADHD services” (as the user phrases), many fear the strategy will be *“pie in the sky.”*

ADHD Waiting Lists: Scale of the Backlog & Projected Costs

The adult ADHD waiting list in England has ballooned into a massive backlog, and tackling it will be an expensive, long-term endeavour. As of spring 2025, roughly **549,000 people are awaiting ADHD assessment in England**[theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com). For context, this is about **one in every 100 adults** in the population stuck in the queue. Waiting times in many areas are shockingly high. In some NHS trusts, adults are being quoted **5+ year waits**, and in worst cases up to **8–10 years** for an assessmentadhd.uk.co.uk/cambridge.org. (For example, one trust in Herefordshire/Worcestershire had a **10-year wait** reportedadhd.uk.co.uk, and Oxfordshire's adult ADHD service was so overwhelmed it actually closed its list entirely after wait times hit ~7.5 yearshansard.parliament.ukhansard.parliament.uk.) These delays far exceed any other area of healthcare and fall outside NHS waiting time targets by a wide margin. Clinically, such long waits are disastrous – people can lose jobs, struggle in education, or develop severe mental health crises while waiting without supporthansard.parliament.ukhansard.parliament.uk. It's widely acknowledged that **demand is outstripping capacity** by a huge factor, and that the backlog will *not* resolve without “substantial intervention”[cambridge.org](https://www.cambridge.org)[cambridge.org](https://www.cambridge.org).

What would it take to eliminate this backlog? **In terms of time:** if the NHS continues at its current pace (no major expansion of services), analyses suggest it would take around **8 years on average to clear the existing adult ADHD waiting lists**, and **some regions would literally take decades** to work through all those waitinghansard.parliament.uk. This grim projection was highlighted in a recent report to the government – effectively, many patients might age out or give up before they ever get seen, unless something changes. On the other hand, to *rapidly* address the backlog would require a massive acceleration. One MP noted in debate that ****seeing every person currently on the ADHD waitlist could cost on the order of £3–4 billion**hansard.parliament.uk. This estimate gives a sense of scale: it's *billions* of pounds for assessments and initial treatment if we tried to process 500k+ people promptly. (By comparison, £3–4bn is almost a quarter of what the entire NHS spends on mental health in a year[pulsetoday.co.uk](https://www.pulsetoday.co.uk).) Even at a more local level, the costs are striking. For example, Greater Manchester (population ~2.8 million) estimated that it had about **15,000 adults waiting** for ADHD assessment – and that clearing this backlog would cost **at least £15**

million in one-off funding, plus around **£8–10 million per year** to handle new referrals and prevent the list growing again democracy.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/getinvolved/gmintegratedcare.org.uk. That was deemed financially unsustainable for one region, let alone the whole country. It underscores that **meeting ADHD demand requires major investment in staff and clinics**: psychiatrists, psychologists, specialist nurses, care coordinators, etc., in far greater numbers than currently exist.

Building “dozens of new ADHD services” (as the user suggests) is likely exactly what would be needed to significantly cut waits. Each comprehensive adult ADHD clinic can typically assess only a few hundred patients per year given the detailed nature of evaluations and follow-up. To evaluate hundreds of thousands in a reasonable timeframe, *hundreds* of new clinicians or clinics would be required. The NHS England taskforce is expected to recommend scaling up community-based services and better integrating care (for instance, involving primary care in follow-up), but those recommendations will need funding to implement england.nhs.uk/hansard.parliament.uk. As of now, **the funding available is nowhere near the level required** to erase the backlog. Minor pots of money (like a few million here or there for digital tools or pilot projects) barely make a dent when tens of thousands of people are waiting years. For many patients, the only way to get timely help has been to seek private assessments (if they can afford it) or use Right to Choose to go to independent providers – but even that route has been under threat of new restrictions due to costs adhduk.co.uk. In sum, the projections indicate that without a *dedicated, large-scale investment*, the ADHD waiting list will remain a long-term problem. Clearing it fully would require **multi-billion-pound spending and several years of concerted effort**, plus robust plans to handle ongoing yearly demand so it doesn’t just build up again.

Needed Funding vs Available Resources: The Gap

Comparing the rough costs to fix ADHD services with current budgets reveals a huge gap. If, as estimated, **~£3–4 billion** is needed to eliminate the backlog and improve access hansard.parliament.uk, this would be a massive addition to the mental health budget. Recall that all mental health services together get about £15–16bn a year pulsetoday.co.uk. Expecting an extra few billion solely for ADHD (which is just one segment of mental

health/neurodevelopmental care) is *very ambitious*. In fact, mental health leaders point out that funding isn't even keeping up with general needs – the mental health budget share is barely ~9%, and even that is slipping pulsetoday.co.uk pulsetoday.co.uk. Saffron Cordery of NHS Providers noted it is “*illogical that the share of NHS funding for mental health is being reduced at a time of soaring need*” pulsetoday.co.uk pulsetoday.co.uk. ADHD is a prime example of that soaring need, yet it lacks a protected funding stream. Moreover, because ADHD services were **left out of official targets and standards**, ICBs have had little accountability to pour money into them theguardian.com cambridge.org. Many local commissioners have thus historically under-funded ADHD, focusing limited budgets on other mental health priorities. The result is the “invisible” crisis that has now boiled over.

Going forward, bridging this gap will require **political will and prioritization**. The Government's upcoming 10-year plan and the NHS taskforce report could, in theory, lead to dedicated funding for adult ADHD – but it would have to be new money, since existing funds are stretched. There are some positive signs: officials have started *acknowledging* that ADHD demand could overwhelm resources and are talking about new models of care hansard.parliament.uk hansard.parliament.uk. For instance, suggestions include involving GPs in shared-care arrangements for stable ADHD patients, using specialist nurses or psychologists for parts of the pathway, and providing non-medical support (coaching, peer support) to complement clinical care htn.co.uk htn.co.uk. These steps can improve efficiency and maybe reduce cost per patient. **However, none of these negates the need for more clinics and professionals.** As NHS England itself admits, “more needs to be done” to ensure timely diagnosis and holistic support for ADHD england.nhs.uk. Without a significant boost in funding, any plan may fall short.

In conclusion, **the current funding allocated for adult ADHD within the NHS is extremely limited relative to the need**. The bulk of NHS mental health money is not reaching this area, and the newly announced initiatives have yet to come with serious cash. Tackling the entire ADHD waiting list – potentially over half a million assessments – would require a **herculean effort and budget** that presently isn't in place. By one estimate it could cost a quarter of the annual mental health budget to clear the backlog and years of work hansard.parliament.uk. So far, the NHS has launched a taskforce and improved data transparency, which are

important first moves but **not a funded implementation plan**. Unless the 10-year plan or future budgets specifically allocate substantial resources for expanding ADHD services, the idea of quickly fixing the waiting lists may indeed be *“pie in the sky.”*

Ultimately, the **plan** (as it stands) is to study the problem and encourage best practices – useful, but not sufficient on its own. Achieving real change will demand aligning policy with purse strings. In the words of one healthcare leader, it’s time to give mental health – and by extension ADHD – “the priority it deserves” pulsetoday.co.uk. If that priority translates into funding and action, the NHS could build the capacity needed to meet adult ADHD needs. If not, the gap between plans and reality will persist, and patients will continue to face intolerable waits for care.

Sources: NHS England and government reports; ADHD UK data; Parliamentary debates and news analyses on NHS mental health budgets and ADHD waiting times pulsetoday.co.uk [england.nhs.uk](https://www.england.nhs.uk) [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com) [pharmaceutical-journal.com](https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com) hansard.parliament.uk, among others. These sources detail the current funding levels, planned initiatives, and expert estimates of the scale of investment needed.