

After-effects of the NHS “Right to Choose” (RTC) ADHD-Referral Turbulence - June 2025

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Executive Summary

- In January 2025 NHS England proposed capping the number of **RTC ADHD assessments** each provider could deliver per Integrated Care Board (ICB).
 - **Public and professional backlash (12 000+ constituent e-mails, media coverage)** forced NHS England to withdraw the cap in March; the national RTC right formally remains in place.
 - **Fall-out continues:** (1) a rush of pre-emptive referrals has lengthened independent-sector waiting lists to 5-12 months; (2) at least one ICB (Coventry & Warwickshire) has **paused new adult RTC referrals**, recreating a postcode lottery; (3) the combined NHS/RTC backlog now tops **≈ 549 000 people**.
 - Patients face worsening mental-health outcomes, providers are overstretched, and the NHS is under pressure to publish an ADHD service recovery plan in summer 2025.
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1 Background & Policy Context

Timeline	Key developments
Jan 2025	Draft <i>NHS Payment Scheme 25/26</i> proposes a “Notified Payment Limit” (≈ 25–40 ADHD cases/provider/ICB/yr) — effectively ending free patient choice.
Mar 2025	Following consultation and campaign led by ADHD UK, NHS England confirms the limit is withdrawn .
Apr 2025 →	Surge of RTC referrals; local ICBs start individual cost-containment moves (e.g. C&W pause for 25+ yrs).
May 2025	First national ADHD waiting-list data published: 549 000 people in England waiting; 144 000 > 2 yrs. digital.nhs.uk
Summer 2025 (due)	NHS England ADHD Taskforce to deliver recommendations on capacity, data, and waiting-time standards.

2 Key Findings

2.1 Impacts on Patients

- **RTC wait times now 5–12 months** at major providers (e.g. Clinical Partners). clinical-partners.co.uk
- **Local NHS waits remain multi-year**: total queue ≈ 549 000; some children forecast 10-year waits. digital.nhs.uk/happyhealthylives.uk
- **Postcode lottery returns** — Coventry & Warwickshire pauses adult RTC from 21 May 2025 to fund children’s backlog. happyhealthylives.uk/covwarkpt.nhs.uk
- **Mental-health deterioration & safety risks**: coroners link at least one death to a 4-year wait; charities call situation “abject failure”. theguardian.com
- **Shift to private diagnosis (£800–£1500)**; GPs tighten shared-care rules, leaving self-funders paying ongoing private fees.

2.2 Impacts on Providers

- **NHS clinics** ration referrals (e.g. Hertfordshire limits to “complex” cases); GPs overloaded with unmanaged ADHD queries.
- **RTC providers** scale up hiring but some (e.g. Skylight Psychiatry) temporarily halt new referrals to protect quality.
- **Administrative burden spikes**: practices, ICBs, and clinics tracking ever-changing eligibility and shared-care protocols.

2.3 System-wide Consequences

- **Finance**: Coventry spent **£2.5 m** on adult RTC in 2024/25 and deemed expansion “unaffordable”; similar cost anxieties likely elsewhere.
- **Data transparency**: May-2025 release of national ADHD statistics hailed as “first step” by RCPsych. rcpsych.ac.uk
- **Regulatory focus**: Greater scrutiny of independent clinics following BBC/Panorama exposés; tighter CQC, prescribing and data requirements.

3 Stakeholder & Political Responses

- **Patient advocacy – ADHD UK**: orchestrated campaign that overturned national cap; now crowdsourcing local-policy evidence.
- **Professional bodies – RCPsych & Healthwatch England**: demand statutory waiting-time target and service expansion, stating “nobody with ADHD should wait years for life-changing care”. rcpsych.ac.uk
- **Parliament**: cross-party MPs label 5-year waits “unacceptable”; ministerial answers confirm RTC right in law.
- **Legal**: Prevention-of-Future-Deaths report obliges NHS England to act; threat of judicial review if RTC curtailed again.

4 Emerging Trends & Long-term Outlook

Trend	Direction	Implications
Children prioritised	↑	Adult waits may lengthen further unless adult-service funding ring-fenced.
Private-sector growth	↑	Risk of two-tier access; GPs/ICBs crafting stricter shared-care thresholds.
Data & transparency	↑	National publication enables tracking; likely precursor to formal wait-time standard .
Integrated commissioning	↗	Some ICBs exploring block contracts with independent clinics rather than ad-hoc RTC.
Political salience	↑	ADHD now regular parliamentary topic; 2025 general-election manifestos expected to pledge reform.

5 Summary Table of Impacts (mid-2025)

Area	Headline Impact
Patient waits	RTC: 5–12 mo; local NHS: up to 5 yrs+; national queue 549 k
Equity	Local adult RTC bans restart postcode lottery
Mental health	Long waits linked to worsening outcomes & preventable deaths
Private shift	More self-funded diagnoses; stricter GP prescribing rules
NHS services	Trusts ration referrals; GP workload rising
System cost/admin	ICBs curb spend; policy U-turn triggered extra bureaucracy

6 Recommendations

1. **Introduce a national ADHD waiting-time standard** (≤ 12 months from referral to treatment).
 2. **Ring-fence funding & workforce expansion** for ADHD across age groups.
 3. **Mandate transparent monthly waiting-list reporting** at provider & ICB level.
 4. **Publish unified shared-care protocols** to end GP/ICB variability.
 5. **Protect RTC in legislation**; prohibit local restrictions unless equivalent timely services exist.
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Full Reference List (All Sources Used)



Official NHS, Government, and Legal Sources

1. **NHS England – NHS Payment Scheme 2025/26**
<https://www.england.nhs.uk/pay-syst/nhs-payment-scheme/>
↳ Original proposal to limit RTC ADHD referrals via “Notified Payment Limit”.
 2. **NHS Digital – ADHD Management Information (May 2025)**
<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mi-adhd/may-2025>
↳ First-ever national dataset showing 549,000+ people waiting for ADHD assessment in England.
 3. **Judiciary UK – Oliver Winson Prevention of Future Deaths Report (Dec 2024)**
<https://www.judiciary.uk/prevention-of-future-death-reports/oliver-winson-prevention-of-future-deaths-report/>
↳ Cited ADHD assessment delay (4 years) as a contributing factor in a suicide.
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Charities, Advocacy & Providers

4. **ADHD UK – “NHS Right to Choose Changes”**
<https://adhduk.co.uk/nhs-right-to-choose-changes/>
↳ In-depth campaign guide, legal framing, and response analysis.
5. **Clinical Partners – RTC Wait Time Update (June 2025)**
<https://www.clinical-partners.co.uk/nhs-services/right-to-choose>
↳ NHS-contracted provider updating on wait times and regional limitations.
6. **Skylight Psychiatry – NHS Referral Pause (June 2025)**
<https://www.skylightpsychiatry.co.uk/>

↳ Temporarily stopped accepting NHS ADHD referrals due to overwhelming demand.

Local ICB and GP Practice Pages

7. **Coventry & Warwickshire ICB – ADHD Policy Statement (May 2025)**
<https://www.happyhealthylives.uk/latest-news/statement-on-adhd-assessment-policy-in-coventry-and-warwickshire/>
↳ Details of local policy to halt RTC referrals for adults 25+.
 8. **Sherbourne Medical Practice – RTC Referral Update (May 2025)**
<https://www.sherbourne.nhs.uk/news/important-update-regarding-referral-for-adhd-assessments>
↳ Example of GP communication that RTC was “stopped” locally.
 9. **Kent & Medway ICB – ADHD Shared Care Prescribing Guidelines**
<https://www.medwayswaleformulary.co.uk/guidancepathways/shared-care-agreements/>
↳ Shows how GPs are instructed to only accept referrals from RTC-contracted providers.
 10. **Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Trust – ADHD Referral Rationing**
<https://www.hpft.nhs.uk/services/community-services/adult-adhd/>
↳ NHS Trust stating they now only take “complex” adult ADHD cases.
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News Media and Journals

11. **The Guardian – “NHS accused of abject failure on ADHD...” (29 May 2025)**
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/29/up-to-25-million-people-in-england-could-have-adhd-says-nhs>
↳ National coverage of the backlog, ADHD UK quotes, and first dataset release.
12. **The Boar – “Adult ADHD referrals paused by NHS...” (10 June 2025)**
<https://theboar.org/2025/06/adult-adhd-referrals-paused-by-nhs-in-coventry-and-warwickshire-as-youth-waiting-lists-top-7500/>
↳ Regional news confirming pause and number of children affected.
13. **HSJ (Health Service Journal) – “ICB pauses ADHD referrals...” (16 Aug 2024)**
<https://www.pslhub.org/blogs/entry/7313-icb-pauses-adhd-referrals-to-service-for-many-adults-as-expansion-is-unaffordable/>
↳ Precedent for rationing by ICBs before the RTC proposal.

Professional Bodies and Think Tanks

14. **Royal College of Psychiatrists – Official Statement (May 2025)**

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2025/05/29/nobody-with-adhd-should-wait-years-for-life-changing-care>

↳ Condemns long waits and calls for a national service standard.

15. **Healthwatch England – Reaction to ADHD Waitlist Data**

<https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/2025-05-29/first-national-adhd-waiting-time-data-published>

↳ Declares new data "a first step" toward accountability and change.

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