The ADHD Taskforce May Save the NHS—But Who Will Save ADHD Adults from the Police?

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17 June 2025

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A public-health emergency now impossible to ignore

In the final week of May 2025 the NHS released its first nation-wide prevalence estimate for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: about 2.5 million people in England—roughly one in every 23 citizens—meet diagnostic criteria. Yet barely half a million carry a formal code in their GP record, revealing a vast iceberg of unmet need. At the same time the official waiting-list count hit 549,000 individuals in March 2025, a one-third rise on the previous year and by far the steepest increase since data collection began. theguardian.comtheguardian.com

Hospitals, GPs and community mental-health teams concede privately that they are "fighting a tidal wave with a teaspoon." Adult services in Oxfordshire, for example, currently clear only 26 assessments a month against a backlog of 2,385; at that pace some patients wait eight years for a first appointment—a figure cited verbatim on the floor of Parliament one week later. hansard.parliament.uk

The ADHD Taskforce: intent, interim findings and unresolved questions

Recognising the crisis, NHS England convened a cross-sector ADHD Taskforce in November 2024 under the chairship of Professor Anita Thapar. Its interim findings—circulated to stakeholders but not yet laid before Parliament—chart a radical change programme:

- Time-to-treatment transparency. From June 2025 every integrated-care board is uploading monthly "clock-start to decision" figures, annual medication-review rates and comorbidity outcomes.
- Needs-based support. Schools, universities, employers and job-centres are told to deliver adjustments according to functional impairment rather than proof of diagnosis—a decisive break from two decades of gate-keeping.
- Private-diagnosis quality control. A minimum-data set will standardise independent assessments so that GPs, local authorities and educators can accept them without re-triage.
- Objective triage. The continuous-performance QbTest, already embedded in about 70 per cent of paediatric services, will be rolled into adult pathways to pare down waiting lists.
- Medication resilience. Emergency procurement solved shortages of lisdexamfetamine, atomoxetine and guanfacine by early 2025; the only drug still unstable is prolonged-release methylphenidate, for which multi-supplier contracts are being finalised.

The Taskforce is explicit: the final report, now promised "after the summer recess," must knit healthcare, education, welfare, employment, prisons and the justice system into a single ADHD strategy. But the fiercest flashpoint—employment discrimination—sits largely outside its current remit.

What Westminster heard on 10 June 2025

Freddie van Mierlo MP (Liberal Democrat, Henley & Thame) opened the first dedicated Commons debate on ADHD since 2015, labelling NHS access an "abject failure." Over two hours of testimony produced five urgent themes.

1. Unmanageable delays. MPs of all parties reeled off local waits of four, five and eight years, warning of family breakdown, job loss and suicide attempts in the queue.
2. Shared-care collapse. Lisa Smart MP described GPs who refuse to continue prescriptions written by private psychiatrists, marooning patients without medication.
3. Educational exclusion. Adam Dance MP called for universal neurodiversity screening in primary schools after cases of children expelled long before assessment.
4. Demographic disparity. Tulip Siddiq MP showed that Black and South-Asian children in London receive ADHD medication at barely half the rate of white peers.
5. Institutional discrimination. Rachel Gilmour MP dropped the bombshell: "ADHD is effectively banned in the Army, RAF, Navy and Police… Discriminatory, outdated and incompatible with the Equality Act."

Health Minister Karin Smyth replied that the Taskforce's interim report "is with ministers" and will champion needs-based support, non-pharmacological care and a bigger, non-specialist workforce. She also confirmed that stimulant-supply contingencies remain active for methylphenidate. hansard.parliament.uk

The quiet bans: how key public-service employers treat ADHD

Despite the rhetoric of inclusion, official rulebooks still treat ADHD as a disqualifying defect.

- Ministry of Defence. Joint Service Publication 950, Leaflet 6-7-7 states that any recruit with a history of ADHD is graded UNFIT unless he or she has been entirely symptom-free and off medication for at least twelve months, backed by "satisfactory occupational performance." That wording appears verbatim in annexes for the Army, Royal Navy and RAF. data.parliament.uk
- Police forces. Occupational-health guidance used by multiple constabularies places ADHD under "mental-health exclusions." Firearms, pursuit-driving and Taser duties are routinely refused, and many applicants report being informally told to delay or hide diagnosis.

- National security clearance. Security-vetting handbooks list ADHD under "mental-health conditions that may require stability evidence," delaying or blocking applications for SC or DV roles.
- Civil aviation. The Civil Aviation Authority's Class 1 medical demands cessation of stimulant medication and neuropsychological testing; most medicated ADHD candidates fail.

These blanket rules appear to violate the Equality Act 2010, which compels employers to base decisions on individual assessment and reasonable adjustment.

How many officers already have ADHD? The hidden prevalence problem

The Home Office's workforce census shows 148,886 sworn police officers in England and Wales on 30 September 2024. gov.uk Epidemiology predicts that between 4,500 and 6,000 of those officers will meet ADHD criteria. Yet a 2024 Freedom of Information response from the British Transport Police revealed only two non-probationary constables who had formally declared ADHD and zero authorised-firearms officers. The same FOI confirmed no explicit ban but noted that fitness assessments "take neurodiversity into account." btp.police.uk

These numbers expose a serious selection-bias paradox:

- Disclosure disadvantage. Candidates honest about ADHD are screened out or pigeon-holed, while undiagnosed peers pass through and serve without support.
- Operational risk. Research links untreated ADHD to elevated accident and burnout rates; excluding medicated, well-regulated recruits may actually heighten risk on the street.
- Cultural distortion. If institutional doctrine brands ADHD as a threat, frontline officers may read inattentive or impulsive behaviour in civilians as deliberate defiance, feeding escalation cycles.
- Legal jeopardy. Blanket exclusions rarely satisfy the Equality Act's test of a "proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim." One strategic case could upend recruitment policy across UK policing.

Medication shortages: lessons learned and residual fragility

Early 2024 saw nationwide shortages of multiple ADHD medicines after a perfect storm of global demand spikes, factory line-failures and freight bottlenecks. By January 2025 the Department of Health and Social Care had confirmed "full restoration" of lisdexamfetamine, atomoxetine and guanfacine. Methylphenidate remains the weak link: three prolonged-release brands still list intermittent supply gaps and some regions are rationing scripts to one-month packs. The Taskforce is therefore working with NHS Supply Chain on real-time

pharmacy dashboards and contractual clauses compelling dual-supplier sourcing. nelft.nhs.uk

Recommendations: closing the gap between healthcare reform and civil-rights reality

- Immediate public-service policy review. The Home Office and MoD must issue updated guidance replacing categorical bars with evidence-based, role-specific risk assessment.
- Explicit employment chapter in the final Taskforce report. Without hard targets and accountability mechanisms, discrimination will persist long after clinical waits fall.
- Mandatory ADHD literacy across safety-critical sectors. Force medical advisers, HR panels, security-vetting officers, magistrates and family-court judges need accredited training grounded in contemporary neuroscience—not outdated behavioural assumptions.
- Anonymous internal screening and fast-track referral. Police and military occupational-health services should offer voluntary ADHD screening, rapid assessment and workplace adjustment for serving personnel, protecting careers and public safety alike.
- Permanent medicine-supply safeguards. Multi-supplier contracts and stockpiles must become the norm, with monthly open-data feeds so prescribers can switch before shortages bite.

Conclusion

England stands at a pivotal moment. The NHS England ADHD Taskforce is on the brink of delivering the most ambitious overhaul of ADHD care in the service's history. Yet, as the Westminster Hall debate laid bare, health-system reform is only half the story. While one arm of the state labours to shorten waiting lists, another quietly bars the very people who fight to obtain a diagnosis. By treating ADHD as incompatible with uniform or security clearance, public-service employers embed stigma, drive neurodivergence underground and manufacture precisely the risk they claim to mitigate.

If policymakers ignore this dissonance, thousands of diagnosed adults will remain locked out of policing, defence, aviation and the wider civil service, while their undiagnosed colleagues carry invisible challenges into the most safety-critical roles in the country.

ADHD itself is not the danger. Outdated policy, institutional fear and systemic exclusion are. The final Taskforce report must therefore step beyond clinics and pharmacies and address employment rights head-on. Only then will England truly honour the spirit of the Equality Act and unlock the full potential of its neurodiverse citizens.

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