


The **NHS Planning Guidance** is a strategic document issued annually by NHS England that sets priorities and operational expectations for the NHS. It provides **national priorities, financial management and performance targets** to guide Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), NHS Trusts, and other healthcare providers.

Lord Darzi's 2024 investigation highlighted that despite the dedication of NHS staff, the **health system in England is struggling to meet the growing demands of an ageing population**, with more people living in poor health and facing delays in care. This year's priorities have been published to drive essential reforms and address these challenges.


Financial flexibility and funding plans

- Under the 2025/26 Planning Guidance, NHS England has reduced the number of national priorities, giving local systems **greater financial flexibility in how funding is deployed**
- The additional funding provided in the October budget must cover pay settlements, increased employer national insurance contributions, faster improvement on the elective waiting list, and new treatments mandated by NICE
- NHS organisations need to **reduce their cost base by at least 1%** and **achieve a 4% improvement in productivity** to manage demand growth as well as addressing new local cost pressures and 2024/25 non recurrent savings
- NHS England will move towards a devolved system and **increase local autonomy** by transferring a **higher proportion of funding directly to local systems** and **minimising funding ring fences**


National priorities for 2025/26

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Reduce the time people wait for elective care

 - **Improve the percentage of patients waiting <18 weeks for treatment to 65%** and for **first appointment to 72% nationally**, with every trust delivering a minimum 5% point improvement
 - **Reduce the proportion of people waiting >52 weeks for treatment to less than 1%** of the total waiting list
 - **Improve performance against 62-day cancer standard to 75%** and **28-day faster access standard to 80%**
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Improve A&E waiting times and ambulance response times

 - Reach **minimum of 78% patients admitted, discharged and transferred from ED within 4 hours**
 - Improve **Category 2 ambulance response times to an average of 30 minutes** across 2025/26
 - Reduce avoidable ambulance conveyances and handover delays by **delivering hospital handovers within 15 minutes** and improving access to **urgent care services at home or in the community**
 - Improve and standardise urgent care by using the principles of **same day emergency care (SDEC)**
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Improve patients' access to general practice (GPs) and urgent dental care


 - **Improve patient experience of access to GPs** as measured by the ONS Health Insights survey
 - Improve access to urgent dental care, **providing 700,000 additional urgent dental appointments**
 - Put in place action plans by June 2025 to **improve contract oversight, commissioning and transformation for GPs to tackle unwarranted variation**
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Improve mental health and learning disability care


 - **Improve patient flow through mental health crisis and acute pathways**, reducing average length of stay in adult acute mental health beds
 - **Improve access to children and young people's (CYP) mental health services** to achieve the national ambition of 345,000 additional CYP aged 0-25 receiving support compared to 2019
 - **Reduce reliance on mental health inpatient care** for people with learning disabilities and autism, delivering a minimum 10% reduction

Key actions for delivery


Live within our means

- **Deliver a balanced system financial position**
- **Reduce spend on temporary staffing and support functions** (incl. 30% reduction on agency; 10% reduction on bank spend)
- Improve **procurement, contract management and prescribing**
- Drive improvements in **operational and clinical productivity**, including stopping lower-value activity 

Digital transformation

- Make **full use of digital tools to drive the shift from analogue to digital**
- Providers proactively offering **NHS App-first communications** to patients
- GPs enabling all core NHS App capabilities
- Systems adhering to the **'Federated Data Platform (FDP) First' policy**
- Systems completing planned **EPR system procurements and upgrades** 

Focus on prevention and address inequalities

- Set foundations for **the neighbourhood health model**, taking a **population health management approach**
- **Address leading causes of morbidity and mortality** (e.g. prevent cardiovascular events by targeting blood pressure and lipid levels)
- **Reduce inequalities in line with the Core20PLUS5 approach** for adults and CYP 

Quality and safety

- Maintain **focus on the overall quality and safety of services**
- **Focus on challenged and fragile services**, including maternity and neonatal services
- **Deliver the key actions of 'Three year delivery plan'** and continue to address variation in access, experience and outcomes 