# NHS league tables revive a controversial transparency approach from 2000



The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has recently reintroduced league tables ranking all 205 NHS trusts in England, presenting the move as a “landmark” and a “pioneering new system” that inaugurates “a new era of transparency.” Health Secretary Wes Streeting reiterated the government’s commitment to exposing poor care, stating that “sunlight is the best disinfectant.” However, while the DHSC is positioning this as a fresh initiative, the approach closely mirrors the "star ratings" system introduced by Tony Blair's Labour government in 2000, an earlier attempt to improve NHS performance through public accountability and transparency.

The original NHS star ratings aimed to simplify complex hospital performance data into consumer-friendly scores, akin to those used for hotels or services. Alan Milburn, who was health secretary at the time and now serves as the DHSC’s lead non-executive director and chief adviser to Streeting, was instrumental in both the initial star ratings and the present league tables. Both efforts share the fundamental goal of reducing variability in care quality and increasing managers’ accountability by publicly ranking NHS trusts. Yet, the star ratings became controversial for their oversimplification, trying to distill diverse healthcare services—ranging from emergency care to elective surgery—into a single rating.

The present league tables face similar challenges. NHS England incorporated a complex matrix of 30 metrics, yet some critics argue the final segmentation into four performance categories—high performing, above average, below average, and low performing—risks oversimplifying the varied realities across trusts. In particular, financial performance heavily influences rankings, with trusts running deficits automatically capped at no better than the third segment, even if they excel in clinical care. For example, Chelsea and Westminster NHS Foundation Trust scored well on care metrics and would rank eighth overall if financials were excluded, but it was placed 28th due to budget overspending. This nuance is crucial, as 36 trusts labelled “below average” actually outperformed higher-ranked trusts in core areas like emergency treatment and surgical wait times.

Such black-and-white categorisation has invited criticism and concerns about unintended consequences. Media outlets picked up on the tables with headlines declaring that “four in five NHS hospital trusts are failing,” a portrayal that does not fully capture the varying circumstances behind the scores. Experts warn that patients and staff might be deterred from choosing or working at “failing” trusts, potentially worsening service disparities and locking struggling hospitals into a negative spiral. NHS Providers' chief executive Daniel Elkeles cautioned that while well-designed league tables can foster “friendly rivalry” and help focus leadership on improvement areas, they may also lead to “naming and shaming.” Furthermore, the ratings do not account for structural inequalities, such as historic PFI debts or deteriorating buildings affecting some trusts disproportionately.

Looking back, the original star ratings were eventually scrapped in 2010 after being seen as too crude to drive meaningful service improvement or to aid patient choice. The system also faced allegations of political interference. Notably, a 2002 controversy involved leaked emails suggesting Alan Milburn had tried to alter performance tables to favour a hospital in Tony Blair’s constituency, although Milburn denied these claims. The star rating system was replaced by more nuanced assessments conducted by the Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection, which aimed to focus on broader quality objectives rather than rigid targets.

The reintroduction of league tables comes as part of the government’s broader 10-Year Health Plan to enhance transparency across the NHS. Announced by Streeting in 2024, the league tables emphasise key indicators such as waiting times for elective care, cancer treatment, and emergency services, signalling a renewed drive to hold NHS trusts publicly accountable. Yet questions remain over whether the league table model is inherently flawed in trying to summarise highly complex healthcare delivery through simplified rankings. Some analysts suggest that while public transparency is vital, the focus should be on nuanced and context-sensitive evaluation rather than reductive scoring that risks demoralising staff and misleading patients.

Ultimately, the NHS league tables represent a revival of a familiar but contentious approach. Their success will depend on how well they balance transparency and accountability with fairness and the inherent complexity of healthcare. Time will tell if these league tables can learn from past pitfalls or whether they will face the same critiques that led to the demise of the original star ratings over a decade ago.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2003/dec/18/NHS.politics), [[7]](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/hospital-league-tables-an-idea-whose-time-has-past/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service), [[5]](https://www.healthcare-management.uk/nhse-publishes-trust-performance-league-table)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service), [[5]](https://www.healthcare-management.uk/nhse-publishes-trust-performance-league-table), [[7]](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/hospital-league-tables-an-idea-whose-time-has-past/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2003/dec/18/NHS.politics), [[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/star-rating-system-for-hospitals-to-be-axed-6956712.html), [[6]](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/labour-uturn-as-nhs-star-ratings-are-ditched-68272.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service), [[5]](https://www.healthcare-management.uk/nhse-publishes-trust-performance-league-table), [[7]](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/hospital-league-tables-an-idea-whose-time-has-past/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/sep/09/the-nhs-league-tables-resemble-blairs-star-ratings-of-2000-can-they-revive-the-health-service> - This article discusses the reintroduction of NHS league tables in England, drawing parallels with the 'star ratings' system from 2000. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has described the new league tables as a 'landmark' and a 'pioneering new system', aiming to increase transparency and hold NHS trusts accountable. Health Secretary Wes Streeting emphasised that 'sunlight is the best disinfectant' in exposing and addressing poor care. The article also highlights the similarities between the current league tables and the previous 'star regime', both designed to improve NHS performance and reduce variations in care quality.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2003/dec/18/NHS.politics> - This article reports on allegations that Alan Milburn, the then Health Secretary, interfered with NHS performance tables in 2002 to improve the rating of a hospital in Tony Blair's constituency. Leaked emails suggest that Milburn secured changes to the ranking system, despite concerns from civil servants about the transparency of the results. Milburn denied the allegations, describing them as 'complete tosh' and unsupported by the emails in question.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/star-rating-system-for-hospitals-to-be-axed-6956712.html> - This article announces the planned abolition of the NHS star rating system, introduced in 2001, which graded hospitals from zero to three stars based on performance indicators like waiting times and cleanliness. The decision to scrap the system follows criticism that it was politically manipulated and failed to accurately reflect patient care. The Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection is set to take over the assessment of NHS performance, with a focus on quality objectives rather than rigid target-setting.
5. <https://www.healthcare-management.uk/nhse-publishes-trust-performance-league-table> - This article reports on NHS England's publication of a performance league table ranking NHS trusts based on waiting times for elective care, cancer care, and A&E services. The table marks the first stage in the government's 10-Year Health Plan to provide new transparency and quality of care by ranking providers against key quality indicators. Health and Social Care Secretary Wes Streeting announced the plans for league tables at the NHS Providers conference in Liverpool in November 2024, aiming to improve performance.
6. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/labour-uturn-as-nhs-star-ratings-are-ditched-68272.html> - This article discusses the Labour government's decision to scrap the NHS star rating system, a significant policy reversal. The system, which graded hospitals from zero to three stars based on performance indicators, faced criticism for being politically manipulated and not accurately reflecting patient care. The Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection is set to take over the assessment of NHS performance, focusing on quality objectives rather than rigid target-setting.
7. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/hospital-league-tables-an-idea-whose-time-has-past/> - This article examines the NHS star rating system introduced in 2000, which aimed to reduce hospital waiting times from 18 months to 18 weeks. The system, described as combining 'targets and terror' and 'naming and shaming', faced criticism for its effectiveness and the unintended consequences it may have had on NHS performance. The article questions whether such league tables are the best approach to improving healthcare services.