# NHS community service waiting lists soar amid surge in obesity, autism, and ADHD demand



NHS waiting lists for community health services in England have surged sharply, driven largely by escalating demand for weight-loss treatments and neurodevelopmental assessments for autism and ADHD, a recent report reveals. The size of waiting lists for children’s community care has risen by 58% since 2022, significantly outpacing the 23% increase observed among adults. This surge has exacerbated longstanding service pressures, with children enduring disproportionately long waits for essential therapies.

Adults are most commonly waiting for musculoskeletal care—addressing bone, joint, or muscle pain—which accounts for 44% of their delays. Yet the fastest growth in adult waiting lists has been in weight management services, which have ballooned by over 500%. This dramatic rise coincides with a notable increase in patients seeking weight-loss support that pairs lifestyle advice with new GLP-1 medicines like Mounjaro and Ozempic. Demand for these novel weight-loss drugs appears to be reshaping NHS community service needs beyond traditional treatment domains.

For children and young people, more than half of those on waiting lists are queued for community paediatric services, which cover neurodevelopmental assessments such as autism and ADHD diagnosis and management. These assessments are in unprecedented demand: data shows waiting lists for autism assessments have more than quintupled since 2019, reaching the highest levels since recording began. This surge aligns with expanding awareness and understanding of neurodiversity, but has overwhelmed existing NHS capacity, prompting calls for a radical overhaul of how these services are structured and delivered.

Adding to this pressure, 21% of children on waiting lists await speech and language therapy, crucial for conditions that hinder communication as well as eating and swallowing functions. Other services such as physiotherapy, audiology, and occupational therapy each account for around 6% of children’s waits. Worryingly, waits for children are considerably longer than for adults; nearly one in four children wait over a year, and about one in 15 face delays exceeding two years, underscoring a profound gap in timely care.

The NHS workforce imbalance compounds these challenges. Between 2010 and 2025, the number of nurses in community settings grew by a mere 1%, while hospital nursing staff expanded dramatically—adult hospital nurses by 42%, and children’s hospital nurses by 93%. This misalignment has left community services strained and unable to meet escalating demand.

Jessica Morris, a researcher at the Nuffield Trust and author of the report, emphasised the human toll: "Children across the country are waiting far too long for the community care they desperately need. For the families affected, it can feel like life is on hold." Morris highlighted life-changing therapies such as speech and language therapy, which many children require urgently but cannot access promptly due to the pressures on the system.

Carli Whittaker, the Royal College of Nursing’s head of nursing, expressed deep concern over the ongoing staffing crisis in community nursing. She pointed out that since 2009, the number of school nurses and health visitors has plummeted by a third, contributing to the swelling waiting lists and denying children and young people the care they need. Whittaker called for urgent and significant investment in community nursing to facilitate prevention-focused care and move services away from hospitals, stating, "Only new and sustained investment can ensure there are enough expert community nurses embedded in every community."

The rising demand for autism and ADHD services has provoked calls for a comprehensive redesign of assessment and treatment pathways. NHS England’s Learning Disability and Autism Programme reported a 12% increase in open referrals for autism assessments in just one year, highlighting persistent inequalities in care access and the necessity for a coordinated, whole-system approach involving education, social support, and health services.

As the NHS grapples with these unprecedented pressures—from managing the obesity epidemic with new drug treatments, to addressing the surge in neurodevelopmental diagnoses—experts warn that without transformative policy changes and increased funding, waiting lists will continue to grow, leaving vulnerable populations without timely, essential support.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15195675/Demand-weight-loss-jabs-autism-ADHD-waiting-lists.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.independent.co.uk/bulletin/news/nhs-waiting-lists-autism-weight-loss-jabs-b2846308.html), [[5]](https://www.newsminimalist.com/articles/weight-loss-jab-demand-and-autism-assessments-drive-nhs-waiting-list-growth-8cc7c34e)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15195675/Demand-weight-loss-jabs-autism-ADHD-waiting-lists.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.independent.co.uk/bulletin/news/nhs-waiting-lists-autism-weight-loss-jabs-b2846308.html), [[5]](https://www.newsminimalist.com/articles/weight-loss-jab-demand-and-autism-assessments-drive-nhs-waiting-list-growth-8cc7c34e)
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* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-15195675/Demand-weight-loss-jabs-autism-ADHD-waiting-lists.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.independent.co.uk/bulletin/news/nhs-waiting-lists-autism-weight-loss-jabs-b2846308.html), [[4]](https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/access-to-services-for-autism-and-adhd)
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2. <https://www.independent.co.uk/bulletin/news/nhs-waiting-lists-autism-weight-loss-jabs-b2846308.html> - The Independent reports that NHS community care waiting lists in England have significantly increased, with children's lists rising by 58% since 2022, compared to 23% for adults. Over half of children on waiting lists require community paediatric services, including neurodevelopmental assessments for conditions such as autism and ADHD. Children face longer waits overall, with nearly one in four waiting over a year for crucial care like speech and language therapy. Adult waiting lists are largely for musculoskeletal services, but weight management services saw a 512% increase, potentially linked to the demand for weight-loss drugs. The Nuffield Trust report highlights a disparity in NHS staffing, with community nurse numbers increasing by only 1% since 2010, compared to significant growth in hospital nurses, exacerbating the strain on community services.
3. <https://news.sky.com/story/nhs-cannot-meet-avalanche-of-demand-for-autism-and-adhd-services-warns-thinktank-13107645> - Sky News reports that the NHS is struggling to cope with an 'extraordinary, unpredicted and unprecedented' rise in demand for autism assessments and ADHD treatments in England, according to the Nuffield Trust. As of December 2023, around 172,040 people were on waiting lists, up from 117,020 a year earlier and more than five times the 32,220 recorded in December 2019. The figures published by NHS Digital show the number of patients waiting for an autism assessment is at its highest level since data started to be recorded in April 2019. It has prompted calls for a 'radical rethink' of how autism and ADHD are assessed and treated.
4. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/access-to-services-for-autism-and-adhd> - The Nuffield Trust provides an overview of access to autism and ADHD services, highlighting that long waiting times for assessments can prevent individuals from receiving vital care and medication. The report notes a significant rise in demand for autism and ADHD diagnoses amid increased awareness and understanding of neurodiversity. Referrals to autism services have more than doubled for both children and adults over a close to three-year period. The report also highlights a disparity in NHS staffing, with community nurse numbers increasing by only 1% since 2010, compared to significant growth in hospital nurses, exacerbating the strain on community services.
5. <https://www.newsminimalist.com/articles/weight-loss-jab-demand-and-autism-assessments-drive-nhs-waiting-list-growth-8cc7c34e> - News Minimalist reports that NHS waiting lists are growing due to increased demand for weight-loss jabs and assessments for autism and ADHD. Children's community care waiting lists have risen 58% since 2022, with many waiting for neurodevelopmental and speech therapy services. Adult musculoskeletal services also see long waits. The report highlights a significant increase in adult weight management services, potentially linked to weight-loss drug demand, and notes a disparity in staff increases between hospital and community settings.
6. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/update-on-learning-disability-and-autism-programme/> - NHS England provides an update on the Learning Disability and Autism Programme, highlighting stark inequalities faced by people with learning disabilities and autism. The report notes a significant increase in referrals for autism assessments, with 236,225 open referrals in June 2025, an 11.9% increase since June 2024. The report also highlights the need for a 'radical rethink' of how autism and ADHD are assessed and treated, with calls for a whole-system approach across education, society, and the health service.
7. <https://www.sevencareservices.org/news/nhs-cannot-meet-autism-or-adhd-demand-report-says/> - Seven Care Services reports that the extraordinary rise in demand for autism assessments and ADHD treatments in England has overtaken the NHS's capacity to meet it, according to the Nuffield Trust. Since 2019, there has been a five-fold rise in people waiting to see an autism specialist and a 51% increase in prescriptions for ADHD medication. Growing backlogs and longer waiting times are negatively impacting people's daily lives. The report highlights the need for a 'radical rethink' of how autism and ADHD are assessed and treated.