



April 2026 | NHS Strategy & Market Access | growth-iq.group

Prevention vs treatment: is the NHS 10-Year Plan's shift actually working?

The NHS 10-Year Health Plan promises to shift from treating sickness to preventing it. These are not new ambitions they appear in almost identical language in the 2019 Long Term Plan, the 2014 Five Year Forward View, and several strategies before that. The question worth asking in 2026 is whether there is any meaningful evidence the NHS is actually moving there.

421k CVD patients waiting	5.8m people with diabetes	54% cancers caught early (target: 75%)	1.7m mental health waiting list
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♥ 01 CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

Real gains but reversing

The long-term story on heart disease in the UK is one of genuine success. Hospital admission rates for coronary heart disease have fallen by 46% since 2005. CVD mortality dropped from over 1,000 deaths per 100,000 in 1969 to 255 per 100,000 in 2019 one of the great achievements of modern preventive medicine, driven by statins, anti-hypertensives, falling smoking rates and improved emergency care.

But that progress has stalled and in some respects reversed. Premature CVD deaths in working-age adults aged 20 to 64 rose by 18% between 2019 and 2023, from 18,693 to 21,975 deaths averaging 420 a week. The BHF described this as the worst start to a decade for heart health in 50 years. The cardiovascular waiting list in England stood at 421,683 at the end of February 2025, up 82% since the start of the decade.

"The Darzi Report was direct: care for cardiovascular conditions is going in the wrong direction. The NAO found there is currently no effective system for commissioning the NHS Health Checks that are supposed to be the primary prevention tool."

02 — TYPE 2 DIABETES

An accelerating crisis

More than 5.8 million people in the UK are now living with diabetes the highest number ever recorded. A further 1.3 million are estimated to have type 2 diabetes without knowing it. The total cost to the NHS is estimated at £10.7 billion, with 60% driven by the costs of complications rather than the condition itself a direct measure of how much earlier intervention is failing to materialise.

The structural shift that most concerns clinicians is the rise in younger patients. Between 2016–17 and 2022–23, diagnoses of type 2 diabetes in people under 40 rose by 40%, reaching almost 168,000. Younger-onset type 2 diabetes carries more severe and faster-progressing complications and disproportionately affects people from South Asian and Black backgrounds and the most deprived communities.

If the trend continues, the NHS is projected to be spending nearly £18 billion on diabetes by 2035. The NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme has been shown to cut the risk of developing type 2 diabetes by more than a third in controlled conditions. The gap between what is proven to work and what is being delivered at scale is where the problem lives.

03 CANCER

Survival improving diagnosis stalling

Cancer survival in the UK has improved substantially over the long term. Five-year survival across all cancers has risen by 7.8 percentage points since 2005, and death rates have fallen by roughly a fifth over 50 years. These are genuine, hard-won improvements driven by treatment advances, earlier screening and better diagnostics.

The diagnosis picture is a different story. Only 54% of cancers in England are diagnosed at stage 1 or 2 against the NHS Long Term Plan target of 75% by 2028. Progress toward that target has

stalled for a decade. As of January 2025, half of people undergoing cancer treatment in the UK reported being worried that NHS pressures were affecting their chances of survival.

"The UK ranked 28th out of 33 comparable countries for lung cancer survival and 26th for pancreatic cancer. Early diagnosis is the single most powerful lever available and the system is not pulling it hard enough."

04 MENTAL HEALTH

Demand outrunning capacity at pace

Mental health services in England received 5.2 million referrals in 2024, up 37.9% from 2019 levels. The mental health waiting list stands at an estimated 1.7 million people. NHS mental health spend is increasing planned at £13.7 billion for 2025–26 but services are not being resourced at anything close to the rate demand is rising.

A third of respondents to the 2024 Community Mental Health Survey waited more than three months between assessment and their first treatment appointment. Among children and young people, the picture is acute: 20% of children aged 8 to 16 had a probable mental disorder in 2023, up from 12% in 2017. The number of children in contact with mental health services has grown at more than four times the rate of the psychiatric workforce since 2016.

The 10-Year Plan commits to mental health support in every school, virtual therapy provision and dedicated crisis departments. These are the right investments. But only 17% of very urgent referrals were seen within 4 hours in March 2025, down from 33% in April 2023.

05 MUSCULOSKELETAL & NEUROLOGICAL

The invisible backlog

Musculoskeletal conditions are the leading cause of disability in the UK and account for approximately 30% of GP consultations. An estimated 20 million people in England live with a musculoskeletal condition.

For neurology, January 2026 RTT data shows 219,082 patients with incomplete pathways in England, with only 57% seen within 18 weeks against a 92% target. The worst-performing trusts are seeing fewer than 35% of their patients within 18 weeks. In stroke, dementia, Parkinson's and epilepsy management, time is a clinical variable not just an administrative one.

THE VERDICT

So is the shift actually working?

The honest answer is: not yet, and not at the pace required.

Two things are working against it simultaneously. The first is resources. NHS spending will grow by 2.8% a year in real terms between 2025 and 2029 below the historic average of 3.7% and well below the 6.8% growth seen during the last major NHS transformation period in the early 2000s. Capital investment will grow by just 1% a year.

The second is history. Previous NHS plans have promised the same three shifts hospital to community, treatment to prevention, analogue to digital and largely failed to deliver them. The Institute for Government's Performance Tracker 2025 concluded that achieving the shift within one parliament seems unlikely, and that slow progress on elective waiting times risks directing political attention back towards hospitals, working directly against the long-term reform ambition.

The gap between the plan's ambition and the current data is not a reason for pessimism. It is the commercial opportunity.

The NHS needs implementation partners, not more strategy documents. Products that reduce hospital admissions, enable earlier diagnosis, free clinical capacity, or support patients managing long-term conditions at home are not just clinically valuable they are strategically aligned with where commissioning money is supposed to be heading.

Growth-iQ works with pharma and med-tech teams to translate clinical evidence into commercial strategies that work in the NHS as it actually is not the NHS as it is described in policy documents. If you are trying to navigate this environment, it is worth a conversation.

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