

Summary Annual Report

2025-26



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Introduction

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside was formally established on 1 July 2022 and is the statutory NHS organisation responsible for planning, funding and overseeing NHS services for our population of 2.7 million people.

It works across two devolved combined authorities and nine local authority areas, across a footprint spanning large towns and cities and more rural areas.

All Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) have four key aims:



**Improve
outcomes in
population health
and healthcare**

**Enhance
productivity and
value for money**

**Tackle inequalities
in outcomes,
experience and
access**

**Help the NHS
support broader
social and
economic
development**

Message from Chief Executive Liz Bishop

Welcome to the NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Summary Annual Report for 2025-26. This year has been one of both challenge and progress.

Alongside continued pressure on NHS services, 2025-26 was a year of significant change. National reforms, including the introduction of the NHS 10-Year Health Plan and Model Integrated Care Board (ICB) Blueprint, set a new direction for the NHS, changing how organisations plan services, work with partners and deliver care.

These changes, alongside financial and operational pressures, had some impact on delivery and - in November 2025 - NHS Cheshire and Merseyside accepted enforcement undertakings from NHS England, committing to rapid improvement in financial planning, quality, leadership and governance. This led to leadership changes, a revised operating model and a Single Improvement Plan. I am pleased to report that significant progress that has since been made - with clear evidence of meaningful improvement across the areas identified for action.

Switching back to 2025-26, demand for NHS services remained high throughout the year, particularly across urgent and emergency care, mental health, neurodevelopmental services and planned care. Despite these challenges, NHS staff continued to provide high-quality care while working collaboratively across organisations to improve access and reduce waiting times.

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside continued to work closely with partners across health and care to deliver significant improvements and achieve ambitious targets.

We also strengthened our focus on delivering more joined-up care closer to home, with more people supported through community services such as virtual wards and Urgent Community Response teams, helping more patients to receive care in their own homes and reducing pressure on hospitals.

Looking ahead, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside will focus on continuing to embed its new operating model and on delivery against refreshed five-year commissioning and population health plans, aligned with national priorities and local needs.



We remain committed to working with partners and local communities to ensure high-quality, sustainable healthcare and to work to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities for everyone living in Cheshire and Merseyside.

For more detailed information about our performance and how we met our statutory duties during 2025–26, please see our full Annual Report, on the NHS Cheshire and Merseyside website: cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk



Urgent and emergency care

Throughout 2025-26, urgent and emergency care services faced significant demand, particularly during winter, but also demonstrated improved resilience, co-ordination and performance across Cheshire and Merseyside.

The system strengthened its approach by working proactively to reduce and redirect demand through initiatives including a Single Point of Access, Urgent Community Response services, digital streaming in emergency departments and enhanced frailty pathways. This helped more people receive care closer to home - reducing avoidable hospital admissions and aligning with local priorities and the 10-Year Health Plan.

Ambulance service performance improved, with faster response times, fewer handover delays and stronger system co-ordination. A&E performance also showed encouraging progress, with four-hour waiting times improving and paediatric services recovering quicker from seasonal pressures.

While levels of 'corridor care' remain a concern, improved system co-ordination helped to reduce its use during the year, alongside the publication of the new Cheshire and Merseyside [Red Lines Toolkit](#) to help ensure the safest possible care for patients - where corridor care is unavoidable.

Planned care

Planned care waiting times reduced significantly in 2025-26, with the number of patients waiting more than 65 weeks falling from 990 to just 36, while performance against the 18-week Referral to Treatment standard improved to 64.5%, exceeding the year-end target.

Diagnostic services continued to perform strongly, with more than 90% of patients receiving tests within six weeks - making Cheshire and Merseyside one of the best-performing systems in England.

Innovative approaches helped improve patient experience and increase capacity, with AI-supported dermatology services helping to prevent 1,600 unnecessary outpatient appointments, ophthalmology initiatives improving access through a Single Point of Access model and advanced MRI technology enabling c5,800 additional scans each year.

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside is now also the top performer for sleep study tests, with 96% of patients seen within six weeks, while home sleep study kits are enabling more patients to be monitored at home and avoid hospital stays.



Cancer

Patients in Cheshire and Merseyside are now surviving cancer for more than five years at a higher rate than the England average - despite proportionally more people being diagnosed with cancer in Cheshire and Merseyside than in other parts of the country.

The Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance continued to work to improve cancer diagnosis, treatment and outcomes, with a strong focus on early diagnosis and reducing health inequalities.

Performance improved across key cancer standards, with performance against the 28-day Faster Diagnosis Standard exceeding its target, reaching 81.2% by March 2026.

The Alliance also continued to lead the rollout of a Lung Cancer Screening Programme across Cheshire and Merseyside - playing an important role in supporting earlier diagnosis.

Community care

Community services continued to be strengthened, supporting the shift from hospital-based care to more care delivered closer to home.

Use of virtual wards increased significantly, with 51% more patients receiving hospital-level care at home, enabling more than 5,000 more people to be treated outside of hospital. This success led to Cheshire and Merseyside becoming the best-performing system in the North West for virtual ward utilisation.

Urgent Community Response services, which provide urgent care to people in their own homes, expanded. Accepted referrals increased by 26% which helped to reduce the number of people needing to be taken to hospital by ambulance.

While demand for community services continued to grow, the number of adults waiting for care for more than 52 weeks fell from 613 to just 100 in March 2026.

Sefton and St Helens selected as neighbourhood health ‘pioneers’

As part of a national programme, both Sefton and St Helens are leading the development of new models of care focused on prevention and delivering services closer to home.

Learning from Sefton and St Helens will be shared across Cheshire and Merseyside to support wider system transformation and development of neighbourhood health services.

Mental health

3,810

**women and
birthing people
received
specialist
perinatal mental
health support
during the year**

Urgent and emergency mental health care continued to be improved during 2025-26, helping to reduce treatment delays and improve access to services for children, young people and adults.

New Mental Health Crisis Assessment Centres were piloted, supporting more than 500 people experiencing a mental health crisis, with permanent centres now being developed.

Early intervention in psychosis services consistently exceeded the national standard, helping people begin treatment within two weeks.

Access to children and young people's mental health services also improved, exceeding national targets, while NHS talking therapies continued to perform strongly. Meanwhile, access to specialist perinatal mental health services also improved, with more than 3,800 women and birthing people receiving support throughout the year.

Learning disability and autism

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside has made strong progress in improving support for people with a learning disability and autistic people - helping more people receive care in their communities rather than via an avoidable hospital stay.

This led to a significant reduction in learning disability inpatient numbers, from 57 adults in March 2024 to just 33 by March 2026 - exceeding the target reduction.

The introduction of a Learning Disability Intensive Support Function (ISF) services across all areas, alongside a pilot Autism ISF service for adults - that is now being expanded - has also led to better patient experience. These specialist teams help identify people who need urgent support earlier, reducing the need for hospital admission and supporting people closer to home.

Preventative healthcare has also improved, with 80.5% of people with a learning disability receiving an annual health check in 2025-26, surpassing the 75% target.

While demand for autism and ADHD assessments continued to grow, improvements have been achieved with regard to early identification and support.

Innovations such as the introduction of the Knowing Me profiling tool, streamlined assessment models, enhanced professional training and stronger partnership working across health, care and education are helping to create a more consistent, responsive and family-centred approach to neurodevelopmental support.

Maternity, women's health and neonatal services

Improvements to maternity and neonatal care were co-ordinated through the Local Maternity and Neonatal System (LMNS). Specialist networks enhanced support for women at risk of preterm birth and those with complex pregnancies, while investment in maternal medicine, pelvic health services and bereavement support further strengthened care for women and families.

Specialist maternity tobacco dependency teams continued to support more women to quit smoking during pregnancy, contributing to smoking rates at the time of birth falling to 4.8% across the region, compared to 9.5% in 2023-24.

Women's Health Hubs continued to expand across all nine local authority areas, improving access to community-based care and offering a wide range of services, including menopause care, cervical screening and long-acting contraception.

Community menopause services also significantly reduced their waiting times throughout the year, including in Liverpool where waits fell from 52 to 25 weeks.

New endometriosis pathways, expanded digital resources and improved gynaecology services also helped to deliver more accessible, equitable and effective care across Cheshire and Merseyside.

Primary care

Cheshire and Merseyside GP practices delivered a record 16.19 million appointments in 2025-26 - half a million more than the previous year - while more patients benefited from a range of access options, including online, telephone and face-to-face consultations.

The primary care workforce also expanded significantly, with more than 2,100 staff now employed through the Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme across Cheshire and Merseyside.

Investment in NHS dentistry helped improve access to urgent and routine care, with more than 80,000 urgent dental appointments commissioned, while schemes supporting vulnerable groups helped almost 112,000 new patients access dental care.

Community pharmacies and optometry services also expanded their services, helping more patients access care closer to home and reducing pressure on general practice.

**16.19
million**

**GP appointments
delivered, online, via
telephone and face-
to-face consultations**



Health inequalities

With more than a third of the Cheshire and Merseyside population living in the 20% most deprived areas in England, targeted action to address health inequalities is vital.

Working with local authorities, voluntary organisations and community partners, in 2025-26 we supported programmes to improve prevention, early diagnosis and access to care. Work also continued to improve the quality of health data, helping to ensure that services are targeted to the communities that need them most.

One project supporting people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and fuel poverty supported more than 250 people to retain independence from health and care services, demonstrating how tackling the wider causes of poor health can both improve health outcomes and reduce pressure on health services.

The system has prioritised delivery of the Core20PLUS5 framework to target communities and groups experiencing the greatest health inequalities. Priority areas included cardiovascular disease, smoking and cancer.

The system-wide All Together Smokefree programme is also addressing one of the leading drivers of health inequalities through targeted prevention, cessation support and public campaigns such as the “What Will You Miss?” communications campaign, launched in December 2025,

Continuing healthcare

Progress towards a new delivery model continued in 2025-26, with the service committed to delivering a consistent approach aligned with the national NHS Continuing Healthcare framework.

Alongside efficiency improvements, the All Age Continuing Care service focused on enhancing patient experience and quality of care through more consistent service delivery, digital innovation, improved governance and closer integration with local authority partners.

A pilot to improve the Fast Track process showed positive results, helping more people receive end-of-life care in their preferred place of care. Further work will continue during 2026-27 to strengthen collaboration with local authorities and deliver a more joined-up, sustainable service.



Quality and safety

In 2025-26, work focused on strengthening patient safety, improving urgent and emergency care and reducing healthcare-associated infections.

A new Patient and Visitor Hand Hygiene Guide encouraged patients and families to play a greater role in preventing infections, while a system-wide improvement programme helped to reduce C. diff infections during the year.

Work also continued to strengthen antimicrobial stewardship, improve community paediatric waiting times and learn from patient safety incidents to help reduce avoidable harm.

Children and young people

Cheshire and Merseyside's 'Beyond' Children and Young People's Transformation Programme continued to drive system-wide improvements, including the rollout of multidisciplinary neighbourhood teams, expanded mental health and neurodiversity support, asthma and smoking prevention programmes, healthy weight initiatives and enhanced epilepsy and diabetes services.

The All Together Smiling supervised toothbrushing programme distributed 60,000 toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste packs, supporting 12,000 children in the most deprived communities across 290 early years settings, childminders and schools - helping improve oral health and reduce inequalities.

A new Paediatric Clinical Advisory Service also improved access to specialist advice, accepting 2,491 calls in its first three months, helping to reduce unnecessary referrals. This contributed to a 36% reduction in referrals to GPs, a 60% reduction in referrals to walk-in and urgent treatment centres and fewer A&E attendances.

Key achievements with regard to safeguarding children and young people included the establishment of a Corporate Parenting Steering Group to improve support for people in care, supporting Family First Partnership reforms and contributing to regional safeguarding priorities through the North West Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership.

Environmental factors

100+

**organisations signed
our Social Value
Charter**

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside continued to work to embed sustainability across health and care services, with our Green Plan 2025-2028 setting out a system-wide approach to achieving a net zero health service by 2040.

Key achievements included the delivery of green primary care pilot projects covering active travel, biodiversity, medicines optimisation and waste reduction and prevention.

Progress towards net zero has been supported through decarbonisation projects, with eight NHS trusts securing £8.3m of national funding for clean energy upgrades to help reduce carbon emissions and improve energy efficiency.

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside also continued to build on its role as a Social Value Accelerator site, with more than 100 organisations now signed up to the Social Value Charter, delivering more than £820m of social value during the year.

The Cheshire and Merseyside Anchor network – a regional collaboration of organisations committed to improving local health and employment, tackling health inequalities and strengthening communities – also continued to grow.

Medicines

‘Five double-decker buses’ of medication saved

A communications campaign supported NHS Cheshire and Merseyside to save around 60 tonnes of prescription medicines during winter. The 641,000 medicine items saved would have otherwise cost the NHS around £5m

Improving the safe and effective use of medicines and helping ensure patients receive the right treatment, while also making best use of NHS resources, remained a key focus.

During 2025-26, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside delivered more than £35m in savings through evidence-based, safe prescribing and collaboration between clinicians, pharmacists and healthcare professionals.

A region-wide campaign to reduce medicines waste helped to save around 60 tonnes of medicines, avoiding c£5m in unnecessary costs.

Primary care programmes focused on shared decision-making with patients to help people feel more confident about decisions regarding their medicines.

Quality improvement work focused on high-cost hospital medicines and responsible antibiotic use, through joint working between hospitals and GP practices.

Involving people and communities

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside continued to involve local people in decisions about NHS services through consultations, engagement and co-production during 2025-26.

Key pieces of engagement included:

- **Shaping Care Together** – More than 5,000 people shared their views during a public consultation about the future of urgent and emergency care services in Southport, Formby and West Lancashire. Feedback informed a decision to relocate children's A&E services to Southport Hospital and provide a 24-hour service.
- **Fertility treatment policies** – More than 2,100 responses were received during a public engagement, helping shape a new single fertility treatment policy to provide more consistent access to NHS-funded treatment across Cheshire and Merseyside.
- **Gluten-free prescribing** – More than 1,000 people took part in a six-week public engagement on proposed changes to gluten-free prescribing, with feedback considered by the Board before a final decision was made.
- **Improving neonatal services** - We worked with NHS England North West and neighbouring Integrated Care Boards to engage with neonatal staff, neonatal support networks / charities, and parents and carers who have lived experiences of using these services on how to improve neonatal care for babies and families across the North West.
- **Primary care services** – We continued to support colleagues in primary care to listen to patients about changes and improvements being made to a number of GP practices and pharmacy services.

5,000+

Views shared on
the future of urgent
care in Southport,
Formby and West
Lancashire

Delivering the 10-Year Health Plan

Looking ahead, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside will increasingly target resources to deliver the three key shifts in care:



We believe these shifts are best achieved through a neighbourhood health model that delivers increasingly proactive, preventative care, improves residents' lives and builds on the strengths of our communities.

Neighbourhood Care

'Neighbourhood Care' describes the ongoing work to safely bring more care out of hospitals and into local communities with the aim of:

- Improving access
- Reducing pressure on acute services
- Tackling health inequalities by delivering joined up care closer to home.

Cheshire and Merseyside's Health and Wellbeing Boards have proposed 58 neighbourhoods in total, with Sefton and St Helens already identified as national 'pioneer' sites for the development of neighbourhood care.

It is recognised that our neighbourhoods are currently at differing levels of maturity, with some in the early stages of development and others more developed.

However, more than a dozen Neighbourhood Health Centres are already in operation across Cheshire and Merseyside, with a number of priority new build centres also planned.

As per national guidance, a Neighbourhood Health Centre must:

- Have a GP practice as its central anchor delivering core services
- Have Community Health and Integrated Neighbourhood Teams already operating or intending to operate from the site
- Be open 12 hours a day / six days a week

Keep in touch

For general enquiries, or to share a comment, complaint or compliment about our work, please visit: www.cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk/contact

Or write to us at the following postal address:

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Interested in having your say on our work? Why not sign up for our Community Voices reference group via email at: engagement@cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk

To receive updates about our work, please sign up to receive regular briefings via our website: www.cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk/latest/sign-up-for-updates

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