Advanced Foundation Trust Programme

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Experts in health

- The Advanced Foundation Trust (AFT) Programme introduces a renewed FT model to shift power to the frontline based on the principle of earned autonomy.
- High-performing organisations achieving AFT status will gain freedoms an improve population health, tackle inequalities and deliver on the three key shifts of the NHS 10-YHP, but status can be withdrawn if standards or provider capability decline.
- The published guide for applicants is out for consultation until 11 January 2026, after which NHSE will support multiple applicant cohorts to achieve the ambition of all providers becoming AFTs by 2035.

3 Core Freedoms & Flexibilities

Strategic and operational autonomy: New, more strategic approach to annual planning and a lighter-touch relationship with the centre will allow more space for boards to focus on delivery, local priorities, and innovation. Local accountability will be increasingly emphasised.

A capability-based regulatory approach: AFTs subject to national expectations and overseen by ICBs and NHSE regions but will be afforded more time and flexibility to address issues. Clear triggers for capability-concerns and intervention with AFT status reassessment every 5 years.

Financial flexibilities: **Capital flexibility**: retain and reinvest revenue post 2024/25 surpluses into future capital projects. **Capital autonomy**: up to £100m without a business case approval when funded through operational capital or capital flexibility. **Revenue flexibility**: revenue surpluses use for one-off transformation or capital-linked costs, subject to adequate cash reserves.

Eligibility Criteria

NHS Trusts and existing FTs are required to meet eligibility criteria to be considered for AFT approval:

Public priorities and value for money: Segment 1 or 2 of NHS Oversight Framework for two consecutive quarters.

High quality care: 'Good' or 'Outstanding' in latest Care Quality Commission (CQC) Well Led Assessment, with no site or service rated 'Inadequate'.

Leadership excellence: Provider capability score of at least amber-green.

Assessment Process & Timeline

NHSE will assess AFT status collaboratively, using existing frameworks and evidence to minimise duplication.

1. **Preparation:** Confirmation of eligibility, support from NHS England regional team for the trust to apply.
   Trust prepares documentation including board self-certification and supporting memorandum, medium-term financial plan, and draft constitution (for NHS trusts).
   NHSE reviews existing information and perform early engagement with Trust, ICB, commissioners and CQC.
2. **Assessment (3 months):** Trust submits formal application.
   NHSE conducts a structured review, involving documentation review and triangulation with third-party feedback (CQC, ICBs, ICS partners, auditors, MPs, VCSE), interviews with key stakeholders, board and committee observations, and requesting of further information from the trust, as necessary.

Advanced Foundation Trust Assessment
Builds on provider capability assessment across same 6 domains:

- Strategy, leadership and planning
- Quality of care
- People and culture
- Access and delivery of services
- Productivity and value for money
- Financial performance and oversight

Medium-term financial plans: Surplus forecast within 3 years and proven delivery of capital schemes.

Additional Assessment for Integrated Health Organisation (IHO) designation
Builds on the AFT assessment:

- Leadership and board capabilities
- Population health management
- Digital and analytical capabilities
- Management of population health budget and risk
- Cross-organizational partnership working
- Governance for an IHO operating model

3. **Approval (1 month):** Board-to-board meeting between Trust, NHSE executives and independent panel.
   Trust to address outstanding issues and submit representation letter.
   NHSE to confirm CQC assurance, prepare documentation and issue formal decision:
   - **Approval:** FT gains AFT status; NHS trust receives prospective AFT approval and should apply under the legislation formally to convert to FT legal form. Any quick actions required are detailed in a side letter.
   - **Deferral:** Up to 12 months to complete required actions and meet conditions for approval.
   - **Rejection:** Declined with reasons outlined in a formal debrief letter to the relevant ICB.

   Status of any Trust as an AFT will be reassessed every 5 years at a minimum.

Source: Advanced Foundation Trust Programme – guide for applicants, NHSE, 2025.