

ADHD Review: Interim findings lay bare the complexity of the 'overdiagnosis' debate

The interim report of a much-anticipated **independent review into mental health conditions, ADHD and autism** documents a sharp rise in demand, with **ADHD assessment waiting lists** for children growing from **~21,000 (2019) to ~270,000 (2025)**. Yet underlying **ADHD prevalence remains broadly stable** (~5% in children; 2–3% in adults), pointing to wider demand drivers including **increased distress, improved recognition, and social factors**. The report seeks to address how these factors relate to **prevalence, diagnosis, demand, and underlying need**, and where **evidence gaps** are still impeding an accurate understanding of the current state.

Demand drivers in the context of 'overdiagnosis' concerns

The **rise in demand** for mental health services **cannot be explained by any single factor**. Rather, the evidence available points to a convergence of **social, institutional, clinical, and environmental forces** that are collectively driving more people into assessment pathways at pace.



Complicating 'overdiagnosis' narratives is the **prevalence below epidemiological benchmarks**. The report sets out that underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis and overdiagnosis are not mutually exclusive and multiple scenarios can be true at once:

Real **increases in distress** in some groups

Under-recognition of structural problems in parts of the system...

...and an **over-reliance** on **diagnostic routes** in others

Evidence gaps to be addressed

- **Routine data is not yet robust** enough to determine whether the severity or functional impairment of diagnosed cases has changed over time.
- The **final report**, expected **Summer 2026**, promises a **stronger evidence base** and **deeper analysis** of demand drivers and care pathways, with recommendations for how to **operationalise a needs-led approach** alongside diagnosis.
- This work is the latest key publication in a series exploring ADHD care and outcomes:

Independent ADHD Taskforce
November 2025

Independent review into mental health, ADHD & autism
March 2026 (interim)

Milburn's Young People and Work report
Expected April 2026

Articulates economic case for ADHD treatment and cross-sector transformation

Sets out evidence on prevalence, administrative diagnosis, and service demand

To share emerging findings on drivers of NEET status, with a focus on ADHD

Implications for providers

Providers will need to **pivot** from being **diagnosis-led** to **outcomes-oriented, integrated support services**.

- The variation in **assessment conversion rates** is a regulatory signal that providers cannot ignore.
- **Data quality requirements** are about to become non-negotiable, and providers who cannot meet them will be squeezed out.
- **The clinical value** of the current **assessment** model is being increasingly brought into question due to the proportion of diagnoses followed by medication prescribing halving in the post-pandemic period.