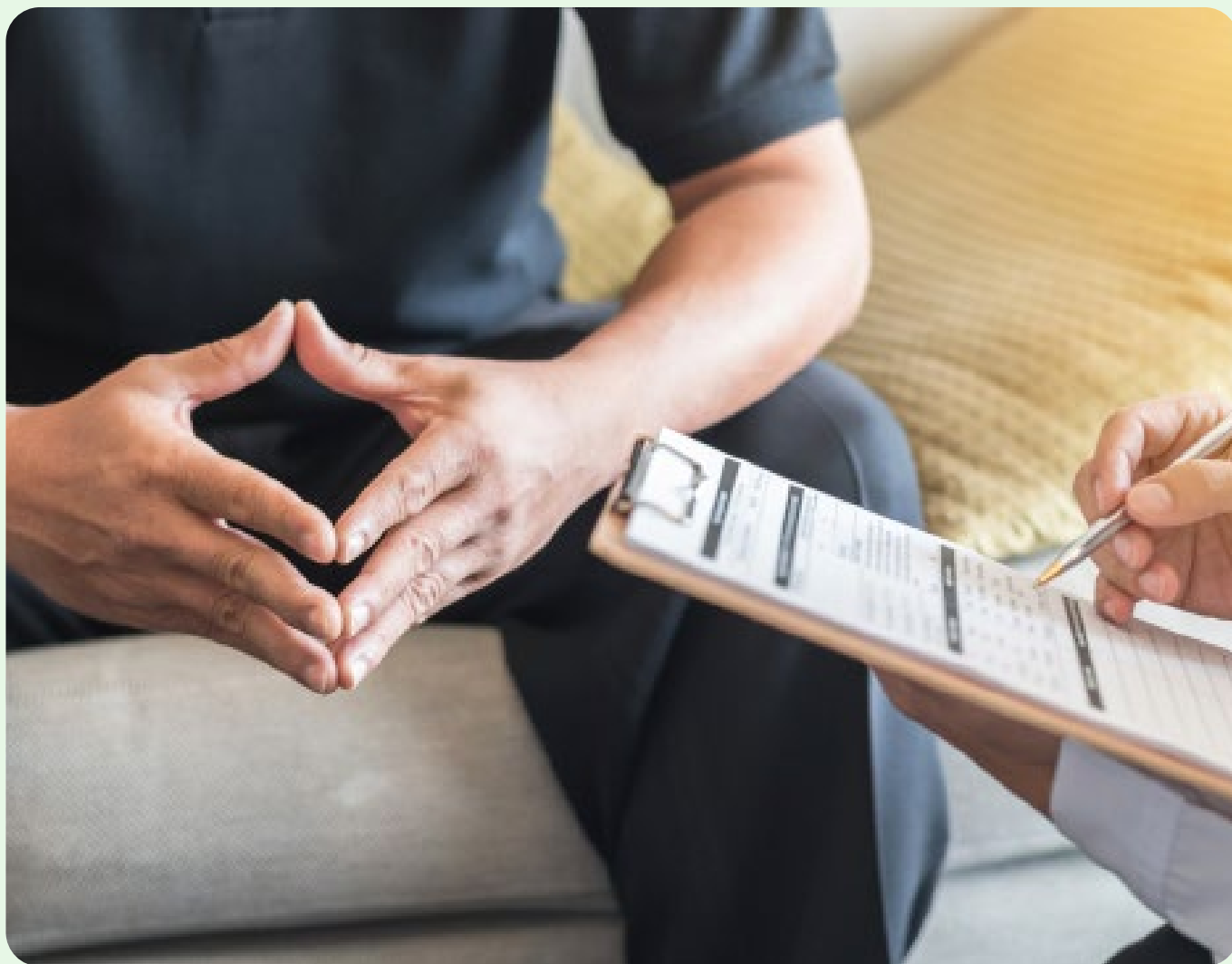


Neurodevelopmental services in Wales

Research Briefing

July 2026



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Research Briefing

July 2026

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This briefing provides information and data about neurodevelopmental service in Wales.

It focuses on the demand for neurodevelopmental diagnostic services, what services are available to support people with ADHD and autism, and Welsh Government action to develop and improve the services offered in Wales.

It also provides answers to some common questions about the rights of adults and children with neurodevelopmental conditions when it comes to education and social care.





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1. What are neurodevelopmental conditions?

Neurodevelopmental conditions are a group of **behavioural and cognitive disorders** that affect the functioning of the brain. They can impact on things like social behaviour, language skills, motor skills and learning ability.

Some common neurodevelopmental conditions are:

- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD);
- autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD);
- learning difficulties (such as dyslexia or dyscalculia);
- dyspraxia or developmental coordination disorder (DCD); and
- Tourette syndrome and other tic disorders.

A growing number of people in Wales are **seeking a diagnosis for ADHD or autism**. This briefing therefore focuses primarily on support for people with ADHD and autism, and what the Welsh Government is doing to ensure services meet their needs.

2. How common are neurodevelopmental conditions?

The **National Autistic Society** estimates that approximately 1% of the population in the UK are on the autism spectrum. According to **ADHD UK**, the prevalence of ADHD is estimated to be around 5% for children and between 3 – 4% for adults in the UK.

There is currently no comprehensive data source on the number of people diagnosed with neurodevelopmental conditions in Wales. However, there is some data published by the Welsh Government and agencies in Wales which show the number of people accessing services or getting support for neurodevelopmental conditions.

- In 2023-24, over 7,501 referrals for adults **were made to the Integrated Autism Service**, of which 65% were requesting autism diagnostic assessments; and
- In 2024-25, 2.4% of pupils in Wales **were reported to have** ASD as an Additional Learning Need (ALN) / Special Educational Need (SEN), whilst 0.5% were reported to have ADHD.

A 2022 Welsh Government **review of neurodevelopmental services** found that growing numbers of children and adults in Wales are suspected to have neurodevelopmental conditions. The review attributes this growth to increased awareness of different conditions, the broadening of diagnostic criteria and thresholds, the establishment of new neurodevelopmental services, and the introduction of new responsibilities for neurodevelopmental services.

An **academic study published in 2023** assessed the feasibility and viability of using data from the Wales Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) database to identify those who had received a diagnosis of ADHD or ASD in childhood. Amongst a sample of individuals born between 1 January 1991 and 31 December 2000, a total of 7726 individuals had a recorded diagnosis of ADHD by the age of 18 years, representing 1.4% of the total Welsh population within that age group. 5001 individuals had received a diagnosis of ASD in childhood, representing 0.9% of the population.

3. What diagnostic services are available in Wales?

There are different diagnostic and assessment routes available for adults and children.

Services for children and young people

Children under 18 can access the [**all-Wales Neurodevelopmental pathway**](#) for assessment and diagnosis. Each health board has a dedicated Children and Young People's Neurodevelopmental Assessment and Diagnosis Service. A referral from a GP or education professional is generally required in order to access this service.

Please note, children and young people should not need a diagnosis in order to begin getting support through their school or further education institution (see Section 5 below).

Services for adults

Each health board has an [**Integrated Autism Service**](#) which offers adult autism diagnostic assessment, and support services for autistic adults, parents/carers, and professionals. Adults can generally access this service directly, or you may be referred by a health or social care professional.

Whilst there is no consistent offer across Wales for adults with other neurodevelopmental conditions, some health boards do provide dedicated services for conditions (such as ADHD). A GP should be able provide information about relevant services in their area.

In 2023, the Welsh Government stated it was working toward filling gaps in provision for neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD as part of its Neurodivergence Improvement Programme. In 2026, it established an [**adult ADHD task and finish**](#) group to develop options to improve services for adults waiting for assessments.

Private assessments

There are a number of services that offer paid-for assessments for neurodevelopmental conditions. Whilst a private assessment service may offer

shorter wait times, individuals will need to pay the costs of an assessment, which will vary depending on the provider.

Getting a private diagnosis also does not guarantee that someone will be able to access treatment or medication through the NHS. Whilst it may be possible to get a **shared care agreement** in order to access NHS treatment after getting a private diagnosis, **there have been reports** that people in Wales struggle to get agreement from their GP to do this. **ADHD Aware** states that whilst some GPs will recognise a private diagnosis, others will not, meaning that it may not be possible to get medication or treatment through the NHS. They recommend speaking to a GP before getting a private diagnosis.

The National Autistic Society states that some local authorities may not accept the results of private autism diagnoses and recommends staying on the waiting list for an NHS assessment, even for those who decide to also seek a private assessment.

In 2026, the previous Welsh Government **said it was considering options** to improve services for adults who are waiting for ADHD assessments, which included work on shared care agreements.

How long does it take to get an assessment?

There can be long waiting times to get an assessment for neurodevelopmental conditions.

The Welsh Government previously **set a target** that children and young people referred to the all-Wales neurodevelopmental pathway should attend a first assessment appointment within 26 weeks of a referral. There is currently no waiting time policy for adults.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) **guidelines for children and young people** recommend that a diagnostic assessment should be started within 3 months of a referral to autism services. Whilst NICE guidelines **are used in Wales** to plan and deliver services, they are not mandatory requirements.

The Welsh Government does not currently regularly publish data on waiting times. Data published through Freedom of Information (FOI) releases **shows that** in June 2023, 67% of children and young people had been waiting for 26 weeks or more for an ADHD or ASD assessment, and 45% had been waiting over a year.

In February 2025, the BBC **published figures** showing the number of children and young people being referred for assessments has been increasing, and that there had been a jump in the number waiting over a year.

In June 2025, the then Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing **announced that** four-year waits for children's neurodevelopmental assessments had been eliminated across all health boards. She said the Welsh Government had set a target to eliminate three-year waits by March 2026. As of June 2026, no data had been published to indicate whether this target has been met.

4. What has the Welsh Government done to improve neurodevelopmental services?

In 2015, the then Welsh Government established an NHS-led **Together for Children & Young People (T4CYP)** programme with the aim of exploring ways to reshape and improve the emotional wellbeing and mental health services provided for children and young people in Wales.

From 2019, work to improve neurodevelopmental services was included as a key focus for the programme. The programme published a **Vision for Neurodevelopmental Support & Services**, which argued for a whole systems approach which would break down barriers between services for children and young people.

Autism services

The Welsh Government published an **Autistic Spectrum Disorder Strategic Action Plan** in 2016, which established new **Integrated Autism Services**. This was **backed by a £13m investment** to 2021, and **a recurrent payment** of £3m a year to support autism services in Wales after 2021.

In 2017, an **Autism (Wales) Bill** was brought forward by Paul Davies MS following a successful Member's Bill ballot. The Bill was ultimately rejected in the Senedd after a motion to agree the general principles was not agreed.

Instead, in September 2018 the Welsh Government made **a series of commitments to improve autism services**. These included introducing a statutory **Code of Practice on the delivery of autism services**. This code of practice provides local authorities with information on the level and range of services and support they are expected to provide for autistic people under existing legislation, the **Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales) 2014** and the **National Health Service (Wales) Act 2006**.

An evaluation of the Code **has been undertaken** to assess the extent to which the duties in the Code are being met. The Phase Two report, published in November 2025, makes recommendations for local authorities, health boards and the Welsh Government.

The neurodivergence improvement programme

In 2022, the Welsh Government **published a review** of the demand, capacity and design of neurodevelopmental services for children, young people and adults. The review identifies that demand for diagnostic assessment has outstripped the capacity of both children's services and Integrated Autism Services, stating that:

Demand-capacity gaps in relation to diagnostic assessments increase waiting times for children, young people, adults and families far beyond that which most would consider acceptable, delaying support (in those cases where support depends upon a diagnosis) and fuelling frustration. It means problems can multiply and/or escalate as opportunities to intervene early are missed and adults and families interviewed described what they felt were 'lost years' as a consequence of long waits before they felt their, or their children's, difficulties were properly understood.

Following the review, **the Welsh Government announced** the creation of a new national improvement programme for neurodevelopmental conditions, backed by £12m in funding up until 2025. In her announcement, the then Deputy Minister for Social Services stated that the programme would:

...support the development of timely and consistent all-age neurodevelopmental services and will include much-needed additional advice and support services for parents and carers.

In May 2023, **the then Minister stated that** the programme is intended to address the 'identified gaps' in support for other neurodivergent conditions, such as ADHD and Tourette syndrome.

In June 2025, the previous Mental Health and Wellbeing Minister **said she was re-orienting the Neurodivergence Improvement Programme** to focus on reducing children's neurodevelopmental assessment waiting times. She set a target to eliminate three-year waits for children's neurodevelopmental assessments.

In March 2026, the then Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care **issued a statement** confirming that health boards were on track to meet this target. It also set out some priorities for 2026-27, including:

- A continued focus on reducing waiting times, including maintaining the national position of eliminating three-year waits for children's neurodevelopmental assessments;
- Encouraging collaborative working and sharing of learning to support the development of more efficient and consistent services for children and young people;
- Work from NHS Performance and Improvement to develop national waiting list validation standards and referral to treatment guidance for neurodivergence pathways;
- The establishment of an adult ADHD task and finish group to look at options to improve services for adults who are waiting for assessments, including work on shared care agreements.

5. Education and neurodevelopmental conditions

Children and young people with neurodevelopmental conditions may be entitled to additional help or support at school or in further education.

Schools, further education institutions (FEIs), local authorities and NHS bodies have duties under the [***Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018***](#) relating to children and young people who have Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

The ALN system replaced the previous Special Educational Needs (SEN) system, with the changes being phased in between September 2021 and August 2025. You can read more about these changes in this [***Senedd Research article***](#) and guide for constituents.

Children and young people [***are recognised as having ALN***](#) if they:

- have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age; **or**
- have a disability (for the purposes of the *Equality Act 2010* – having a “substantial” or “long-term” effect) which prevents or hinders them accessing education or training that’s generally provided for others of the same age; **and**
- the learning difficulty or disability calls for Additional Learning Provision (ALP).

If a child has ALN then they have a right to a statutory plan called [***an individual development plan \(IDP\)***](#). Young people up to the age 25 with ALN will be entitled to an IDP if they are in further education.

The Welsh Government has published [***a ‘toolkit’ for parents and carers***](#), which provides more information on the ALN system.

Do education providers require a diagnosis before providing support?

A diagnosis is not required before decisions are taken on whether a child or young person has ALN, and additional support is put in place. Paragraph 1.48 of the [ALN Code](#) states:

Even if there might remain some outstanding evidence yet to be received which might provide a fuller picture of the extent of the ALN or the ALP – including, for example, where a diagnosis of a particular condition might have been sought but not received - if the IDP can be prepared, then it needs to be prepared.

This has been confirmed several times by the Welsh Government, including in the [toolkit for parents and carers](#), published in November 2025. The toolkit states that “support should not be delayed because of NHS waiting times”.

6. Social care and neurodevelopmental conditions

Under the ***Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014***, local authorities have duties relating to the provision of adult social care services for people and carers who need support. These apply to everyone with care and support needs, including people with neurodevelopmental conditions.

The local authority has a legal duty to carry out an assessment of anyone living in its area who may need care and support services, once it becomes aware of this need. It will determine whether an individual's needs meet the eligibility criteria for a formal care and support plan and the provision of social care services.

You can read more in our Senedd Research **guide for constituents** on accessing care and support. The guide sets out the initial process, individual rights and the responsibilities of local authorities in the provision of adult social care. It also signposts to other useful sources of help and support.

In addition, ***the Code of Practice on the delivery of autism services*** provides more detail on arrangements for providing care and support services for autistic people and their family / carers.

7. Other sources of help and support

- [Neurodivergence Wales](#) (previously Autism Wales) provides information and resources about autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions, and about the services and training opportunities available online and across Wales.
- The [Community Advice Listening Line](#) (CALL) provides a 24-hour listening line service. The operators can also provide service information on local or national services across Wales. You can reach CALL on 0800 132737 or by emailing CALL@HELPLINE.WALES.
- The [National Autistic Society](#) provides support services for people on the autism spectrum and their families.
- [ADHD UK](#) provides online resources for people with ADHD, including information about requesting reasonable adjustments at work and support at school.
- The [ADHD Foundation](#) offers support to people with a range of neurodevelopmental conditions, including ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Tourette syndrome. They also provide training and resources for businesses, education institutions and healthcare bodies.
- The [British Dyslexia Association](#) provides information and services for people with learning difficulties like dyslexia or dyscalculia, as well as for parents, carers or teachers.
- [Tourettes Action](#) is a support and research charity for people with Tourette syndrome and their families.

Mental health support

Whilst not everyone with neurodevelopmental conditions will experience mental health difficulties, there are [high rates of mental health problems](#) amongst people with certain neurodevelopmental conditions.

Senedd Research has published a [constituency factsheet on mental health support](#) which provides information about sources of help with mental health problems and other associated issues.