

Better health and wellbeing for all...

Annual report summary
2025-26



Highlights of our year...

Fit for the Future...

Our five-year commissioning plan



We want people to live longer, healthier lives. But people in our region don't live as long as they should, and spend too many years in poor health.

We want to change that. We're working to move more care from hospitals into communities, prevent ill health, and make better use of digital technology.

Our five-year commissioning plan sets out how we will plan and improve care between now and 2031: creating a health and care system that's fit for the future.

Better urgent dental care...

23
urgent dental
access centres
opened



109,000
additional
appointments
a year



Protecting
**young
teeth**



WorkWell...



For many people, health problems can make it hard to stay in work. We have:

**Secured
£30m** to
help with
health
and work

Provided **health and work
coaches** across the region

**New digital
innovations** to help

Increased **mental health and
musculoskeletal** support

Added extra
gynaecological services

Tackling tobacco harm...



Tobacco
dependency teams
in every trust

82,890 people
referred for
treatment

Region's smoking
rate down to 10% -
from 29% in 2005

Waiting lists for
elective care at
their lowest since
the pandemic



Our GP practices
provided **85,000**
appointments
every day

Winter planning...



A detailed winter masterplan helped staff improve services while caring for record numbers of patients:



Category Two
ambulance
response times
down by almost
five minutes



Handover times
down by 18%



7,000 fewer
ambulances
waited 45+
minutes at A&E

Winter planning
included targeted
support for people
with COPD
(chronic obstructive
pulmonary disease).



1,936 patients were supported
– and their use of urgent
and emergency care fell by
65%, with fewer 999 calls,
emergency admissions and
A&E attendances.

NHS Excellence Award
for North East and
North Cumbria
staff mental
health and
wellbeing hub



**63,845 lung health
checks completed
with 427 cancers
diagnosed earlier**



Alcohol teams
now caring for
patients in every
trust with 10,939
patients supported



Sunderland and
Stockton among
the first to pioneer
**neighbourhood
health teams**



Mental health...

Mental health safe havens now open in
Ashington, Wallsend, Newcastle, Gateshead,
Redcar and Whitehaven. Young people's havens
getting started in Newcastle and Gateshead.



Strategy now in
place to **tackle
obesity**



18% increase
in Covid-19
vaccine uptake



**28,888 people have joined Boost, our learning
community. Almost 16,000 took courses this year!**

Thank you

Together we have achieved a lot. Thank you to everyone who has been part of this – from GP practices, pharmacies and dental teams to trusts, collaboratives, councils, patients and voluntary organisations.

Chair's foreword

Professor Sir Liam Donaldson



This has been an important period of change for our Integrated Care Board. We have a new focus as a strategic commissioner, assessing and meeting the health needs of 3.2 million people.

Our role is to look at health and care across the North East and North Cumbria, to determine what services are available and get a much clearer view of the quality of care they can deliver.

We can use data to develop a deeper understanding of the care our people need, and get real insights into how services are performing.

The North East and North Cumbria has a poorer health record than many parts of the country. More people get preventable illnesses, live with chronic ill health or disability, and die earlier than they should.

Some statistics present a stark challenge: the highest rate of drug and alcohol deaths; suicide rates the highest in England.

Working together, we are addressing the wider determinants of health. A strong example is our WorkWell programme, a £30 million investment which is helping people to stay in or return to work through health and employment support.

With persistently higher levels of economic inactivity and ill health, this work is critical. With our partners, we are helping to tackle longstanding challenges around unemployment, inequality and economic inclusion.

Our Housing, Health and Care programme has moved forward, with a shared recognition that good housing is vital to health and wellbeing. We are taking steps to tackle alcohol, tobacco and obesity - all key causes of ill health.

Our commitment to mental health remains strong. With voluntary sector partners we have expanded crisis services and safe havens. I'm delighted to see our investment enabling our ambulance services to achieve the best response times in England.

Alongside this progress, we must be open about the challenges we have faced. The ICB commissioned a Royal College of Surgeons review into breast surgery services at County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, which highlighted serious concerns about safety and quality of care.

When the NHS falls short of the standards people have a right to expect, the impact is profound. We continue to work with the Foundation Trust to ensure that improvements are made and sustained.

Strengthening our workforce and supporting our staff remain key priorities. New medical training opportunities will help to attract and retain the best talent.

Development of the Pears Cumbria School of Medicine is a significant step forward, adding to the strong and growing range of medical training at Newcastle, Sunderland, Teesside and Northumbria universities. These institutions will help us grow a sustainable medical workforce for the future.

As we look ahead, our direction is clear. We will strengthen our role as a strategic commissioner, focusing on better outcomes for our communities. Delivery of healthcare will increasingly be led through our local partners.

I would like to offer sincere thanks to our staff for their professionalism, resilience and continued commitment through a demanding year of change. For colleagues who have taken the opportunity to retire or explore new roles, I thank you for your service and your lasting contribution.

Finally, I want to thank all our partners for their continued collaboration. Working together, our ambition remains strong and consistent: to improve health outcomes, reduce inequalities, and provide safe, high-quality care for all our communities.



Chief executive's statement

Samantha Allen



It's been another year of change – but crucially, also a time of achievement.

We have reduced running costs and changed the way we work – but still made progress in improving health and care.

It's a tribute to our staff, Board members, partner organisations and communities that so much has been achieved. My thanks go to the staff who have moved on, often after long and dedicated careers in the NHS.

Now we turn the page with a new focus and confidence for the future. Our five-year strategic commissioning plan sets out how we will plan and buy services to achieve better health and wellbeing for all.

Higher demand, better performance

One great example is the careful planning that takes place before winter. Every spring, colleagues start a painstaking planning process so our services can provide high quality care, no matter what bad weather, sickness bugs or surprises lie ahead.

With initiatives like acute respiratory infection hubs, proactive frailty care and improved patient flow, we approached winter well prepared.

Between October and March, there were 18,000 more 111 contacts and 15,000 more 999 calls than the previous year. 7,000 more ambulances arrived at our hospitals.

And yet performance improved against the A&E 4-hour standard. Category two ambulance response times reduced by almost five minutes; handovers were quicker. Hard working GP practices offered almost 11 million appointments.

Elective waiting times improved steadily. Waiting lists are at their lowest level since the pandemic, while the number waiting over 12 months has almost halved. Community Diagnostic Centres in Gateshead, Stockton and Workington are speeding up care for many patients, while a new Urgent Treatment Centre at Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary has helped reduce pressure on A&E.

We are not yet where we want to be, but there is clear progress. My heartfelt thanks go to everyone who is working so hard to make it happen.

Health and work

We were among the first to develop a WorkWell service, to help people with health conditions stay in or return to work.

Employed by a range of partner organisations, WorkWell coaches have helped hundreds of people to tackle the health barriers that make it hard for them to work.

There's also extra support for musculoskeletal, gynaecological and obesity issues – all common reasons for leaving the workforce – and wellbeing support for health and care staff.

Improving dental care

As part of our Oral Health and Dental Strategy, we invested £9.5m in a network of 23 urgent dental access centres, which have already treated more than 60,000 people.

Changes to payment rates and loyalty bonuses are helping to stabilise practices and replace lost capacity. We are working to grow and upskill the dental workforce for the future.

Prevention is key. New fluoride varnish schemes and supervised toothbrushing are protecting oral health from an early age, helping children care for their teeth.

Primary care

Our GP practices deliver more care than ever, often working with higher levels of acuity and providing more than 85,000 appointments a day.

The Primary Care Access Recovery Plan is improving resilience, supporting integrated working, addressing workforce issues and improving infrastructure.

Community pharmacists provide 60,000 Pharmacy First consultations for common conditions every month, more than half our Covid vaccinations and now offer the contraceptive pill for women with no need to see a doctor.



Commissioning, listening, innovating

As commissioners, we want to listen, spot opportunities and try new things. With patients highlighting the need for a wider range of mental health services, we commissioned safe havens as an informal, practical way to access support.

Safe havens are now supporting thousands of people in Ashington, Wallsend, Newcastle, Gateshead, Redcar and Whitehaven – with our first young people's havens getting started in Newcastle and Gateshead.

Another innovation is SPOT CKD, a partnership with Boehringer Ingelheim and Health Innovation North East and North Cumbria. Working with practices in Sunderland, South Tyneside and South Tees, we are spotting Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) earlier and strengthening care.

Women's health

Women's health hubs in Sunderland and Gateshead are making a real impact: for every pound invested, they generate £8 in benefits - reducing waits, improving access and helping women stay in work.

We aim to build on their experience to improve services in other areas. Across our region, there is a real determination to tackle the many inequalities that women face.

Alcohol and tobacco

Prevention is always better than cure. Happily, our region has made amazing progress as smoking has dropped from 29% to 10% in two decades. We continue to work with partners like Fresh and Balance towards a smokefree future.

We continue to lead system-wide action to reduce alcohol harms. Specialist alcohol care teams have now supported more than 10,000 patients in our hospitals.

Looking ahead

In the coming year we will further develop neighbourhood health services to bring care closer to home, help people stay well and reduce the need for hospital visits.

Stockton and Sunderland are leading the way, with GPs, nurses, social care, pharmacists and other professionals providing joined-up care in one place.

We will extend neighbourhood health teams across the region, using data, digital tools and new ways of organising services.

Looking ahead, we can expect further change as we embrace our new mission. As a strategic commissioning organisation we can make a real difference, improving health and wellbeing and ensuring people receive high quality care.

"As a strategic commissioning organisation we can make a real difference, improving health and wellbeing and ensuring people receive high quality care."

Samantha Allen, chief executive

Sunderland and Stockton pioneer neighbourhood health

New national funding means neighbourhood teams – nurses, hospital doctors, social care, pharmacists, dentists, optometrists, paramedics, social prescribers, councils and voluntary organisations all working together – will offer tailored care in communities.

Patients will get end-to-end care and tailored support nearer to home – as well as help with the wider causes of health problems.

Making better use of medicines

We spend £1 billion on medicines every year. Our new medicines strategy aims to get the most benefit for patients from this investment.

- Reducing unnecessary prescriptions could save £20m a year
- Less long-term use of opioids to keep patients safer
- Tackling overuse of antibiotics
- Reviewing antidepressant use when safe to do





Families help to shape new respite service

No one knows a service better than the people who rely on it. When Middlesbrough's respite service for people with learning disabilities needed a new home, families and carers of service users played a key role in shaping a new service at Levick Court to ensure it meets the needs of their loved ones.

A great example of working together – and families celebrated with partners from the ICB, Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust and Middlesbrough Council.



Women's health

We are determined to provide better, fairer healthcare for women in our region. Since the launch of the national women's health plan, we have:

- Invested over £1 million
- Created a learning disability menopause passport
- Listened to 5,000+ women
- Supported a Violence Against Women audit tool
- Piloted our first women's health hubs (photo shows Dame Lesley Regan visiting an outreach session in Gateshead)
- Developed a five-year women's health plan
- Adopted a menopause policy for staff
- Started work on a regional contraception plan

Makeover for historic building, better spaces for GP practice

Patients at a Middlesbrough practice are benefiting from a refurbishment, new consulting rooms and space for community services.

Built in 1926, the much-loved Carter Bequest Hospital has been home to Cambridge Medical Group since 1990. The £1.3 million investment came from NHS England and NHS Property Services as well as the ICB.



Helping you stay well, and stay at work

Joanne* was sofa-surfing for months. With limited housing available in her area, she felt stuck and emotionally drained - and the situation was taking its toll on her health.

Feeling disheartened, she discussed her housing problems at work, and became very upset. Her employer suggested speaking with WorkWell.

A health and work coach helped her get support from a therapist, referred her to a housing advisor and checked in regularly so Joanne felt less isolated. With continued support, she gradually regained confidence, was able to stay in work and has now moved into a new home.

Looking back, she is glad to finally have stability. "I just wanted a place to call home again," she says. "I would strongly recommend WorkWell – their support made a difference during a very challenging time, and I would have struggled much more without it."

Joanne is one of the many people in our region to get practical help from WorkWell coaches. From housing and finances to stress or back pain, the coaches help people address the health problems that are making it hard for them to work.

*Joanne's name has been changed

Our campaigns are good for your health!

Award-winning campaigns are helping people stay healthier and access the right care for their needs. Working with partners, we use evidence and insight to encourage prevention, self-care and early intervention.

From Be Wise, Immunise and Little Bug Busters to #ByeByeUTI, we are helping people take positive action for better health.



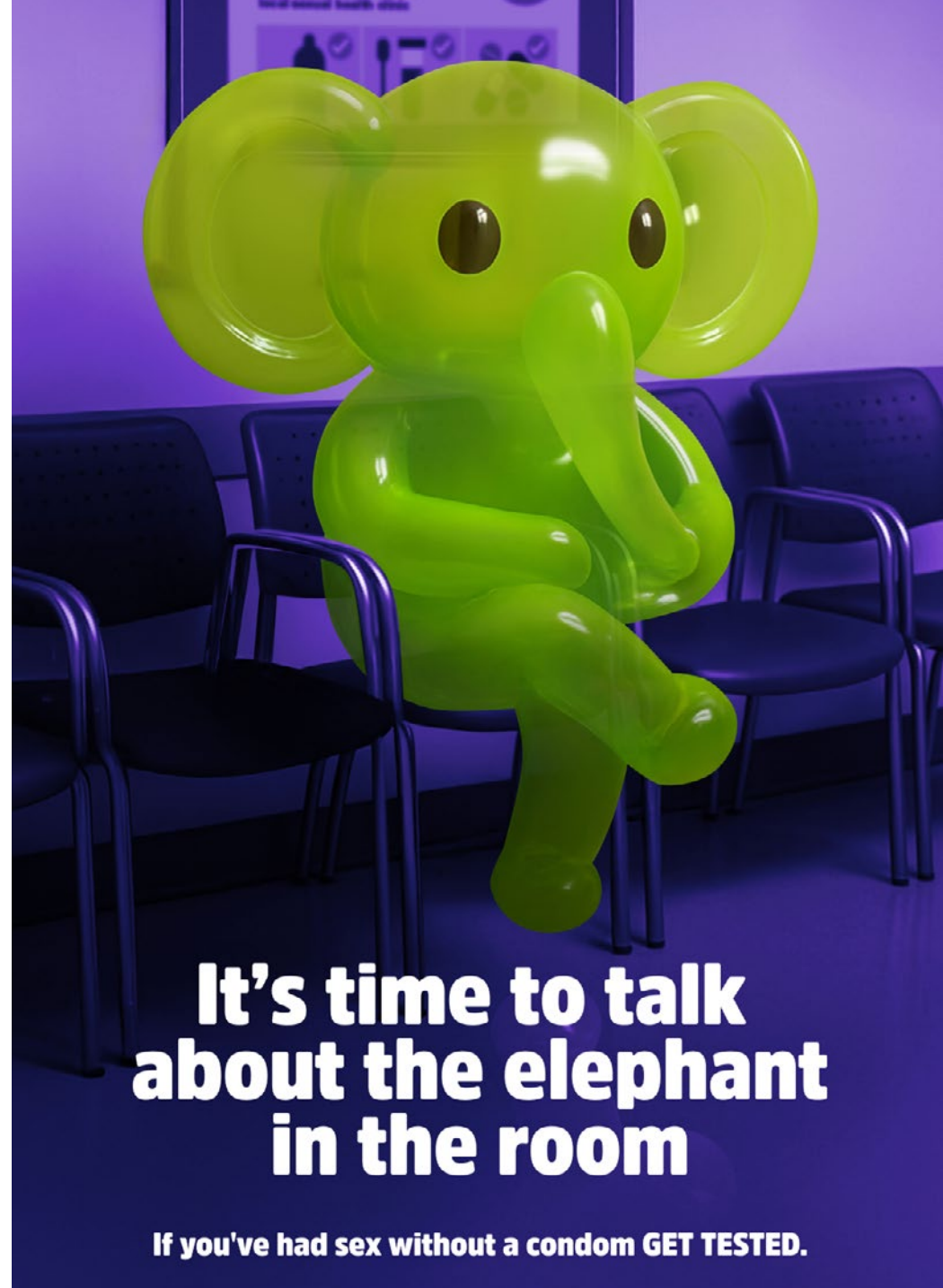
LITTLE BUG BUSTERS!

Ear ache?
Most children will feel better within 7-8 days without the need for antibiotics.

Ask your pharmacist for advice.

NHS

HERE TO HELP



It's time to talk about the elephant in the room

If you've had sex without a condom GET TESTED.

Matchday health checks a winner with fans

Football fans got more than just 90 minutes of action this winter, thanks to a successful partnership that made vital healthcare services part of the matchday experience.

Sunderland, Spennymoor Town, Darlington and Gateshead football clubs all played host to winter health checks, with everything from vaccinations to blood pressure checks, diabetes screening and smoking cessation advice.

The clinics spotted several people with undiagnosed high blood pressure, so their GPs could step in and take action. The checks proved so popular that the Western Australian Health Board is considering a similar approach.

Stay informed, get involved

More than 2,500 people have joined our People's Hub, to get regular updates and influence the decisions we make. To sign up, just visit the ICB's Boost website.



Performance and improvement

Urgent and emergency care

Our work this year has focused on:

- More community alternatives to A&E
- Care co-ordination hubs
- Virtual wards and urgent crisis response
- Strengthening our System Co-ordination Centre - so hospitals can support each other when needed
- More 'step down' services, so patients don't get stuck in hospital when well enough to leave
- Ambulance handover delays
- More Same Day Emergency Care

Despite increased activity and sustained winter pressures, A&E performance has improved:

- A&E performance against the 4-hour standard reached 80.6% in March - above the national ambition of 78% but below our own target.
- Category 2 ambulance response times improved by five minutes
- Handover times dropped by five minutes



Waiting lists better...but more to do

By the end of March, we had:



343,000

on waiting lists -
lowest since the
pandemic

2,400

waiting more
than 12 months –
down from 4,200

72%

waiting less than 18
weeks - improved
from 70%

Cancer

The ICB and Northern Cancer Alliance are working to speed up cancer pathways, increase diagnostic capacity and reduce waiting times.

In a challenging year, our performance against the 62-day treatment standard was largely unchanged on 71.5%, while our score on the 28-day diagnosis standard ranged between 66.6% and 76.7%.

Dedicated improvement plans are in place for 2026-27, while some pressured pathways are being redesigned.

Primary care

Our GP practices provided 85,980 appointments every day, while the Primary Care Access Recovery Plan continued to strengthen and support our practices. Plans are in place to maximise capacity during 2026-27.



Improving dental care

In three years since taking on responsibility for dentistry, we have made strong progress. Early investment helped to stabilise services; now a network of urgent dental access centres is offering 109,000 additional appointments a year.

We have changed payment rates and are supporting dental staff to ensure we have a strong, skilled and sustainable workforce for the future.

With high levels of dental decay in some areas, fluoride varnishing and supervised toothbrushing in schools and nurseries will help our children take good care of their teeth.

Mental health

We want to make it easier to access mental health support and psychological therapies.

Our reliable recovery rate for mental health is 48.1%, with reliable improvement at 68%. We have further expanded crisis support services and now have safe havens in six areas as well as a crisis text support service.



Performance dashboard...

A snapshot of service performance during March 2026

14 May 2026 published data - data used is aligned to the ICB integrated delivery report

North East and
North Cumbria

KEY Arrows - based on Statistical Process Control (SPC) trend: **Green** = Improving **Red** = Worsening | **Targets** - based against submitted plan: **Green** = on track **Red** = off track

Urgent and emergency care

(Reporting period March 26)



**Average Category
Two ambulance
response time:**

National benchmark: 18 mins

**Cat
2**

Improved to
20:09 mins

Ranked 2 of 11



**Proportion of A&E
Waiting Times
within 4 hours:**

National benchmark: 77.1 %

80.6%

Ranked 7 of 42 ICBS



**Proportion of
attendances in A&E
over 12 hours:**

National benchmark: 10.6 %

3.8%

Cancer

(Reporting period March 26)



69.4% of people treated within 62 days

National benchmark: 72.8 %

75.6% meeting the faster diagnosis
standard (FDS) within 28 days

National benchmark: 79.4 %



Mental health

(Reporting period March 26)



1,677 Mental health bed days per 100,000
head of population

<5 Total number of inappropriate Out of Area
(OOA) Placements

68% Talking Therapies - reliable improvement

48.1% Talking Therapies - reliable recovery



59,790 children and young people
accessing mental health services

2,440 accessed perinatal mental health
support

2,420 people received Individual Placement
Support (IPS)

Learning disability and autism

(Reporting period March 26)



164 Inpatient beds for people who are
autistic and/or adults with a learning
disability



Planned elective care

(Reporting period March 26)

**Waiting times:**

72.3% of patients receiving treatment within
18 weeks from referral

National benchmark: 65.3 %



0.7% of patients waiting over one year

National benchmark: 1.3 %



8.8% of people waiting over six weeks for a
diagnostic procedure or test

National benchmark: 11.4 %



Primary and community care

(Reporting period March 26)

**GP appointments:**

Monthly appointments in general practice per working day: **85,458**

62.9% Virtual Ward
occupancy rate

2.3% Patients waiting 52+ weeks
for community services



Dementia diagnosis rate at: 68.9%

**Dentistry:**

40.5% Percentage of unique
patients seen by NHS
dentist (adult)

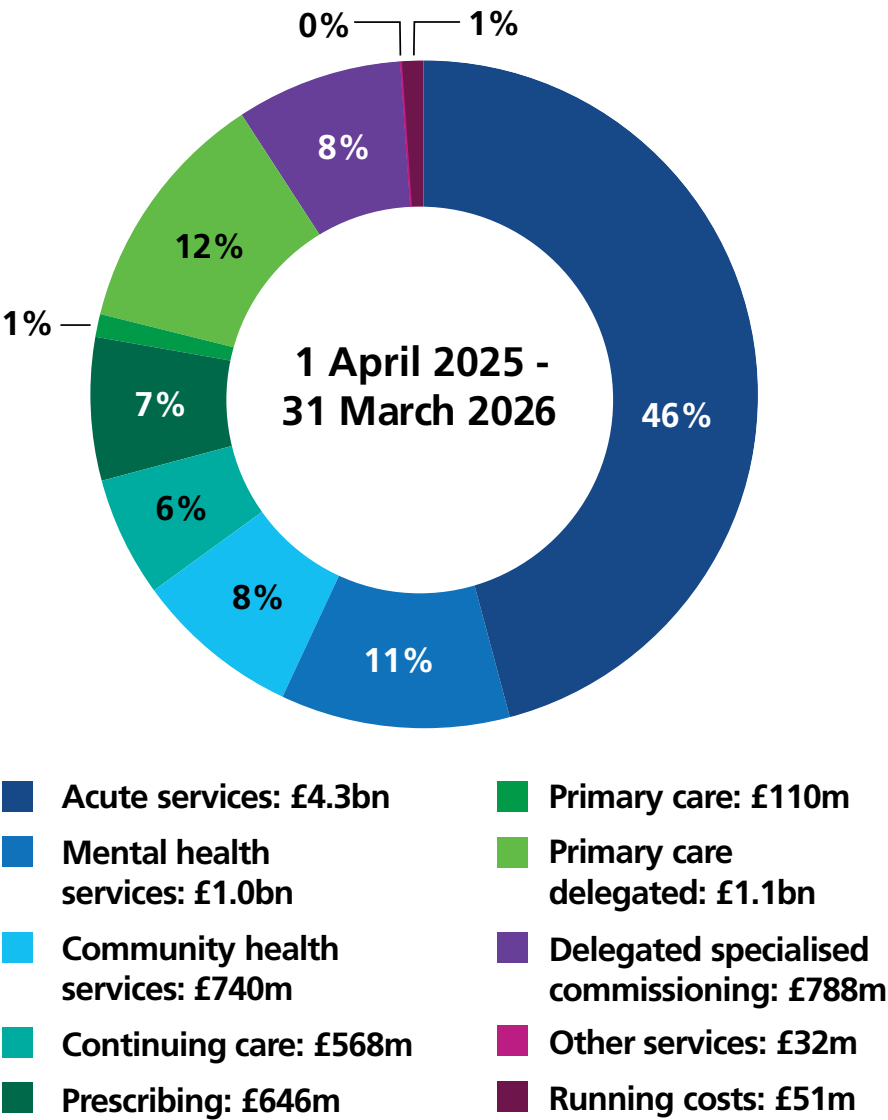
63.6% Percentage of unique
patients seen by NHS
dentist (child)

Our finances

The ICB continued its strong financial performance by fulfilling all of its financial duties for 2025-26. An underspend has been delivered in administrative spend during the period which has allowed additional funding to be spent on frontline healthcare services.

The overall ICB surplus of £34.9 million was delivered in order to offset deficits in NHS provider trusts within the system. The original planned ICB surplus was £11.8 million. In January 2026, the Board approved an increase to the ICB surplus of £23 million to offset a deterioration in the overall provider financial position within the system, ensuring no net impact on the overall ICS* position.

*The Integrated Care System, or ICS, is a statutory partnership of organisations who plan, buy, and provide health and care services in our region. This includes all NHS organisations in the North East and North Cumbria.





£34.9m

ICB overall surplus delivered to support NHS provider deficits

Efficiencies

Efficiencies totalling £131.5 million (compared to a plan of £126.1 million) were delivered during the year, which has supported delivery of the overall financial position. As in the previous year, this included particular efficiencies in medicines optimisation and the delivery of individual packages of care.

£131.5m
efficiencies made:
 exceeding our plan of £126.1m



ICS financial position

The ICB, along with other system partners, had a shared responsibility for achieving financial balance at an ICS level in 2025-26.

A balanced overall financial plan for the ICS was agreed with NHS England at the start of the year. A deterioration in the financial position of one provider trust during the year was mitigated by improvements elsewhere in the ICS, including within the ICB. The final outturn position for the ICS overall is a surplus of £1.1 million in total (subject to audit), excluding additional non-recurrent deficit support funding received in March 2026.

Looking ahead...

2025-26 was a hugely challenging year financially, both for the ICB and wider ICS, and this will continue to be the case in 2026-27. Although the financial position in 2025-26 was delivered overall across the ICS, this included a significant level of non-recurring benefits, and an under-delivery of recurrent efficiency plans will increase the challenge for 2026-27 with continued high levels of efficiency required.

From 2026-27, all organisations have been set individual financial plan limits and although organisations are still expected to work collaboratively across the system, the joint requirement to manage the system financial position no longer applies. As such, our focus will be on managing the ICB financial position as a strategic commissioner.

A balanced financial plan for the ICB has been agreed for the three years from 2026-27. This requires similar levels of efficiency to be delivered in each year and will require careful management of financial risks, with total net risk for the ICB of over £30 million remaining in 2026-27 plans at this point.

The plan does include investment within primary and community services over the three years to support the 'left shift' ambitions outlined in the 10 Year Health Plan. Utilisation of that funding will be agreed across the system to support current pressures and priorities.

Want to know more?

If you would like to find out more about NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board and would like to view our annual report and accounts in full, please go to: [northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk/publications](https://www.northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk/publications)



www.northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk

July 2026

