

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A mid-term report card on children and young people's mental health – and key priorities for the new government



The state of children and young people's mental health is one of the biggest challenges of our time – for this country, our economy and our future. The scale of need is now hard to overstate: over the last two decades the number of children and young people living with a mental health condition has doubled, while the system built to support them has not kept pace. This Government has recognised the problem and made welcome commitments – describing turning the tide for young people as a “moral mission”, promising more mental health support and a hub for early support in every community, and setting the ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children ever.

But there is still a long way to go. This report card is a mid-term assessment of whether those promises are reaching children and young people. Our conclusion is that, so far, they are not – and, with the next general election less than three years away, we are calling on the Government to deliver on their promises to transform young people's mental health support, before this Parliament is out. There is still time to deliver much needed change, but action must be taken now.

Children and Young People's mental health since the general election:

Between 2004 and 2024, the prevalence of mental ill health among children and young people doubled. By 2024, 1 in 5 young people had a mental health condition. Yet services have not kept up with rising demand. Since the general election, the pattern remains largely unchanged:

- **2.7 million referrals** to mental health services have been made in England between July 2024 and June 2026.
- **157,000 children and young people** are estimated to have been referred, in crisis, in England between July 2024 and June 2026.
- Despite this, less than **1% of NHS funding** in England goes to mental health services for children and young people.

The picture by 2029:

If current trends continue, need will continue to rise, and more children and young people – and their families – will continue without the support they need. Using a range of recent published data, we estimate that – without significant action – by the end of this Parliament:

- **3.9 million referrals** for children and young people's mental health and other support will likely be made in England, between now and August 2029.
- Over **1.1 million children** and young people with a referral are estimated to potentially not receive treatment between now and the end of this parliament.
- The equivalent of **1.3 million years** spent on waiting lists. If waiting times are not reduced, children and young people could potentially spend **0.5 billion days** on waiting lists between now and August 2029.

Our assessment of the Government's work to date is:

**REQUIRES
URGENT
IMPROVEMENT**

Whilst progress has been made in some areas, and the Government should be recognised for their commitment to taking the issue of children and young people's mental health seriously, the response so far falls far short in meeting the scale and complexity of the challenge – as does the funding. Mental health need continues to rise among children and young people, and increased demand is not being adequately met. Piecemeal policy commitments won't be enough to turn the tide of youth mental health – there needs to be a fundamental shift if the Government is to kickstart real progress before the end of this Parliament and make a difference to children and young people's mental health.

An assessment of Government action so far...

It will take time to reverse this long-term trend, but action is urgently needed. Decisions already taken or taken now, can have major long-term benefits or costs. If the Government is serious about changing the current trajectory of declining youth mental health, it has to be bold and ambitious.

There have been some improvements which will benefit children and young people

The expansion of Mental Health Support Teams and reform of the Mental Health Act are both expected to have a positive impact on children and young people's mental health, by providing additional support and changing how young people requiring certain care are protected. Likewise, Best Start Family Hubs, Early Support Hubs, the National Youth Strategy, and DWP Youth Hubs are all welcome initiatives that build the wider network of community-based, open-access support for children and young people.

But underfunding and continued inaction in other areas threatens to undermine any progress

Continued underfunding of children and young people's mental health services – particularly investment into community-based early intervention and preventative support – will continue to undermine efforts to reduce need, with more young people reaching crisis and requiring more costly intervention as a result. The failure to fully fund some of the Government's commitments, such as Youth Future Hubs, SEND reforms, and the failure to introduce access and waiting time standards are crucial missed opportunities to strengthen the wider network of support for young people to improve mental health. The continued disproportionate numbers of Asian and Black children reaching crisis, and the coming into force of the EHRC Code of Practice, will mean that the negative impact will be felt differently by marginalised communities.

WHERE NEXT? A crossroads for children and young people's mental health

A new Government brings a fresh opportunity to turn the tide and leave a lasting legacy for children and young people – and the case for acting has never been clearer. The Prevalence Review and Alan Milburn's interim report into Young People and Work both lay bare the same reality: need is rising fast, with a system not built to meet it. Too many young people are going without the support they need to thrive. Following the conclusions of these reports, the Government will be well placed to act and we are hopeful about the direction of travel.

Future Minds has identified **four key commitments** that are urgently required if the Government is serious about turning the tide on children and young people's mental health. Reversing the trend does not mean reinventing the wheel. It means building on what the evidence shows works, with clear direction, real ambition, sufficient investment and effective delivery.

- **Triple-protect investment in children and young people's mental health** by guaranteeing that the annual budget increases in line with inflation, average earnings growth or by 2.5% – whichever is the largest;
- **Embed children and young people's mental health as a national priority across government**, using the Government's mental health strategy to introduce evidence-based interventions that establish the building blocks of good mental health;
- **Enforce the mandatory access and waiting time standards** for mental health care proposed by NHS England to close the treatment gap for children and young people's mental health;
- **Deliver the manifesto commitment to provide open-access mental health support** through Early Support Hubs in every community up to the age of 25.

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Published September 2026

