

# An introduction to specialised services

The abolition of NHS England (NHSE) creates an uncertain future for services supporting patients with rare and complex conditions. This briefing sets out the key questions requiring urgent clarification from the Government.

## What are specialised services?

150+

Over 150 specialised services<sup>1</sup>



Support people with a range of rare and complex conditions<sup>1</sup>



Covering everything from chemotherapy to hand transplants<sup>1</sup>

## How does specialised commissioning work today?

- Specialised services have historically been commissioned at a national level by NHSE<sup>2</sup>
- Since 2023, NHSE has gradually delegated more responsibility to local Integrated Care Boards (ICBs)<sup>2</sup>
- ICBs now commission 70 'delegated' services, while NHSE commissions just over 100 'retained' services<sup>3</sup>
- For now, NHSE is accountable for all specialised services and responsible for setting national standards<sup>3</sup> – but this is set to change<sup>4</sup>

Click [here](#) to read our full guide to specialised commissioning in 2026/27



## How might the abolition of NHS England affect specialised services?

- In March 2026, NHSE published a letter setting out how specialised commissioning is expected to work after NHSE's functions are merged into the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC):
  - The most highly specialised services will be commissioned by DHSC<sup>4</sup>
  - DHSC will maintain a framework of standards, service specifications and clinical commissioning policies<sup>4</sup>
  - When services are delegated, full *accountability* – on top of existing *responsibility* – will transfer from NHSE to ICBs<sup>4</sup>
  - Seven Offices for Pan-ICB Commissioning (OPICs) will be established from April 2027 to support ICBs to discharge their commissioning responsibilities, essentially replacing the current role of NHS regions<sup>4</sup>
- Significant questions remain:

Will DHSC have the right **capacity and capabilities** for specialised commissioning?

What data and processes will underpin **strong accountability**?

What will happen if ICBs are not meeting **national standards**?

Will NHSE's **clinical leadership** infrastructure be retained?

What mechanisms will drive meaningful **patient involvement**?

## How can you help?

- Meet with the Specialised Healthcare Alliance (SHCA) to learn more about specialised services
- Table PQs on the outstanding issues listed above
- Ask the Government about its plans for specialised services in a debate

<sup>1</sup> NHS England. [Specialised services](#). No date. <sup>2</sup> NHS England. [Roadmap for integrating specialised services within Integrated Care Systems](#). 2022. <sup>3</sup> NHS England. [Commissioning integration: delegation of specialised services to integrated care boards 2025/26](#). 2024. <sup>4</sup> NHS England. [Direct commissioning update](#). 2026. <sup>5</sup> UK Government. [PM remarks on the fundamental reform of the British state: 13 March 2025](#). 2025.