

Briefing: Health Bill (2026) & Children and Young People with Cancer

Children and Young People's Cancer Care

Every year in the UK around 4,200 children and young people under 25 are diagnosed with cancer, and cancer remains the leading disease-related cause of death in this age group¹.

Cancer in children and young people is different from cancer in older adults, including because treatment and care are primarily provided through a national, UK-wide network of 19 specialist Principal Treatment Centres (PTCs), with 14 in England.

This specialist treatment model ensures children and young people receive the best possible, age-appropriate treatment and care in centres which have the expertise, infrastructure and resource to deliver the best possible outcomes. It also ensures access to other support coordinated through PTCs, such as clinical trials and research, and access to further highly specialised services such as Proton Beam Radiotherapy and fertility care.

The model is the most efficient delivery model for the health service, due to patient numbers, the associated costs of delivering these services for the population, and limitations around establishing NHS and clinical trials infrastructure, workforce and expertise. It would not be viable nor appropriate to federate the model, which would also risk perpetuating or introducing additional health inequalities and issues of equity of access.

Service Commissioning and Delivery

Children and young people's cancer services, alongside related services including the Proton Beam Therapy service, are "prescribed specialised services" as defined by NHS England, which refers to the level of expertise delivered within a service and the commissioning models used by NHS England to commission specialised services. Specialised services are for complex conditions delivered in a small number of expert centres.

Until 2023/24, children and young people's cancer services had been nationally commissioned by NHS England, including setting national service specifications and standards which prescribe the requirements for delivering the services and the standard of care expected from organisations funded by NHS England to provide specialised care. These have been overseen by a national NHS Clinical Reference Group. National accountability, oversight, and service specifications and standards ensure consistent, equitable access to care, maintains high clinical standards and safety, and ensures clear accountability for critical, complex services.

As of 2023/24, NHS England began delegating services to, or jointly commissioning services with, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), with children and young people's cancer services jointly commissioned through NHS England and ICB Joint Committees in line with national specifications and standards. NHS England retains overall accountability and oversight to support national consistency and equity in service provision.

Delivery of the children and young people's cancer services is via PTCs, which are specialist centres based in large NHS hospital Trusts. PTCs serve multiple regions/ICB areas and provide care for patients outside of their typical Trust or ICB area. This includes PTCs in England providing care for patients from the devolved nations.

Health Bill Implications

The Health Bill seeks to abolish NHS England and transition all commissioning responsibilities either to the Secretary of State or, as expected in the majority of cases, subsequently to ICBs.

It is expected, but not confirmed, that ICBs will become fully responsible for commissioning children and young people's cancer services. It is not yet clear whether the Secretary of State will retain any national oversight or accountability for the services, including setting specifications and standards, as undertaken by NHS England.

Removal of a single point of national oversight, accountability and direction for the services risks introducing or further perpetuating inequalities in access and standards, and variation in service delivery, which is counter to the purpose of the national specialist care network via PTCs. There is also a risk of:

- Creating a fragmented commissioning landscape, with varying ICB local priorities and varying care pathways, introducing further complexity and inconsistency
- ICB capacity challenges to support management of complex specialised services, and other aspects such as consistent data reporting
- Unclear accountability and clarity over who is ultimately responsible for specialised services, and how ICBs will work together to support the national PTC network, compounded by PTCs currently having no formal role in their respective ICBs as they are providers within Trusts, not commissioning partners
- Possible dilution or loss of national expertise supporting specialised services

¹ [Children's](#) and [Young People's](#) Cancer Statistics, Cancer Research UK (2023)

Health Bill Provisions

The Health Bill, as introduced, makes provision for the Secretary of State to both retain functions (including commissioning functions) and oversight as part of the health service which will be transitioned from NHS England, or to discharge these functions to ICBs or other bodies. These provisions are set out throughout the Bill, primarily in the following sections:

- 8 - Directions to exercise Secretary of State's functions
- 12 - Commissioning functions: responsibility
- 39 - Joint working and delegation arrangements

It is not clear whether the commissioning oversight of children and young people's cancer services will be retained in any way by the Secretary of State, or fully discharged to ICBs, and this may be a matter for implementation following Royal Assent of the Bill.

However, amendments to the Bill could be considered to ensure that the national oversight and accountability of children and young people's cancer services, and that of other services, is maintained following the bill's passage. This could be achieved, for example, through:

- Amending one of the above sections of the Bill to include a duty on the Secretary of State to have due consideration to the benefits of retaining national oversight and accountability of specialised services within the Department of Health and Social Care, particularly relating to service specifications and standards
 - This could operate alongside any delegation of functions to ICBs to deliver/implement the directions of the Secretary of State in relation to these services
 - This could also include a requirement to publish a risk assessment and record of the decision-making in relation to delegation of specialised services to ICBs and/or introduce specific reporting arrangements for ICBs involved in delivering/implementing any commissioning direction for specialised services

Any assurances that can be provided, in the absence of any amendments to the Bill, on how the provisions within the Bill will be implemented in relation to protecting the national delivery of children and young people's cancer services, would be welcomed.

Further Information

If you would like any further information, or to arrange a meeting with us, please get in touch using the details provided with this submission.