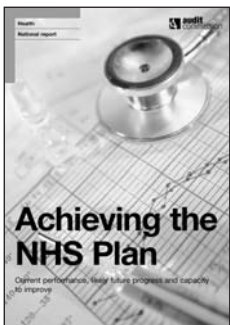


Achieving the NHS Plan

Assessment of current performance, likely future progress
and capacity to improve

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health and criminal justice services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.



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The NHS Plan, published in July 2000, set out the Government's vision of a health service designed around the patient. Independent auditors assessed progress towards meeting the priority targets that stemmed from the Plan.

The overall picture is one of good progress. It is clear that setting national standards and developing action plans are powerful tools for improving services to patients, and holding organisations to account for their performance.

But the system is not working universally well. There is a lot to be done, both nationally and locally, to make the improvements sustainable and permanent. Some of the means used to meet targets in the short term may not stand the test of time.

Making more efficient use of resources is an important part of meeting targets and is the key to long-term progress. But for improvement to be sustainable, targets need to make sense locally to encourage strong local ownership of the need to change. Managers have found it difficult to foster a culture of partnership working, especially to deliver the mental health and older people's National Service Frameworks.

Assessment procedures should become more robust, drawing evidence together from a number of sources to form a rounded judgement. Some trusts which achieved 'three stars' and could apply for freedoms as NHS Foundation Trusts, were judged by auditors to have significant management weaknesses.

The key findings are:

- the majority of trusts were making progress, performing well against the main targets and managing resources adequately
- in particular, the huge effort put into reducing waiting times for outpatient appointments and for hospital inpatient treatment was paying off
- only a few trusts were judged likely to achieve all of the highest priority targets in the NHS Plan
- few acute trusts had been able to keep waits in A&E consistently to target levels
- many trusts were finding it difficult to achieve the required increases in frontline staff numbers and estate maintenance improvements
- the majority of trusts were finding it difficult to balance the books – some had redirected money intended to boost specific services to offset underlying deficits, while auditors judged a third of recovery plans to be unrealistic