

A dark green silhouette of a mountain range is positioned in the upper middle section of the page, spanning across the width of the cover.

the rural divide

the realities of mental healthcare
for children and young people
in rural Scotland

by change mental health

April 2024



The Rural Divide: The Realities of Mental Healthcare for Children and Young People in Rural Scotland

summary

- The latest data points to stark inequalities in accessing mental healthcare for children and young people across the three most rural NHS health boards.
- This report analyses Public Health Scotland data for the wait distribution of patients who started treatment for CAMHS in NHS Scotland from the recent quarter ending December 2023, across NHS Highland, NHS Dumfries & Galloway and NHS Borders.
- In NHS Highland, more than 13% of children and young people waited more than 53 weeks for treatment. Scotland-wide, only 1.4% of total patients waited more than 53 weeks before receiving treatment. Children and young people in NHS Highland are nearly 10 times more likely to wait more than a year for treatment than in NHS Scotland as a whole.
- In NHS Dumfries and Galloway, 44% of children and young people were not seen within 18 weeks of referral, compared to only 16.8% nationally. For a service that was seeing 94% of patients within 18 weeks in June 2023, it now sees only sees 56% of patients within that standard period.
- NHS Borders is the only health board where a majority of children and young people are not seen within the 18-week window. While there has been recent progress in NHS Borders, 60% of children and young people were seen between 19 to 35 weeks, compared to 12.6% across Scotland as a whole, a 47.6% difference.
- Across these three most rural health boards, we can see significant inequalities relating to mental healthcare for children and young people. The Scottish Government will not meet its target of 90% of children and young people starting treatment within 18 weeks of referral to CAMHS without action in rural areas to address these inequalities.



The Rural Divide: The Realities of Mental Healthcare for Children and Young People in Rural Scotland

review

Introduction

People in rural Scotland are more likely to experience depression, suicidal thoughts and feeling, self-harming behaviour and anxiety – no matter their age, gender or location. They might become isolated, worsened by remoteness, stigma and fear. **Audit Scotland's recent 2023 Report on Adult Mental Health**¹ advised that accessing mental healthcare is more difficult for people living in rural areas. The report acknowledges that this is a long-standing problem and progress in tackling it has been slow.

Our landmark **Rural Mental Health survey in 2017**² found that isolation was a key issue within rural communities, contributing to poor mental health. While those in rural areas may be physically isolated from services and support groups, the data found that they are also emotionally isolated, with two thirds of respondents saying they could not be open within their own community about their mental health.

While work has been done on adult mental health in rural areas, this report aims to shed light on the realities facing children and young people living in some of the most rural parts of Scotland when seeking support with their mental health. There has been wide discourse around CAMHS waiting times in recent years, and this report seeks to dig underneath the Scotland-wide trends to uncover how rural health inequalities are impacting on children and young people.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

CAMHS is the NHS mental health services for children and young people, comprising of multi-disciplinary teams that provide treatment and/or interventions for Children and Young People (CYP) experiencing mental health problems. The Scottish Government's own specifications for CAMHS advise that all children and families should receive support and services that are appropriate to their needs. For many children and young people, such support is likely to be community based, and should be easily and quickly accessible³. Yet we know that for many young people, this will not be the case.

CAMHS support covers depression, problems with food and eating, self-harm, abuse, violence or anger, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and anxiety, and other difficulties. The Scottish Government standard states that 90% of children and young people should start treatment within 18 weeks of referral to CAMHS. This target is yet to be met.

1 https://audit.scot/uploads/docs/report/2023/nr_230913_adult_mental_health.pdf

2 https://changemh.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/RuralMentalHealthSurveyReportScotland_April2017_RPC.pdf

3 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-nhs-scotland-national-service-specification/>

Public Health Scotland regularly provides an update of how long people waited to start treatment with CAMHS in NHS Scotland. This report is for the quarter ending December 2023.

Broad Trends across Scotland

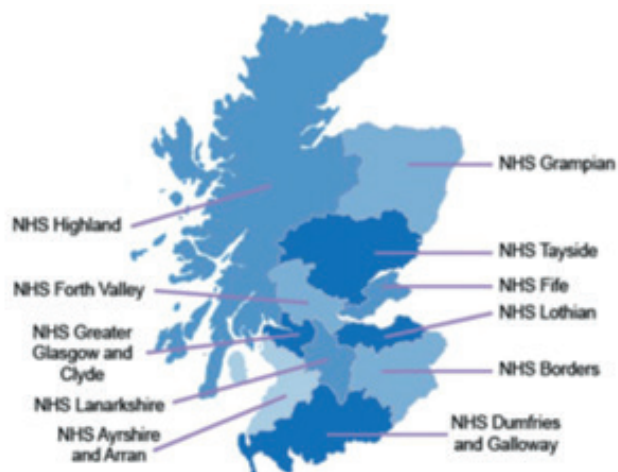
Across Scotland nationwide, for the quarter ending December 2023:

- **83.8%** of children and young people were seen within 18 weeks of referral, which is an increase from 75.6% for the previous quarter⁴.
- **4,531** children and young people started treatment at CAMHS in Scotland. This is a 3.3% decrease from the 4,686 starting treatment in the previous quarter⁵.
- **50%** of the children and young people starting treatment started within 6 weeks of referral, which is a decrease from 10 weeks in the previous quarter⁶.
- We are beginning to see a **rural/urban divide** widening on the most recent set of data from Public Health Scotland.

The nationwide figures point to an increase in the amount of children being seen within 18 weeks of referral, and a larger amount being seen quicker, with half of children and young people starting treatment within 6 weeks of referral. This nationwide progress on CAMHS is to be welcomed. However, by looking further into the data provides us with a more granular understanding of the regional disparities at play.

Of the 14 territorial Health Boards that make up NHS Scotland, the three most rural are NHS Highland, NHS Dumfries and Galloway and NHS Borders. While 98% of Scotland land mass is designated as rural, these three health boards comprise the most rural areas. This report will look into the regional trends in these rural health boards, compared to Scotland as a whole.

It should be noted that all three island-specific health boards – NHS Orkney, NHS Shetland and NHS Western Isles – have 100% of children and young people seen within 18 weeks of referral in the most recent quarter, well above the Scottish average⁷.



4 <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times-quarter-ending-december-2023/>

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

7 <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times-quarter-ending-december-2023/dashboard/>



The Rural Divide: The Realities of Mental Healthcare for Children and Young People in Rural Scotland

While these health boards are rural, their success has to be viewed within the prism of their much smaller total patient population (NHS Orkney – 22,241 patients; NHS Shetland – 22,851 patients; NHS Western Isles – 27,076⁸). We are aware of the difficulties analysing data using small samples, so have chosen not to focus on these health boards.

In comparison, NHS Highland has a patient population of 337,719 alongside NHS Dumfries and Galloway's 156,403 patients and NHS Borders' 121,488 patients⁹.

We have noted that NHS Tayside and NHS Grampian also encompass large rural areas across Scotland, with Tayside including Perthshire, Kinross-shire and Angus, and Grampian including Aberdeenshire and Moray. Both health boards were excluded from this report due to the fact they include the large urban population hubs of Dundee and Aberdeen which offset their rurality.

NHS Highland

Geographically, NHS Highland is the largest health board in Scotland, covering an area of 12,500 square miles from Kintyre in the south-west to Caithness in the north-east, serving a patient population of nearly 338,000 people. It covers the Highland and Argyll and Bute council areas. By size, the health board is larger than the countries of Belgium or Albania, emphasising how large an area it spans.

CAMHS in NHS Highland are based in the Raigmore Hospital site in Inverness, with Tier 3 and 4 based in the Phoenix Centre for children, young people and their families whose difficulties need more specialist support.

Before attending the Phoenix Centre, children and young people across NHS Highland are likely to have accessed Tier 1 and 2 of Children's services¹⁰. These comprise of universal services in Tier 1 (GP, Guidance Teachers and Health Visitors), and trained mental health workers in Tier 2, who offer early intervention with the aim of preventing mental health difficulties escalating.

For the quarter ending Dec 2023, 71.5% of children and young people were seen within 18 weeks of referral, which is 12.3 percentage points lower than the national average¹¹.

10.6% of the children and young people in NHS Highland CAMHS waited between 19 to 35 weeks, 4.6% waited between 35 to 53 weeks, with 13.2% waiting more than 53 weeks before they received treatment¹².

8 <https://www.publichealthscotland.scot/publications/general-practice-demographics-data-visualisation/general-practice-demographics-data-visualisation-up-to-1-october-2023/dashboard/>

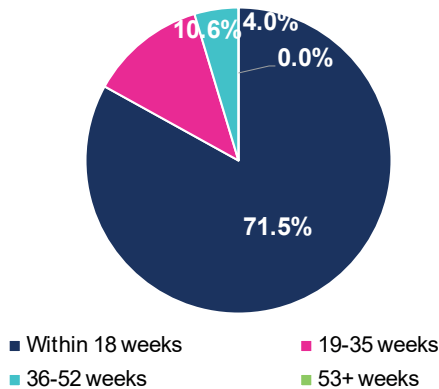
9 Ibid

10 <https://www.camhs-nhshighland.com/about-us>

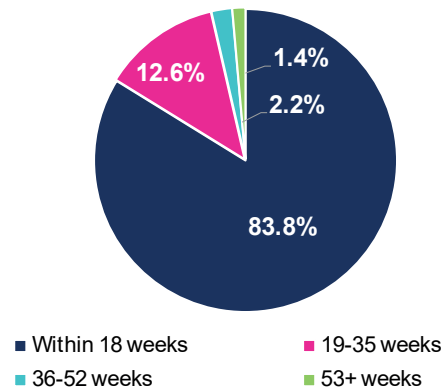
11 <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times-quarter-ending-december-2023/dashboard/>

12 Ibid

Wait distribution % in NHS Highland



Wait distribution % in NHS Scotland



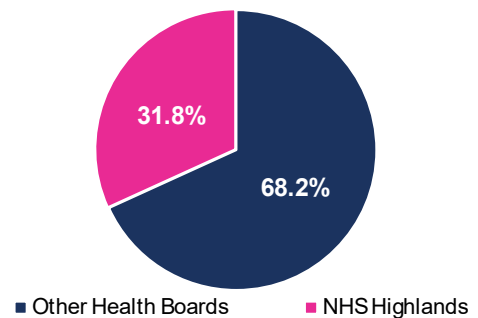
The percentage of children and young people seen within 18 weeks of referral is broadly in line with the figures from the quarter ending Sep 2023 (70.2%), the quarter ending Jun 2023 (72.6%) and the quarter ending Mar 2023 (73.6%)¹³.

The data shows an increase in the number of children and young people seen within 18 weeks from the same period last year, the quarter ending December 2023 at 63.6%. While this improvement is to be welcomed, it should be noted that the total number of patients being seen in this 2022 quarter were 242, compared to 151 patients in the most recent quarter. This drop of 38% in the number of patients being seen in the last year advises that CAMHS were able to treat 154 children and young people within 18 weeks by December 2022 compared to the most recent period where only 108 children and young people were able to be seen within 18 weeks. This reduction is concerning.

In NHS Highland, 13.2% of children and young people waited more than 53 weeks for treatment. This is a jump from 7.6% for the quarter ending Sep 2023 and 6.7% for the quarter ending Jun 2023. This near doubling of the percentages since June 2023 is concerning.

Furthermore, this is not reflective of the broader trends of CAMHS across the rest of Scotland, which showed 1.4%¹⁴ of total patients waited more than 53 weeks before receiving treatment. This means that children and young people in NHS Highland CAMHS make up nearly a third of all of those waiting more than a year for treatment across Scotland. The data also shows that those in NHS Highland are more than ten times more likely to wait more than a year for treatment than in NHS Scotland as a whole.

Those waiting 53+ weeks for treatment nationwide by health board



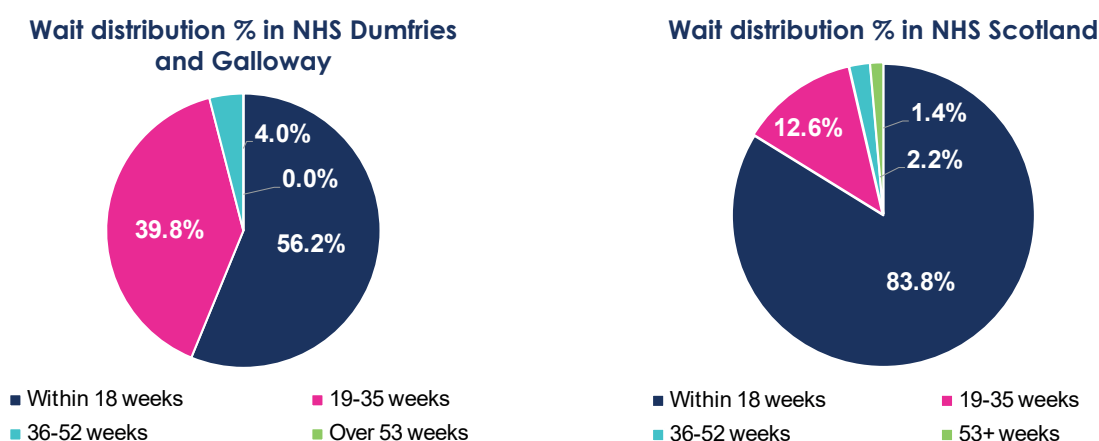
¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times-quarter-ending-december-2023/dashboard/>

NHS Dumfries and Galloway

Serving a patient population of nearly 157,000 people within a large geographical area of about 2,400 square miles, NHS Dumfries and Galloway stretches from Langholm and Moffat in the East to Stranraer in the West. The Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in NHS Dumfries and Galloway are based between the Willows Centre in Dumfries and The Oak Tree Family Centre in Stranraer¹⁵.

For the quarter ending Dec 2023, 43.8% of children and young people in NHS Dumfries and Galloway were not seen within 18 weeks of referral, which is 27.6 percentage points higher than the national average¹⁶.



The number seen within 18 weeks (56.2%) is a minor improvement from the quarter ending September 2023 (55%) but a substantial decrease from the percentage of children seen within 18 weeks in quarter ending Jun 2023 at 94%, Mar 2023 at 99.1% and Dec 2022 at 97.8%¹⁷.

It is clear that there has been a significant increase in waiting times for children and young people across Dumfries and Galloway in the last year, moving from one of the highest performing CAMHS regions to one of the lowest within 6 months.

It is evident from the data that the biggest rise has been in those waiting between 18 and 35 weeks. This figure stood at 6% of total patients in the quarter ending June 2023, then rose to 45% in quarter ending Sep 2023 and 39.8% in quarter ending Dec 2023. This is in stark contrast to the Scotland-wide figure of 12.6%¹⁸.

While NHS Dumfries and Galloway have eliminated long waits of over 53 weeks, for the first time in a year, 4% of children and young people in the health board have now had to wait between 36 to 52 weeks¹⁹.

¹⁵ <https://dghscp.co.uk/camhs/who-are-we-all/>

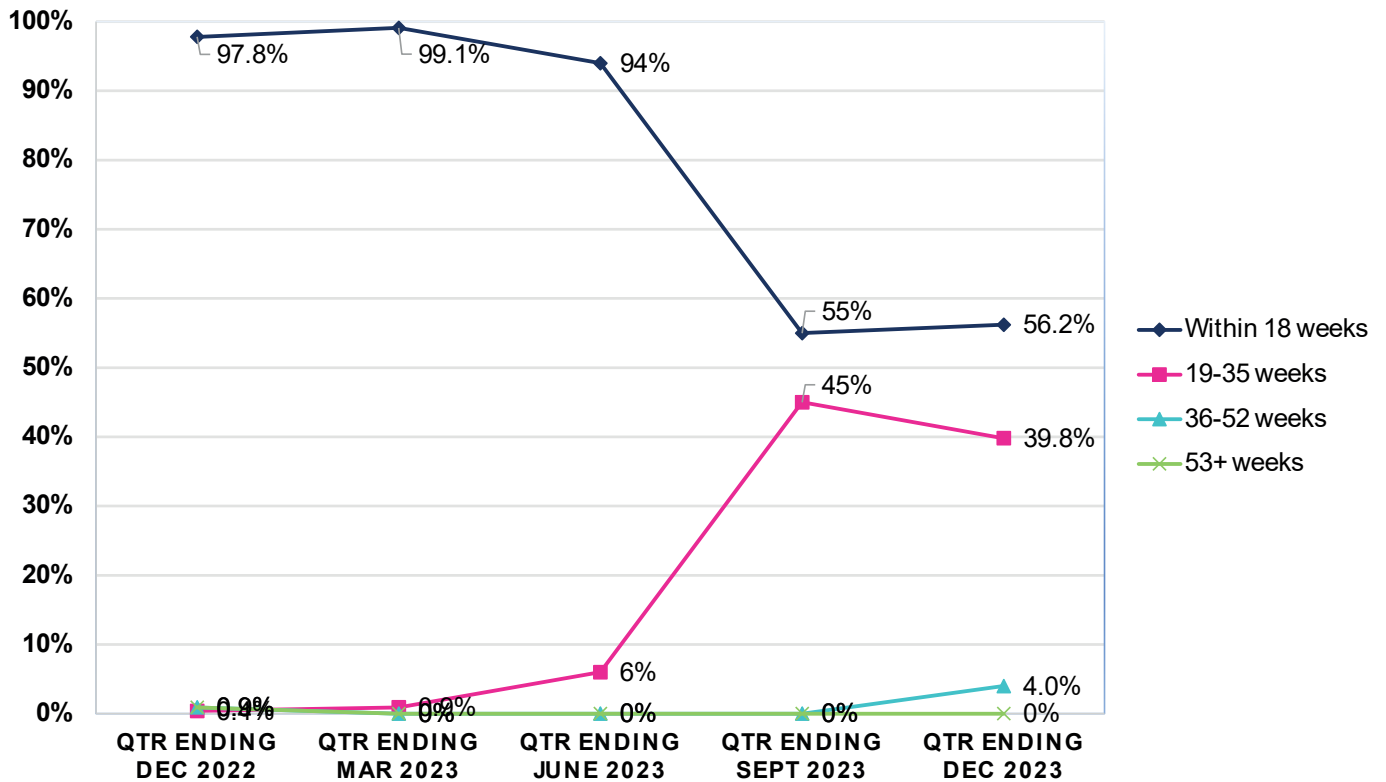
¹⁶ <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times-quarter-ending-december-2023/dashboard/>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

WAIT DISTRIBUTION % IN NHS DUMFRIES IN GALLOWAY IN THE LAST YEAR



Unlike the situation in NHS Highland, increased demand may be a contributing factor to the rise in waiting times. When they were able to process 99% of patients within 18 weeks in quarter ending March 2023, they were serving 109 patients. This increased to 133 by June, 151 by September when waiting times rapidly increased, and 176 by the end of 2023²⁰. If NHS Dumfries and Galloway are to resolve their increased waiting times, increasing capacity to deal with this increased demand will be vital. Crucially, as the past trends within NHS Dumfries and Galloway highlight, it is possible to hit mental health targets within vast rural areas. However, this is not currently being achieved.



The Rural Divide: The Realities of Mental Healthcare for Children and Young People in Rural Scotland

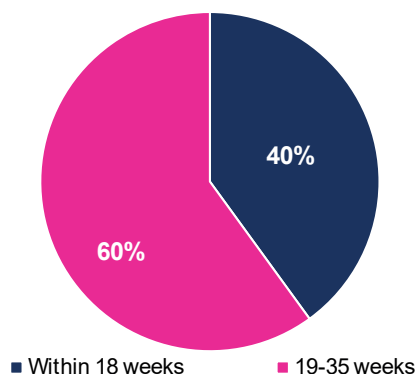
NHS Borders

Serving an area of around 1,827 square miles, NHS Borders serves the Scottish Borders Council region, stretching from Hawick in the west to Eyemouth on Scotland's east coast. It serves more than 121,000 patients and the CAMHS is based in the Andrew Lang Unit in Selkirk.

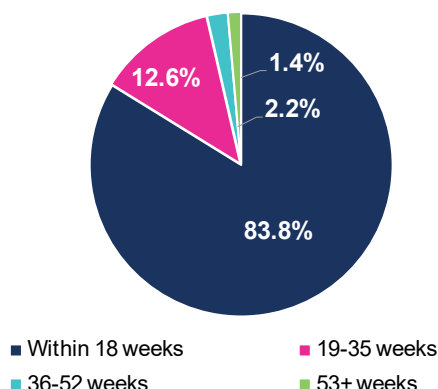
The worst performing CAMHS service by waiting times in Scotland, NHS Borders is the only health board where a majority of children and young people are not seen within the Scottish Government's standard of 18 weeks. This has been a long-standing issue within the region.

In the quarter ending Dec 2023, 60% of CAMHS patients within NHS Borders were seen outwith the 18 weeks standard²¹, compared to 16.2% across Scotland as a whole, a 43.8% difference.

Wait distribution % in NHS Borders



Wait distribution % in NHS Scotland



It should be noted that the figure for being seen within 18 weeks (40%) is an increase from the quarter ending Sep 2023 (34.7%), the quarter ending Jun 2023 (31.3%) and the quarter ending Mar 2023 (33.6)²². However, by Scotland-wide standards, this shows a clear marked difference in rural mental healthcare.

In the last quarter, 60% of children and young people were seen between 19 to 35 weeks, compared to 12.6% across Scotland as a whole. This is a slight decrease from the quarter ending Sep 2023 (63.3%) and the quarter ending Jun 2023 (66.7%)²³.

NHS Borders have now eliminated waits between 36 to 52 weeks for service users, which stood at 46.1% in March 2023 and now stands at 0% by December 2023²⁴. While this is clear progress towards improving waiting times, at their current rate of improvement, it will be 5 years before they will be able to meet the Scottish Government standard of 90% of patients being seen within 18 weeks. The vast majority of improvement is concentrated between the 36 to 52 weeks and the 19 to 35 weeks categories.

21 <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-camhs-waiting-times-quarter-ending-december-2023/dashboard/>

22 Ibid

23 Ibid

24 Ibid



The Rural Divide: The Realities of Mental Healthcare for Children and Young People in Rural Scotland

conclusions

It is clear from the latest set of data that there are key challenges facing the most rural Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services across Scotland. From Highland to the Borders, vulnerable young people seeking support are facing key barriers to accessing support.

In NHS Highland, compared to the two other rural health boards, waiting times were the closest to the Scottish-wide average at 71.5%, but more than 13% of children and young people waited more than 53 weeks for treatment. This is a significant increase since earlier in the year and is not reflective of the broader trends of CAMHS across the rest of Scotland.

Across the whole of Scotland, only 1.4% of total patients waited more than 53 weeks before receiving treatment. Children and young people in NHS Highland are more than 10 times more likely to wait more than a year for treatment than in NHS Scotland as a whole, and make up nearly a third of all of those nationwide waiting more than 53 weeks.

In NHS Dumfries and Galloway, only 56% of children and young people were seen within 18 weeks of referral, 27.6 percentage points lower than the national average. For a service that was seeing 94% of patients within 18 weeks in June 2023, it now sees nearly 40% of patients between 19 to 35 weeks. There has been a substantial increase in waiting times in this area, compounded by an increase in patients. Also of concern is the fact that having previously eliminated waits between 36 to 52 weeks, children in this area are now being moved into this category.

Lastly, NHS Borders remains the only health board where a majority of children and young people (60%) are not seen within the Scottish Government's standard of within 18 weeks. While there has been significant progress eliminating waiting times between 36-52 weeks, only 40% of patients within NHS Borders CAMHS were seen within 18 weeks, compared to 83.8% across Scotland as a whole, a 43.8% difference.

Across these three most rural health boards, we can see significant inequalities relating to access to mental healthcare for children and young people. While the most recent CAMHS data released from Public Health Scotland shows nationwide improvements towards the Scottish Government's target of treating 90% of children and young people within 18 weeks of referral, interrogation of this data reveals that there are significant disparities in rural areas.

Eliminating long waits of over a year in NHS Highland alone, which has been achieved in other health boards, would reduce the total number of people waiting over a year for treatment in Scotland by nearly a third.

While it is true that rural areas comprise a smaller section of referrals to CAMHS services nationwide, compared to the Lothians and Greater Glasgow who comprised more than 40% of referrals for the whole of Scotland. But correcting these rural inequalities is vital to making these areas safe and healthy places for children to grow up. NHS Dumfries and Galloway, current issues notwithstanding, have shown that it is possible to eliminate long waits for mental health treatment in large rural areas.



The Rural Divide: The Realities of Mental Healthcare for Children and Young People in Rural Scotland

recommendations

Addressing mental health waiting times in rural areas requires a comprehensive approach that considers the unique challenges faced by remote communities.

The Scottish Government have taken action in recent years to address rural mental health inequalities, especially with their support of the **National Rural Mental Health Forum**, which drives change in rural Scotland by bringing members together to create a solid evidence base for what works to improve people's lives and develops a programme to influence policy makers to channel resources in ways that bring positive change.

Spurred on by the recent evidence of young people's mental healthcare in rural areas, the National Rural Mental Health Forum will now be focusing upcoming sessions over this pressing issue and looking at best practice.

We know that investing in early intervention is key to tackling Scotland's current mental health issue crisis, especially with children and young people. **Change Mental Health's education programmes** have worked with a third of Scottish secondary schools and provide schools and youth groups with essential resilience training. Our Bloom and Your Resilience projects are taking forward action to focus on reducing inequalities in rural areas over the next year, placing young people at the heart of the work through co-production and are well placed to act in this regard. Further action on these early intervention programmes will have a significant impact on reducing future CAMHS waiting list pressures.

However, we need to see more action to specifically address youth mental health services in rural areas. Closer shared learning and best practice from NHS boards that also serve large rural areas such as NHS Grampian, which sees nearly 97% of patients within 18 weeks, will be vital in address some of these issues. Targeted funding to further 'rural proof' these services should also be considered. Furthermore, there is a role within the upcoming Rural Delivery Plan being taken forward across Government to commit to levelling up healthcare in rural Scotland. Taking CAMHS and other mental health services into consideration within this Plan must be a priority.

The Scottish Government will not meet its target of 90% of children and young people starting treatment within 18 weeks of referral to CAMHS without action in rural areas to address these inequalities. We all want to see a future where children across Scotland receive the support and services that are appropriate to their needs. There must be targeted action from the Scottish Government to tackle these rural inequalities, working in partnership with NHS bodies, charities and communities.