Stakeholder Briefing: Changes to Access Criteria for Tier 3 Specialist Weight Management Services (SWMS) in Sefton

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside

Overview

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB) are working to align provision and access arrangements for Tier 3 Specialist Weight Management Services (SWMS) across its footprint. The aim is to ensure that limited specialist capacity is prioritised for those with the greatest clinical complexity and highest health risks, while supporting more equitable access arrangements.

As part of this work revised referral criteria will be introduced from 1 November 2026 for new referrals into the service for Sefton patients. These changes have been approved through the ICB's governance processes following consideration of demand, clinical need, service capacity, waiting lists, variation in provision across Cheshire and Merseyside, national guidance and emerging evidence-based recommendations.

Why are changes being made?

The work identified several challenges:

- Demand for specialist weight management services now significantly exceeds available capacity.
- Access criteria have differed across local areas, creating variation and inequity in service provision.
- Existing arrangements have relied heavily on BMI thresholds rather than wider assessment of clinical complexity and risk.
- National clinical guidance increasingly supports prioritisation based on obesity-related complications and specialist need.

The revised approach seeks to ensure that people with the most significant obesity-related health complications can access multi-disciplinary specialist support in a timely manner.

What is changing in Sefton?

From 1 November 2026, referrals for residents of Sefton will be assessed against criteria aligned to recommendations published by the Society for Endocrinology and partner organisations regarding access to Specialist Weight Management Services in England.

Priority access will focus on:

- Individuals with a BMI above 50 kg/m² (ethnicity-adjusted).
- Individuals with a BMI above 35 kg/m² (ethnicity-adjusted) who also have significant obesity-related health conditions or complex clinical, psychological or social needs.
- Young people transitioning from specialist obesity services.
- Individuals requiring urgent weight loss to access time-critical treatments or surgery.
- Patients who meet NICE criteria and wish to pursue bariatric surgery.

Impact on Sefton patients

- **Patients already receiving treatment**

  Individuals currently receiving care through the specialist service will continue their existing treatment pathway and will not be affected by these changes.

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- **Patients on the waiting list**

  Patients currently waiting to access the service will be reviewed against the new criteria. The ICB and provider are developing plans to undertake this in a way that minimises impact on GP practices and patients, with the intention of commencing this by the end of November 2026.

Key consideration: patients no longer meeting new criteria

The ICB recognises that some individuals, particularly those with a BMI between 40 and 49 kg/m² who do not have the additional complexity required under the new criteria, may no longer be eligible for Tier 3 SWMS services.

This commissioning gap is recognised nationally. The ICB acknowledges that these individuals may still require support to manage their weight and reduce future health risks and is actively exploring options to strengthen support for this cohort.

Alternative support will continue to be available through:

- Primary Care weight management interventions.
- Community lifestyle and behavioural support services.
- NHS Digital Weight Management Programmes where applicable.
- Weight management medications prescribed in accordance with NICE guidance and local commissioning arrangements.

Wider strategic context

The changes being implemented in Sefton form part of a broader programme of work across Cheshire and Merseyside to align Tier 3 SWMS provision and these clinical criteria may change in the future.

The changes intend to improve consistency and sustainability of services and reduce variation in access across local areas. Aligned access criteria and consistent standards will produce better value for money and provide increased stability and equity of service provision for our patients.

Key messages for constituents and residents

- NHS services are not being withdrawn for patients currently receiving treatment.
- Changes seek to ensure specialist services are prioritised for people with the highest levels of clinical need, risk and complexity.
- Demand currently exceeds available specialist capacity, requiring a more clinically targeted approach.
- Individuals who do not meet the new specialist criteria will continue to have access to support through primary care and community-based services.
- The ICB recognises concerns regarding those affected by the changes and is exploring future options to address identified gaps in provision.
- These changes are part of a wider programme to improve consistency and fairness of access across Cheshire and Merseyside.

Anticipated Questions

Why is the NHS making these changes?

Demand for specialist services significantly exceeds capacity. The revised criteria ensure people with the greatest clinical need and most complex health conditions are prioritised for specialist multidisciplinary support.

Are services being cut?

No. Patients already in treatment will continue to receive care. The changes relate to future access criteria and prioritisation of specialist services.

What happens to patients on the waiting list?

Patients on the waiting list will be reviewed against the new criteria. Detailed plans are being developed to manage this process fairly and consistently.

What support remains for people who do not meet the new criteria?

Support remains available through primary care, community programmes, digital services and appropriate pharmacological treatments. This will be communicated to those patients who do not meet the new criteria.

Engagement and Communications

The ICB will:

- Provide information through ICB and provider websites.
- Communicate updates through GP practices and stakeholder networks.
- Share further information regarding waiting-list reviews as plans are finalised.
- Maintain engagement with local partners, elected representatives and Healthwatch throughout implementation.

How you can feedback comments and questions

We want to provide you with an opportunity to raise questions and share feedback or further considerations to help shape ongoing planning.

You can do this at the following email address**:** T3SWMS@cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk

Please provide your feedback between 1 November and 30 November 2026.
