

Roadmap for mental health, addiction, and wellbeing

June 2026

Psychological distress is rising across Aotearoa, but the mental health system's response is not keeping pace. While progress has been made, it has not gone far enough, especially for young people and Māori. This roadmap sets out where faster, more focused action is needed to build a system that better meets people's needs.

What must change

There has been some progress to improving the mental health and addiction system over the past seven years, including increased access to primary and community mental health and addiction services, more specialist support, and improvements in workforce capacity. These gains are not yet reaching the people with the highest needs in the way they need to.

We need a system that works for everyone: one that provides support early, responds effectively in crisis, is easy to access, and delivers equitable outcomes. For people and their whānau, that means getting help earlier, closer to home, in ways that reflect their culture, identity, and community, with care that is timely and respectful.

Through five years of monitoring, engagement, and advocacy, we have seen that the system works best when it supports young people's wellbeing, improves early and equitable access, responds effectively in crisis, and centres people with lived experience and their whānau. The roadmap below draws on those insights to show what good mental health policy looks like.

What this means

This roadmap brings together a select number of clear and connected priorities to help focus effort where it can make the greatest difference. Together, these priorities would support a system that is more responsive, more equitable, and more effective.

Most importantly, they would improve people's day-to-day lives by making support easier to reach, ensuring services respond to people in ways that make sense to them, and treating people and whānau with dignity when they need help.

Who we are

Te Hīringa Mahara – Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission – was established following *He Ara Oranga*, the 2018 inquiry into mental health and addiction, and is an independent monitor and advocate for mental health and wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our role is to contribute to better and more equitable mental health and wellbeing outcomes for everyone in Aotearoa New Zealand. We monitor progress, lead with new insights, advocate for change, and highlight where action is most needed. Our work is focused on improving outcomes for Māori and whānau and people with the highest need. We advocate for the collective interests of people with lived and living experience of mental distress and problematic substance use, and the whānau who support them.

Roadmap for mental health, addiction, and wellbeing

A strong mental health system must:



Support the mental health and wellbeing of young people

When young people get the support they need early, their lifelong wellbeing is much more likely to improve.

We need to see:

1. Improved access to mental health and addiction services for youth; MHA specialist services, youth Access and Choice services and acute community options.
2. Online safety education rolled out in schools, greater regulation of social media platforms and youth co-design of solutions.
3. Commitment to ring fenced prevention and early intervention investment that reflects the 25% population of young people.



Provide early, equitable access and respond effectively in crisis

The earlier people can access support that works for them, the better the chances of preventing distress before it develops into crisis. When needed, crisis support must be timely, culturally responsive, and compassionate, to reduce harm.

We need to see:

4. Full implementation of the Access and Choice programme, especially the Kaupapa Māori, Pacific and Youth services.
5. A national crisis response system, including nationwide access to 24/7 phone-based crisis support, crisis cafes, co-response teams and peer support in EDs.
6. A growing workforce, especially lived experience, and Māori leadership.



Centre people with lived experience and their whānau

When people are at the centre of their care, and they find it caring, responsive, fair, equitable, and just, their outcomes are more likely to improve.

We need to see:

7. A commitment to a human-rights based Mental Health Act and pathway towards the elimination of seclusion and other coercive practices.
8. A commitment to sustained and equitable resourcing for Kaupapa Māori and other culturally appropriate services for tāngata whaiora and whānau.
9. A commitment to collecting prevalence data for adults.

Find out more: www.mhwc.govt.nz/roadmap



1. The system must provide early, accessible support for young people

One in five young people in Aotearoa New Zealand are experiencing high levels of psychological distress. The cost of mental ill health among the population of children and young people lasts over decades for each impacted individual. When young people get the support they need early, their lifelong wellbeing is much more likely to improve.

Improve access to services and support

Young people wait longer for access to services – particularly specialist services – than other age groups. Access to a range of services, co-designed with young people, earlier in the course of distress, supports wellbeing and reduces the long-term impacts on health, education, employment and their families.

We need to see:

Improved access to mental health and addiction (MH&A) services for youth; MH&A specialist services, youth Access and Choice services and acute community options.

Reduce online harm

Young people have told us that online safety is a driver of their wellbeing. Young people in NZ have some of the highest rates of online engagement internationally and experience harms online. Promoting online safety is especially urgent now. Digital literacy, age-appropriate platform design and action to regulate online spaces will reduce harm from online content, leading to better mental health and wellbeing outcomes for young people now and in the future.

We need to see:

Online safety education rolled out in schools, greater regulation of social media platforms and youth co-design of solution.

Increase early intervention and prevention initiatives

Prevention and early intervention reduces escalation of mental distress, minimises the long-term impacts of more complex mental health needs, and significantly reduces the lifetime costs associated with mental illness. Current investment does not reflect the population of those aged under 25 and critically, it does not reflect the level of need. We would also like to see use of evidence-based solutions and engagement to ensure early intervention solutions are effective for young people.

We need to see:

Commitment to ring fenced prevention and early intervention investment reflects the population aged under 25.



2. The system must provide early, equitable access and respond effectively in crisis

The earlier people can access support that works for them, the better the chances of preventing distress before it develops into crisis. When needed, crisis support must be timely, culturally responsive, and compassionate, to reduce harm.

Full delivery of the Access and Choice programme

The Access and Choice services are intended to improve access to primary mental health and addiction services, including in Kaupapa Māori, Pacific, youth, general practice, and community settings. Completing the implementation of these services matters because early access can prevent distress from escalating and reduce pressure on other parts of the system. It is important that people have more options, so that support is appropriate and helps people to flourish.

We need to see:

Full implementation of the Access and Choice programme, especially the Kaupapa Māori, Pacific and Youth services.

A nationally coordinated crisis response system

Crisis responses ensure people and whānau experiencing crisis can get urgent support in ways that are safe, welcoming, and effective. It's important that whenever people and their whānau are in crisis, they have someone to call, someone to respond and a safe and welcoming place to go.

A robust crisis response approach is at the heart of an effective mental health and addiction system and getting that right will have ripple effects on other parts of the mental health system.

We need to see:

A national crisis response system, including nationwide access to 24/7 phone-based crisis support, crisis cafes, co-response teams and peer support in EDs.

Grow the workforce

The mental health and addiction system cannot deliver the support people need without the workforce that can meet needs now and in the future.

Strengthening the lived experience workforce helps ensure services are more effective, more trustworthy, and understand and reflect the communities it serves. We need to embed Māori leadership into the mental health and addiction workforce to ensure that there is a strong and robust workforce to provide support to Māori and whānau.

We need to see:

Commitment to grow the workforce, especially lived experience, and Māori leadership.



3. The system must centre people with lived experience and their whānau

When people are at the centre of their care, and that care is fair, equitable, and just, their outcomes are more likely to improve.

The elimination of seclusion and other coercive practices

The mental health and addiction system needs to uphold the rights of all people who interact with it. People in Aotearoa New Zealand experiencing significant mental distress continue to be subject to coercive practices, despite evidence that these practices have no therapeutic value. Some people are disproportionately impacted, particularly Māori.

We need to see:

A commitment to a human-rights based Mental Health Act and pathway towards the elimination of seclusion and other coercive practices.

Growth in Kaupapa Māori and other culturally appropriate services

Māori continue to experience some of the poorest mental health and wellbeing outcomes, that are within a broader context of inequity. We need to ensure the system meets the needs of Māori and whānau. This requires increased access to kaupapa Māori options. Having a system that reflects and meets the needs of Māori can build trust and increase the likelihood that Māori will reach out for support earlier in helping stem the rising tide of high rates of distress and inequities experienced by Māori.

We need to see:

Commitment to sustained and equitable resourcing for Kaupapa Māori and other culturally appropriate services for tāngata whaiora and whānau.

Robust data about the mental health and wellbeing of people

Good decisions about the shape and design of services that will meet the needs of people and their whānau requires good data on the level of need, including specific populations. Collecting this data is critical to understanding whether services and the wider system are working to improve outcomes for people including those experiencing ongoing inequities.

We need to see:

A commitment to collecting mental health prevalence data for adults.

References

The Roadmap draws on monitoring, reports, recommendations and other work by Te Hīringa Mahara since its formation in February 2021. These include:

Access and Choice Programme: Monitoring report on progress and achievements at five years, April 2025

Access to mental health and addiction services data summary, May 2025

Access to mental health and addiction services data summary, February 2026

Addiction specialist services – access, workforce, investment, and outcomes data summary, May 2025

Acute options for mental health care insights paper downloads, August 2024

Assessment of progress – implementation of Kua Timata Te Haerenga | The Journey Has Begun recommendations, November 2025

Evidence Brief: Effective early intervention and secondary prevention approaches for young people experiencing early signs of distress, April 2026

Kaupapa Māori services report, June 2023

Kua Timata Te Haerenga: The journey has begun – mental health and addiction service monitor report, June 2024

Leadership as a mental wellbeing system enabler report, June 2024

Lived experience of CCTOs insights paper, July 2023

Mental Health Bill submission, December 2024

NZ Health Survey 2024/2025 mental health and substance use data summary, February 2026

Peer support workforce insights paper, June 2023

Reducing coercive practices infographic, June 2024

Submission on Inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online harm, July 2025

System performance monitoring report, June 2026

Urupare mōrearea: Crisis responses monitoring report, November 2025

Wellbeing assessment: people who interact with mental health and addiction services, May 2026

What matters for mental wellbeing: analysis of factors related to mental wellbeing for tāngata whaiora report, May 2026

Youth services focus report – Admission of young people to adult inpatient mental health services, May 2023

Strategic priorities 2025–2029

Over the four years to 2029 Te Hīringa Mahara has three strategic priorities. Each of the priorities is represented by a maunga tietie, as pictured below. The roadmap is relevant to all strategic priorities. Read more: www.mhwc.govt.nz/strategy-on-a-page

Mental health and addiction services meet the needs of tāngata whaiora and their whānau.

Waharua Kōpito | A point where people or events cross. The pattern is a reminder that change occurs at such meeting points.

Advancing mental health and wellbeing outcomes for people with lived experience of mental distress and addiction.

Aramoana | 'Pathway of the sea'. The horizontal zigzags suggest pathways that the ocean and other waterways provide to many destinations.

Improved performance of the mental health and addiction system.

Poutama | A common pattern which symbolises stairways, whakapapa and also the pursuit of knowledge, advancement and growth.