

A New Era in Early Intervention: Univa and First Steps ED Unveil Primary Care Digital Pilot for Eating Disorders

Wednesday 3 September, 2025

Univa, a digital health company at the forefront of clinical innovation in eating disorders, and First Steps ED, a leading UK eating disorder charity, today announced the launch of a primary care pilot that will deliver faster, more personalised support for young people with early-stage eating disorders.

The pilot will use the Univa Care Platform, the first digital programme in NHS eating disorder services that supports both the patient and their carers at the same time. Families can choose between digital-first intervention they can start straight away, or blended care that combines the digital programme with extra clinical sessions from First Steps ED.

The urgency for innovation has never been greater. Eating disorders are among the fastest-growing mental health conditions in the UK, hitting children and teenagers hardest. Acute hospital admissions for girls aged 11–15 have **surged by 514% in the past decade**, while in 2023 **fewer than half of young people** referred to specialist services were able to access treatment. The rise is not limited to girls - between 2015 and 2021, hospital admissions for boys and young men **increased by 128%**. The Royal College of Psychiatrists' 2024 review delivered a stark conclusion: child and adolescent eating disorder services have **never met NHS waiting time standards** and remain unable to keep pace with demand.

This programme could mark the beginning of a new national model for eating disorder care, combining digital innovation, family empowerment, and clinical efficiency to meet one of the most urgent mental health challenges of our time.

Dr Alison Cowan, GP Clinical Lead for Hertfordshire's Children & Young Person's Mental Health System and GP within the Hertfordshire CYP Eating Disorders Team, said:

"As GPs, we are seeing growing numbers of young people presenting with eating difficulties and the strain this places on families. New models of early intervention such as this which can reach patients sooner, at scale, and in ways that fit around their lives would be a very valuable addition to the Hertfordshire eating disorders' support. This pilot with Univa and First Steps ED is an exciting step forward as digital interventions have a crucial role to play in primary care, helping us to provide earlier, more accessible support and reduce the need for escalation to specialist services."

Rich Andrews, CEO and Co-Founder of Univa, said:

"Primary care is where families turn first, but it has never had a scalable solution for eating disorders. The Univa Care Platform changes that. By giving both young people and carers their own tailored pathways, and by offering a choice between digital-first and blended support, we are creating a model that is personal, immediate, and proven."

Daniel Magson, CEO of First Steps ED, said:

"For too long families have faced the agony of waiting for support, knowing every week matters. Eating disorders are often treatable conditions and people can make a full recovery from them, but early intervention is crucial. By partnering with Univa, we are bringing innovation directly into the community, empowering families to take control earlier."

This one-year NHS-aligned pilot will be embedded directly into primary care, the first point of contact for most families, giving GPs, local care teams and schools access to a new digital model of early intervention. By shifting support upstream, the pilot aims not only to improve outcomes and symptoms for young people but also to reduce waiting times, prevent escalation into crisis, and relieve pressure on overstretched secondary care services. It is backed by six NHS Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in Hertfordshire: **Stort Valley and Villages, Hitchin and Whitwell, Harpenden Health, Abbey Health, Alban Healthcare and HaLo St Albans PCNs**.

The pilot aligns directly with the NHS Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan, which calls for a shift from hospital to community care, a digital-first NHS, and a prevention-driven model that intervenes early rather than late.

At the centre of the pilot is the Univa Care Platform, a first-of-its-kind dual-care system that provides

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separate but connected digital care pathways for both the young person and their carer - an innovation not seen in NHS eating disorder care before. Families with a child aged 12–18 experiencing anorexia symptoms or restrictive eating behaviours will be able to choose between:

Digital-first care - instantly available app-based programmes for both the young person and their carer, featuring evidence-based modules, daily and weekly check-ins, and progress tracking. This highly scalable model provides an immediate lifeline for families who want to begin care without delay.

Blended care - digital programmes combined with personalised support from the First Steps ED clinical team, including secure messaging and up to 10 structured sessions. This offers families more intensive, tailored support when needed.

By combining immediate access with flexible levels of care, the pilot aims to prove that digital-first, dual-care models can deliver measurable improvements in clinical outcomes and symptoms, while also showing clear cost savings for the NHS through reduced referrals to secondary care and avoidance of emergency hospitalisation.

About Univa

Founded in 2024, Univa Health is transforming the care experience for people with eating disorders and their families. Driven by science and harnessing the power of technology and design, the Univa Care Platform combines real-time monitoring with interactive, evidence-based therapeutic tools to deliver earlier intervention, more personalised support, and sustained recovery. Its unique dual app programmes provide tailored pathways for both the individual and their carer, harnessing the power of the family as an active partner in recovery. Built as a platform of tools to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of both NHS and private healthcare systems, Univa empowers clinicians to deliver care that is proactive, scalable, and compassionate. Alongside its healthcare partnerships, Univa also provides a direct-to-consumer service supported by its own in-house clinical team, giving families immediate access to expert-led care when they need it most. www.univa.health

About First Steps ED

First Steps ED is a national eating disorder charity supporting people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. In the field of eating disorders, we offer the widest range of high-quality care focused on the needs of the individual. The services include psychotherapy, counselling, workshops, peer support and online tools for everyone impacted by eating disorders, including family and loved ones. <https://firststepsed.co.uk/>

References

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- 2.
- 3.

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