



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

January 2019 Monthly Report

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1 Executive summary

This report presents a monthly summary of diagnostic waiting times and activity across the NHS in England. This monthly report is part of a routine series of publications produced by NHS England.

The data presented in this report measures the current waiting times of patients still waiting for any of 15 key diagnostic tests or procedures at the month end. This data is split by number of weeks waiting, and by test. The waiting times reported are for those patients who have been referred for a test, but whose test had not taken place by the end of the reporting period. Referrals may be from a variety of sources including GPs.

One of the main measurements covered in this report is the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test, from time of referral.

This six week diagnostic wait was initially introduced as a 'milestone' from March 2008 towards achieving the standard Referral to Treatment wait of 18 weeks by December 2008, but diagnostic waiting times now form part of the NHS Constitution. This gives patients the legal right to treatment within 18 weeks of referral (18 week RTT) and as part of this, pledges that patients should not be required to wait six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test.

NHS England's planning guidance states that there is a threshold of 99% for this pledge. The financial penalty for non-delivery of the standard is set out in the NHS Standard Contract 2017/18.

The 15 key diagnostic tests included in this report are:

Imaging

- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)
- Computerised Tomography (CT)
- Non-obstetric Ultrasound
- Barium Enema
- Dual-Energy X-Ray Absorptiometry (DEXA) Scan

Physiological Measurements

- Audiology Assessments
- Echocardiography
- Electrophysiology
- Neurophysiology – Peripheral Neurophysiology
- Respiratory Physiology – Sleep Studies
- Urodynamics – Pressures & Flows

Endoscopy

- Gastroscopy
- Colonoscopy
- Flexible Sigmoidoscopy
- Cystoscopy

For detailed descriptions of each diagnostic test please see the [collection guidance document](#).

Some of the key terms used throughout this report are outlined below:

- **6+ Waits**
A count of the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test at month end from referral.
- **Activity**
A count of the number of diagnostic tests undertaken during the month.
- **Diagnostic Test**
A test or procedure of which the primary function is to identify a patient's disease or condition to allow a medical diagnosis to be made.
- **Waiting List**
A count of the number of patients that are waiting for a diagnostic test at the end of the month.

A more comprehensive glossary is available in the Annex.

All England figures quoted are commissioner based. Commissioner based returns reflect data for patients for whom English commissioners are responsible.

1.1 National Statistics

The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- meet identified user needs;
- are well explained and readily accessible;
- are produced according to sound methods; and
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.

2 January 2019 Key Findings

- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of January 2019 was 35,500. This was 3.6% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month. This was the worst performance in the last 12 months and since February 2008.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or longer was not met this month.
- Compared with January 2018 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 14,700, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 1.3 percentage points.
- In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 1.6% (February 2018) and 3.6% (January 2019).
- At the end of January 2019, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Barium Enema with 0.7%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 13.7% of patients waiting six weeks or longer.
- An alternative measure of diagnostic waiting times is the average (median) waiting time. The estimated average time that a patient had been waiting for a diagnostic test was 1.8 weeks at the end of January 2019. This was the lowest in the last twelve months.
- There were 990,000 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of January 2019. This is an increase of 98,800 from January 2018. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test continues to show an increasing trend with an average monthly increase of 0.9%.
- A total of 2,047,100 diagnostic tests were undertaken in January 2019. This is an increase of 117,300 from January 2018. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.5%.
- County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust submitted an estimated return for audiology assessments due to data quality issues.

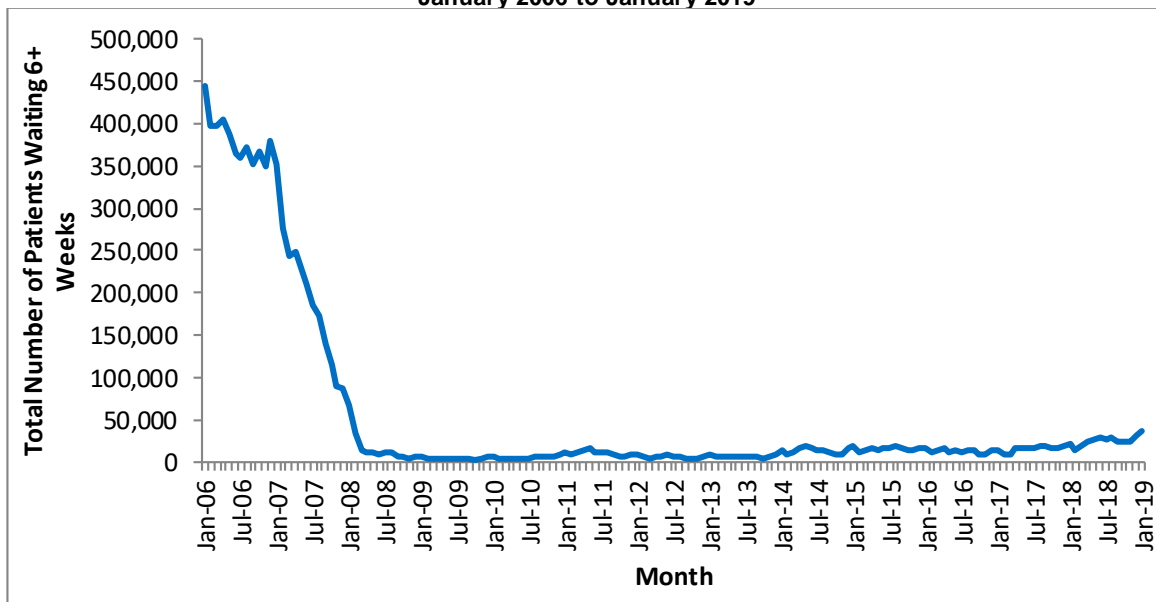
3 National Trends

This section analyses trends in monthly diagnostic waiting times and activity data that has been collected since January 2006.

3.1 6+ Week Waits

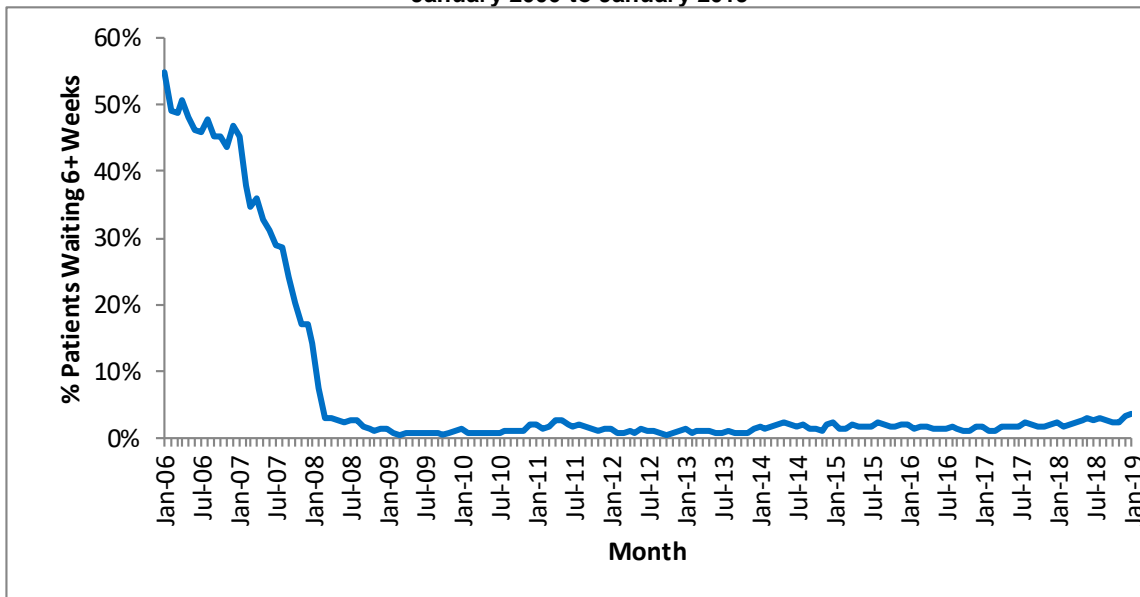
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait longer than six weeks for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 there have been fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer. Between October 2013 and May 2014 there was a significant increase in the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer. That number has since continued to fluctuate. In January 2019 there was an increase of 4,200 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to January 2019



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer shows a similar drop between January 2007 and the 6 week milestone in March 2008 before stabilising (Chart 2). In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 1.6% (February 2018) and 3.6% (January 2019). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013. 3.6% in January 2019 was the worst performance in the last 12 months and since February 2008.

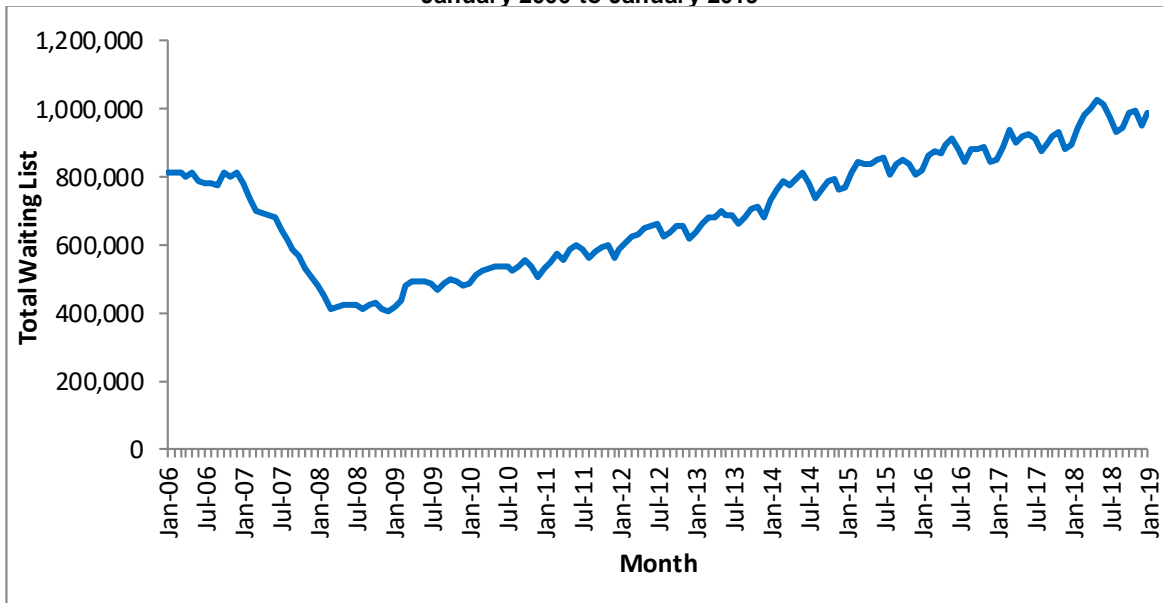
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to January 2019**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As seen with the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer, the total number of patients waiting at the month end dropped dramatically between January 2007 and the 6 week milestone in March 2008 (Chart 3). Between March 2008 and January 2009 the total waiting list remained stable, after which the underlying trend has shown an increase. In the last 12 months the average monthly increase was 0.9%.

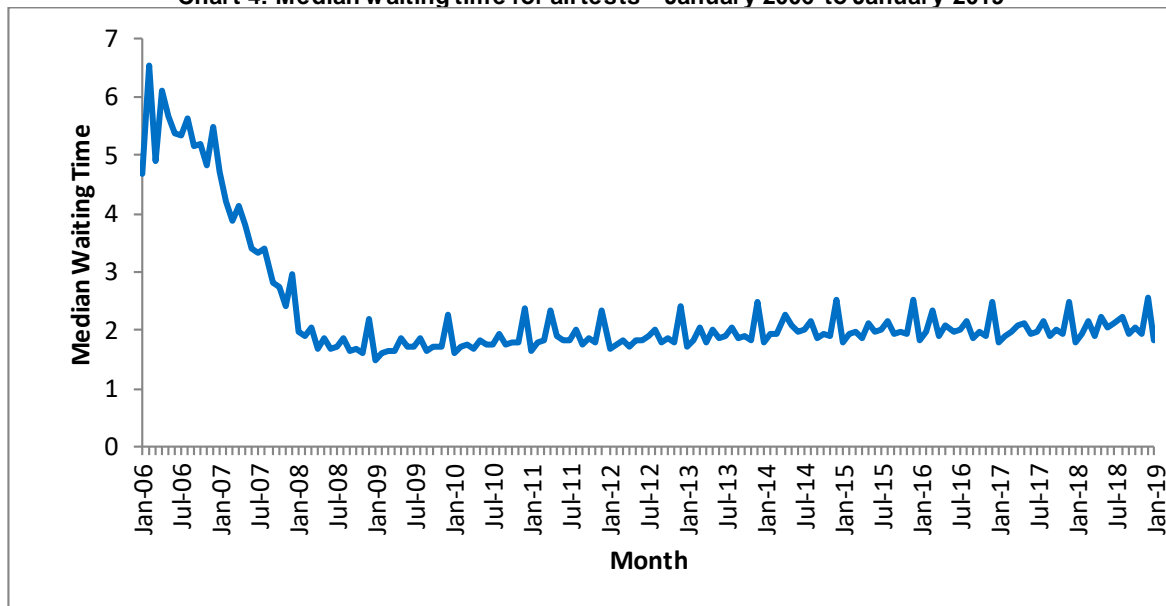
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to January 2019**



3.3 Median Waiting Time

3.3.1. The average (median) waiting time displays a similar trend to the total waiting list and 6+ waits. After a rapid decrease in the first two years leading to the 6 week milestone, the median waiting time has remained stable (Chart 4). The data shows significant increases during December every year, as a result of the increased number of bank holidays and resulting staff shortages. In the last 12 months, the median waiting time has remained stable at around 2.0 weeks, with a high of 2.6 weeks (December 2018) and a low of 1.8 weeks (January 2019).

Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to January 2019

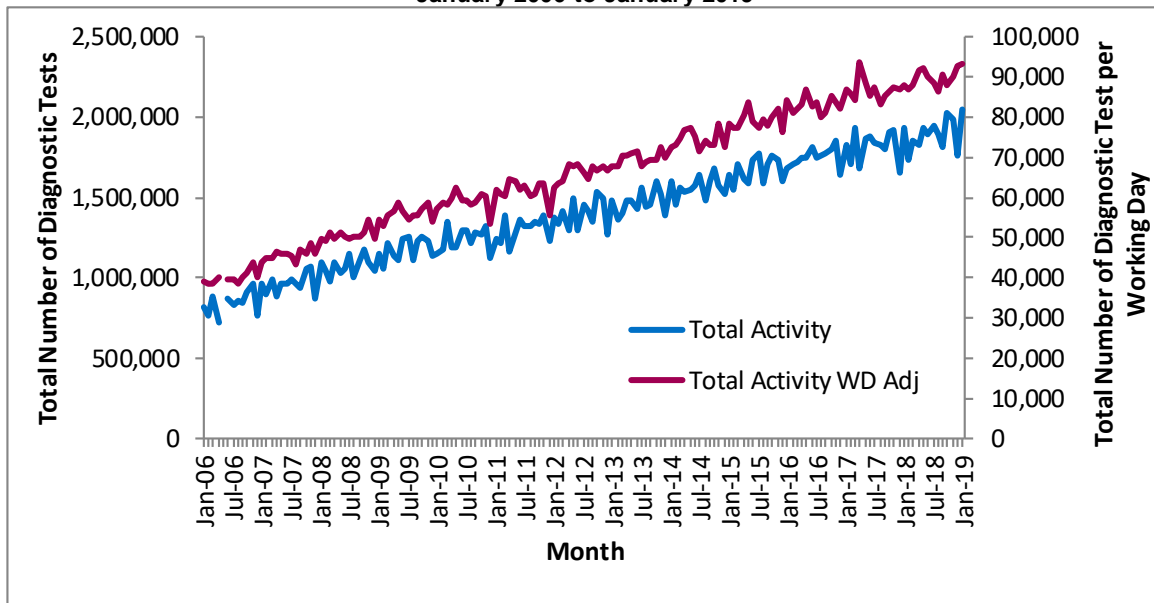


3.4 Total Activity

3.4.1. The monthly activity figure can fluctuate significantly month to month, with particularly notable decreases in December due to the bank holidays. However, the underlying trend has shown an increase since January 2006. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced (Chart 5).

3.4.2. Monthly activity has slightly increased over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.5%.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to January 2019**



Note: Activity data was not collected in May 2006 and all activity time series graphs will show missing values for that month

3.4.3. In the previous 12 months, individual tests have shown slight changes in activity. The test with the largest increase in activity was Urodynamics, where the average monthly increase was 1.0%. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Barium Enema, where the average monthly decrease was 0.2% (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – January 2018 and January 2019

	Jan-18	Jan-19	Average monthly growth
MRI	303,101	319,401	0.4%
CT	503,108	536,264	0.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	638,716	682,971	0.6%
Barium Enema	2,135	2,082	-0.2%
Dexa Scan	38,287	40,980	0.6%
Audiology Assessments	110,855	113,337	0.2%
Echocardiography	136,518	143,291	0.4%
Electrophysiology	3,439	3,518	0.2%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,019	20,932	0.4%
Sleep Studies	12,017	11,913	-0.1%
Urodynamics	7,031	7,928	1.0%
Colonoscopy	43,114	46,917	0.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	26,478	28,242	0.5%
Cystoscopy	25,960	27,936	0.6%
Gastroscopy	58,933	61,342	0.3%
All Tests	1,929,711	2,047,054	0.5%

4 January 2019 Data

This section analyses the January 2019 diagnostic waiting times and activity data, and includes comparisons between tests, area teams, providers and commissioners.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of January 2019, there were a total of 35,500 patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 3.6% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month. This was the worst performance in the last 12 months and since February 2008.
- 4.1.2. Compared with January 2018, the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 14,700, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 1.3 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with January 2018, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Electrophysiology, which increased by 8.6 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Dexa Scan, which decreased by 1.0 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2018 and January 2019

	Jan-18	Jan-19	Difference (%age points)
MRI	2.0%	3.7%	1.7
CT	1.8%	2.5%	0.6
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	0.9%	1.3%	0.3
Barium Enema	0.3%	0.7%	0.4
Dexa Scan	1.8%	0.8%	-1.0
Audiology Assessments	2.7%	1.9%	-0.8
Echocardiography	3.9%	6.7%	2.8
Electrophysiology	0.8%	9.4%	8.6
Peripheral Neurophysiology	2.9%	3.4%	0.5
Sleep Studies	6.5%	7.1%	0.6
Urodynamics	11.3%	13.7%	2.4
Colonoscopy	7.6%	13.4%	5.9
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	5.0%	9.1%	4.1
Cystoscopy	5.6%	8.4%	2.8
Gastroscopy	5.0%	7.9%	2.9
All Tests	2.3%	3.6%	1.3

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with January 2018, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Endoscopy with an increase of 4.1 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 1.5 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 0.7 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

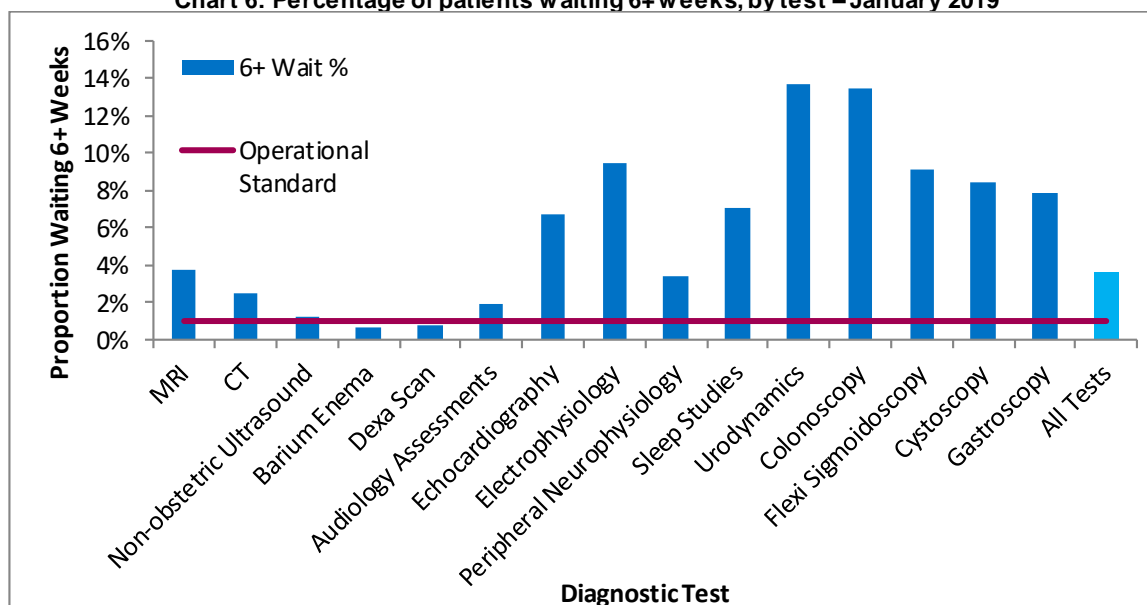
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – January 2018 and January 2019

	Jan-18	Jan-19	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	1.4%	2.2%	0.7
Physiological Measurement	3.8%	5.2%	1.5
Endoscopy	5.9%	10.0%	4.1
Total	2.3%	3.6%	1.3

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.5. The operational standard that less than 1% of patients should wait six weeks or more from referral for a diagnostic test was met in 2 of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Barium Enema (0.7%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Urodynamics (13.7%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2019



4.1.6. 83 of the 149 acute trusts that submitted data for January 2019 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. 149 of the 196 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 13 more than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month and 22 more than in January 2018².

¹ Includes NHS England

² 208 Commissioners in January 2018

4.1.8. None of the five NHS England Regional Teams met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test varied by region between 2.1% and 8.1% (Table 4).

Table 4: January 2019 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Regional Team*

Region	Number of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end	Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
North	9,253	3.2%	287,607	605,333	1.8
Midlands and East	6,169	2.1%	289,521	601,794	1.8
London	7,240	4.2%	172,304	322,819	1.9
South West	7,811	8.1%	96,833	198,188	2.0
South East	4,857	3.5%	139,159	303,196	1.8
England	35,538	3.6%	990,022	2,047,054	1.8

*Includes all independent sector providers.

4.1.9. Feedback from NHS trusts has indicated that variations can exist between different regions due to a variety of reasons from machines breaking down to staff shortages in trusts that usually only affect one area region.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of January 2019 there were a total of 990,000 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 98,800 (11.1%) from January 2018.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 35.3% of the total waiting list, or 349,800 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.1% of the total waiting list, or 800 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – January 2018 and January 2019

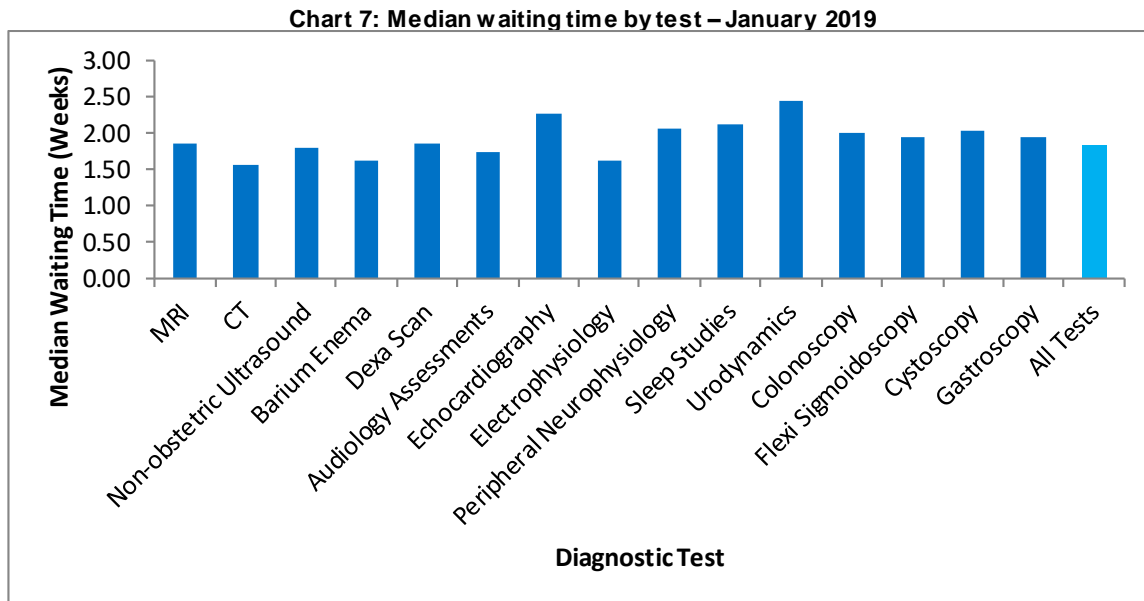
	Jan-18	Jan-19	Growth (%age)
MRI	185,965	205,344	10.4%
CT	120,671	133,591	10.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	308,959	349,844	13.2%
Barium Enema	1,115	1,434	28.6%
Dexa Scan	29,065	29,963	3.1%
Audiology Assessments	42,183	40,703	-3.5%
Echocardiography	66,503	75,587	13.7%
Electrophysiology	1,807	753	-58.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,569	18,483	5.2%
Sleep Studies	8,584	8,972	4.5%
Urodynamics	4,205	5,140	22.2%
Colonoscopy	33,697	41,186	22.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,737	18,659	11.5%
Cystoscopy	13,262	15,266	15.1%
Gastroscopy	40,871	45,097	10.3%
All Tests	891,193	990,022	11.1%

Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. There have been large increases in the number of patients waiting for certain tests. The largest percentage growth has been for Barium Enema where the waiting list increased by 28.6% compared with January 2018. The largest reduction has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list decreased by 58.3%.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of January 2019, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 1.8 weeks from the time of referral. This is a decrease of 0.7 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 1.6 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 2.4 weeks (Chart 7).



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 2,047,100 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during January 2019. This is an increase of 117,300 (6.1%) from January 2018 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 683,000 tests taking place. This accounted for 33.4% of all activity in January 2019. The test with the lowest activity was Barium Enema with 2,100 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.1% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 3.6% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – January 2018 and January 2019

	Jan-19	Jan-18	YTD 18/19	YTD 17/18	Growth Jan 19 vs Jan 18	Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18	Adjusted Growth Jan 19 vs Jan 18	Adjusted Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18
MRI	319,401	303,101	3,022,444	2,943,945	5.4%	2.7%	5.4%	1.7%
CT	536,264	503,108	5,065,558	4,745,162	6.6%	6.8%	6.6%	5.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	682,971	638,716	6,335,095	6,016,178	6.9%	5.3%	6.9%	4.3%
Barium Enema	2,082	2,135	19,829	20,347	-2.5%	-2.5%	-2.5%	-3.5%
Dexa Scan	40,980	38,287	380,428	359,378	7.0%	5.9%	7.0%	4.9%
Audiology Assessments	113,337	110,855	1,058,056	1,041,209	2.2%	1.6%	2.2%	0.7%
Echocardiography	143,291	136,518	1,315,853	1,261,196	5.0%	4.3%	5.0%	3.3%
Electrophysiology	3,518	3,439	28,731	28,375	2.3%	1.3%	2.3%	0.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,932	20,019	190,352	187,126	4.6%	1.7%	4.6%	0.8%
Sleep Studies	11,913	12,017	111,724	113,866	-0.9%	-1.9%	-0.9%	-2.8%
Urodynamics	7,928	7,031	68,620	66,766	12.8%	2.8%	12.8%	1.8%
Colonoscopy	46,917	43,114	438,352	426,570	8.8%	2.8%	8.8%	1.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	28,242	26,478	263,415	248,274	6.7%	6.1%	6.7%	5.1%
Cystoscopy	27,936	25,960	259,115	257,565	7.6%	0.6%	7.6%	-0.3%
Gastroscopy	61,342	58,933	577,039	577,388	4.1%	-0.1%	4.1%	-1.0%
All Tests	2,047,054	1,929,711	19,134,611	18,293,345	6.1%	4.6%	6.1%	3.6%

Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

5 Annex

5.1 Methodology

5.1.1. NHS England compiles diagnostic waiting time and activity data through a central return. Data collected includes:

- The number of patients waiting at the month end, split by test and week.
- Total activity classified as either; Waiting List tests (excluding planned), Planned tests, or Unscheduled tests.

5.1.2. Providers submit data to NHS England via SDCS where it is checked and signed off by commissioners. For further details on how the data is collected and the SDCS system, please refer to the [NHSE Collection Guidance](#).

5.2 Data Revision

5.2.1. Revisions to published figures are released on a six-monthly basis and in accordance with the NHS England Analytical Services (Operations) team's revision policy. For more information on the revision policy please refer to the [SDCS Revisions Policy Document](#).

Revisions were last published in December 2018 for the months January 2018 through to September 2018.

5.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. The next publication of this report and accompanying data will be 11th April 2019. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here.](#)

5.3.2. In addition to monthly publication, diagnostic waiting time and activity data is also published in a quarterly census and annual report.

5.3.3. [Quarterly census data can be found here.](#)

5.3.4. [Annual Imaging and Radiodiagnostics data can be found here.](#)

5.4 Glossary

Area Team

A geographical area of NHS England with direct commissioning responsibilities for GP services, dental services, pharmacy, and certain aspects of optical services.

Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)

A group of GP practices, which working with other healthcare professionals and in partnership with local communities and local authorities, commission NHS services for patients within their local communities.

Endoscopy

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Colonoscopy; Flexi Sigmoidoscopy; Cystoscopy and Gastroscopy.

Imaging

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI); Computed Tomography (CT); Non-obstetric Ultrasound; Barium Enema and DEXA Scan.

Median Waiting Time

A measurement of the average time a patient is required to wait for a diagnostic test. The median is the middle value when waiting times are put in numerical order. 50% of patients will wait less than the median. The median is the preferred measurement of average waiting time as it is less susceptible to extreme values than the mean.

Physiological Measurement

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Audiology Assessments; Echocardiology; Electrophysiology: Peripheral Neurophysiology; Sleep Studies and Urodynamics.

Provider

An organisation that provides NHS treatment or care, for example, an NHS Acute Trust, Mental Health Trust, Community provider, or an Independent Sector organisation.

5.5 Feedback Welcomed

We welcome feedback on the content and presentation of statistics within this report and those published on the NHS England website.

If you have any comments on this, or any other issues regarding these statistics, then please email england.nhsdata@nhs.net

Alternatively, we welcome your comments via our user feedback form.

Feedback about the user's experiences of using these statistics is available here.

5.6 Consultation

The future of the Quarterly Diagnostics Census and Monthly Diagnostics Waiting Times and Activity Returns are under consultation. Find out more at: <https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/consultation/diagnostics-census-waiting-times-activity-return>

The deadline for consultation was 5th April 2018. NHS England will publish a response to the feedback received as part of this consultation once results have been analysed.

5.7 Additional Information

[Full details of diagnostics data for individual organisations are available here.](#)

For press enquiries please contact the NHS England media team on 0113 825 0958 or 0113 825 0959. Email enquiries should be directed to nhsengland.media@nhs.net

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) statistician responsible for producing these data is:

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