



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

March 2017 Monthly Report

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NHS England

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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 6 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 2016/17.

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 6 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 March 2017 Key Findings

- The total number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of March 2017 was 9,900. This was 1.1% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was not met this month.
- Compared with March 2016 the total number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer decreased by 5,400, while the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer decreased by 0.7 percentage points.
- In the last twelve months, the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 1.04% (February 2017) and 1.8% (April 2016).
- At the end of March 2017, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Dexa Scan with 0.1% of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 8.6% of patients waiting 6 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 2.0 weeks at the end of March 2017.
- There were 934,000 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of March 2017. This is an increase of 57,700 from March 2016. In the last twelve months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has continued to increase with an average monthly increase of 0.5%.
- A total of 1,937,900 diagnostic tests were undertaken in March 2017. This is an increase of 213,000 from March 2016. In the last twelve months activity has continued to increase with an average monthly increase of 1.0%.

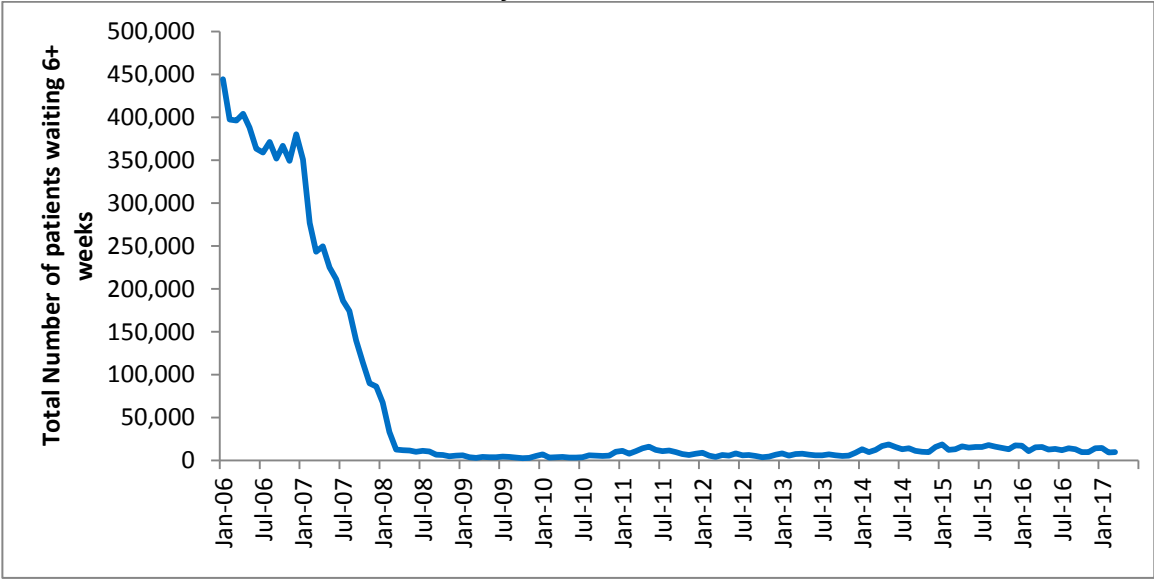
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

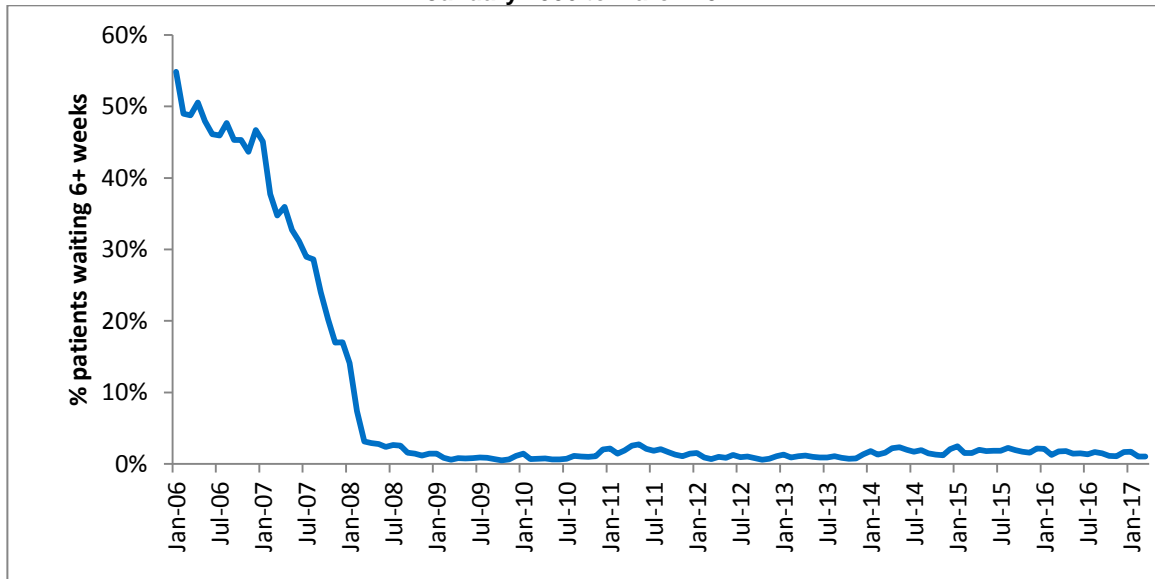
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait longer than 6 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 6 weeks or longer. Between October 2013 and May 2014 there was a significant increase in the number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer. That number has since continued to fluctuate. In March 2017 there was an increase of 600 in the number of patients waiting 6 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 March 2017



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting 6 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 twelve months, the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 1.04% (February 2017) and 1.8% (April 2016). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

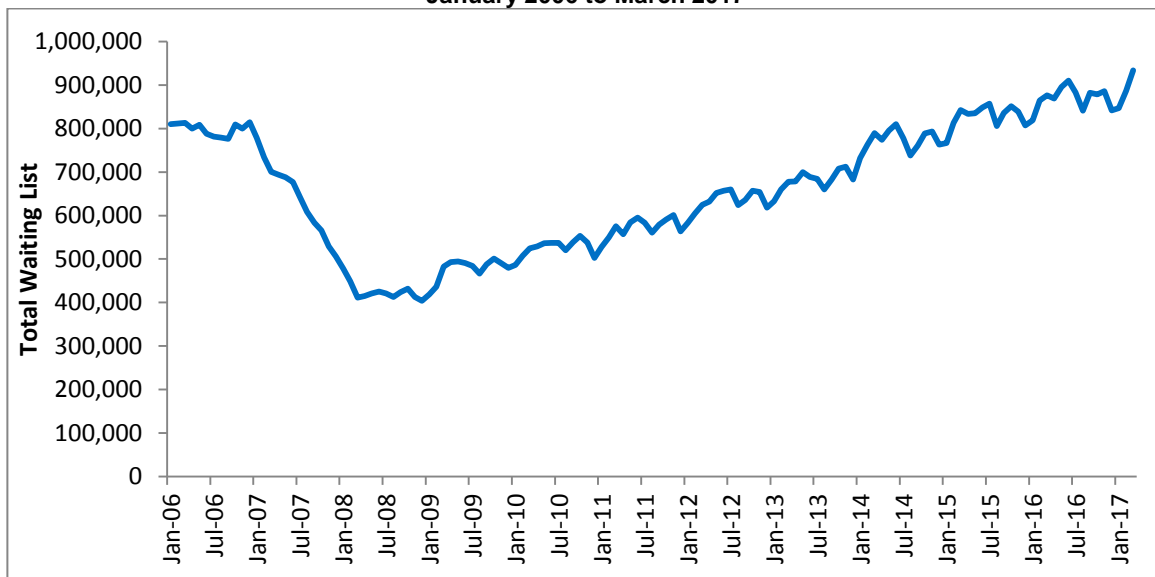
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2017**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As seen with the number and proportion of patients waiting 6 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 twelve months the average monthly increase was 0.5%.

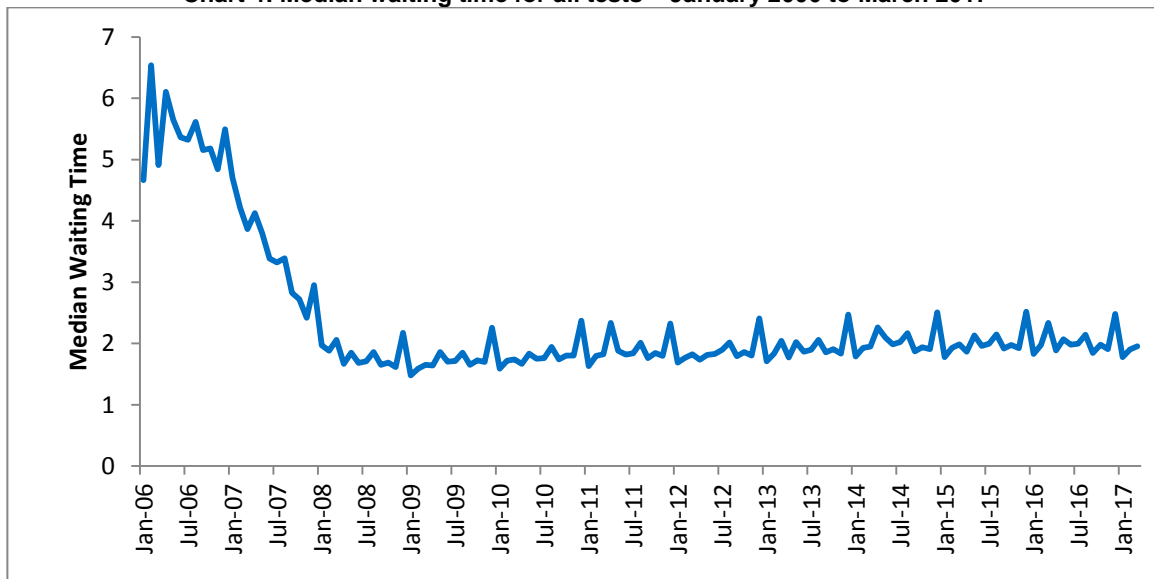
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2017**



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 twelve months, the median waiting time has remained stable at around 2.0 weeks, with a high of 2.5 weeks (December 2016) and a low of 1.8 weeks (September 2016 and January 2017).

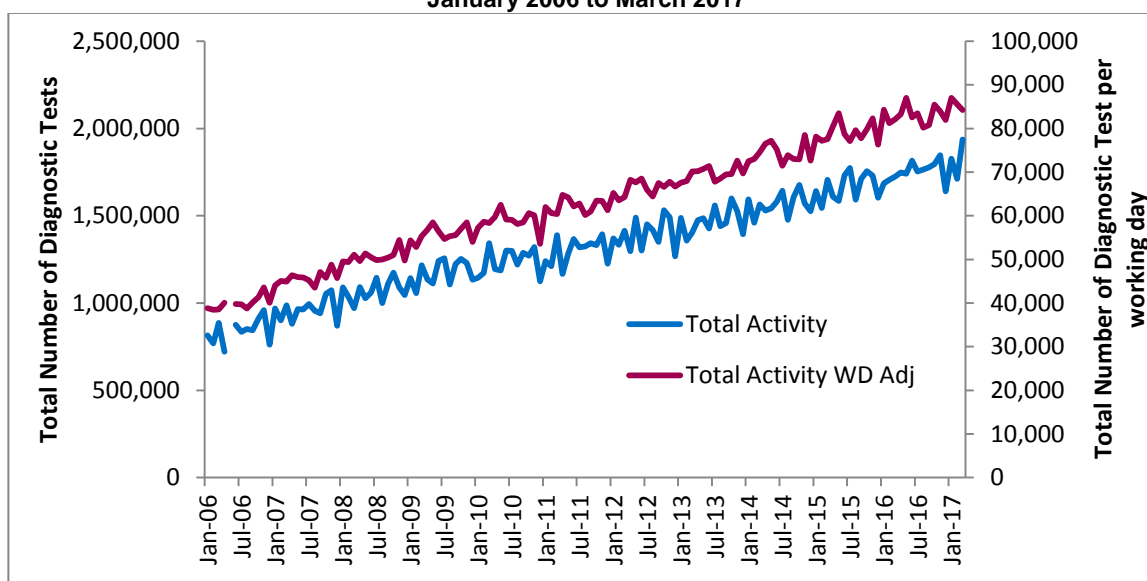
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to March 2017



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 1.0%, the average monthly change in activity per working day was also an increase of 0.2%.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to March 2017**



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 twelve months, individual tests have shown slight changes in activity. The largest changes have been for Colonoscopy, where the average monthly increase was 1.9%. The test with the smallest increase in activity was Barium Enema, where the average monthly increase was 0.4% (Table 1).

Table 1: Total Activity, by test – March 2016 and March 2017

	Mar-16	Mar-17	Average monthly growth
MRI	272,126	307,545	1.0%
CT	434,484	490,382	1.0%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	581,695	639,216	0.8%
Barium Enema	2,085	2,185	0.4%
Dexa Scan	34,465	37,201	0.6%
Audiology Assessments	101,471	111,384	0.8%
Echocardiography	118,430	135,774	1.1%
Electrophysiology	2,035	2,499	1.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,692	19,402	0.8%
Sleep Studies	11,416	13,021	1.1%
Urodynamics	6,610	7,334	0.9%
Colonoscopy	38,563	48,265	1.9%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	22,421	27,735	1.8%
Cystoscopy	24,760	29,775	1.5%
Gastroscopy	56,673	66,145	1.3%
All Tests	1,724,926	1,937,863	1.0%

4 March 2017 Data

This section analyses the March 2017 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 March 2017, there were a total of 9,900 patients waiting 6 weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 1.1% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with March 2016, the number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer decreased by 5,400, while the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer decreased by 0.7 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with March 2016, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Urodynamics which increased by 1.0 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Sleep Studies, which decreased by 4.0 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2016 and March 2017

	Mar-16	Mar-17	Difference (%age points)
MRI	1.7%	0.7%	-1.1%
CT	0.5%	1.0%	0.5%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	0.6%	0.3%	-0.3%
Barium Enema	0.9%	0.3%	-0.5%
Dexa Scan	0.4%	0.1%	-0.3%
Audiology Assessments	2.1%	1.2%	-0.9%
Echocardiography	1.7%	2.5%	0.8%
Electrophysiology	3.6%	1.9%	-1.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	3.2%	0.8%	-2.5%
Sleep Studies	6.2%	2.3%	-4.0%
Urodynamics	7.6%	8.6%	1.0%
Colonoscopy	6.7%	3.1%	-3.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	4.4%	2.8%	-1.6%
Cystoscopy	5.1%	4.5%	-0.6%
Gastroscopy	5.4%	2.2%	-3.2%
All Tests	1.7%	1.1%	-0.7%

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with March 2016, the test type with the smallest decrease in the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Imaging with a decrease of 0.35 percentage points. Endoscopy decreased (by 2.8 percentage points), while Physiological Measurement decreased by 0.5 percentage points. See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types (Table 3).

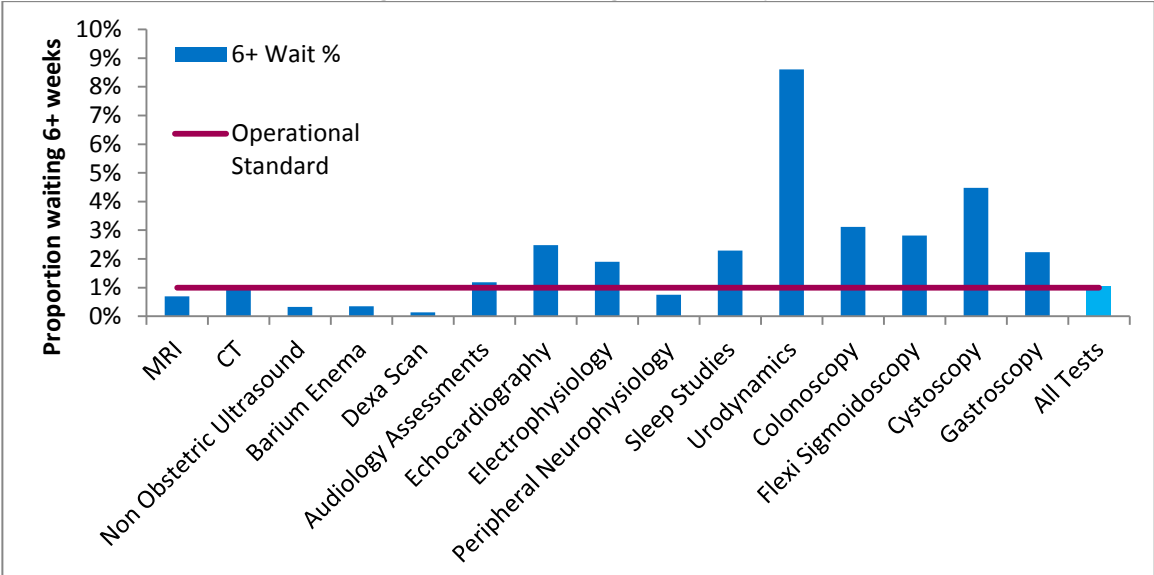
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – March 2016 and March 2017

	Mar-16	Mar-17	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	0.9%	0.5%	-0.4%
Physiological Measurement	2.5%	2.0%	-0.5%
Endoscopy	5.6%	2.9%	-2.8%
Total	1.7%	1.1%	-0.7%

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.5. The operational standard that less than 1% of patients should wait 6 weeks or more from referral for a diagnostic test was met in 6 of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Dexa Scan (0.1%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Urodynamics (8.6%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2017



4.1.6. 35 of the 154 Acute Trusts that submitted data for March 2017 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. 55 of the 210 Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 47 less than the number of CCGs that failed the standard in the previous month and 20 less than in March 2016.

- 4.1.8. 2 of the 4 NHS England Regional Teams met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer for a diagnostic test varied by region between 0.8% and 1.2% (Table 4).

Table 4: March 2017 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Regional Team

Region	Number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at month end	Percentage of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
North	3,458	1.2%	279,627	564,257	1.9
Midlands and East	2,102	0.8%	268,055	566,122	1.9
London	1,462	0.9%	154,589	310,539	1.9
South	2,819	1.2%	227,999	481,261	1.9
England	9,868	1.1%	934,010	1,937,863	1.9

*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 March 2017 there were a total of 934,000 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 57,700 (6.6%) from March 2016.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 35.4% of the total waiting list, or 330,200 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Barium Enema, which accounted for 0.1% of the total waiting list, or 1,100 patients (Table 5).
- 4.2.3. There have been large increases in the number of patients waiting for certain tests. The largest growth has been for CT and Urodynamics where the waiting list increased by 16.5%, compared with March 2016. The largest reduction has been for Cystoscopy, where the waiting list decreased by 5.9%.

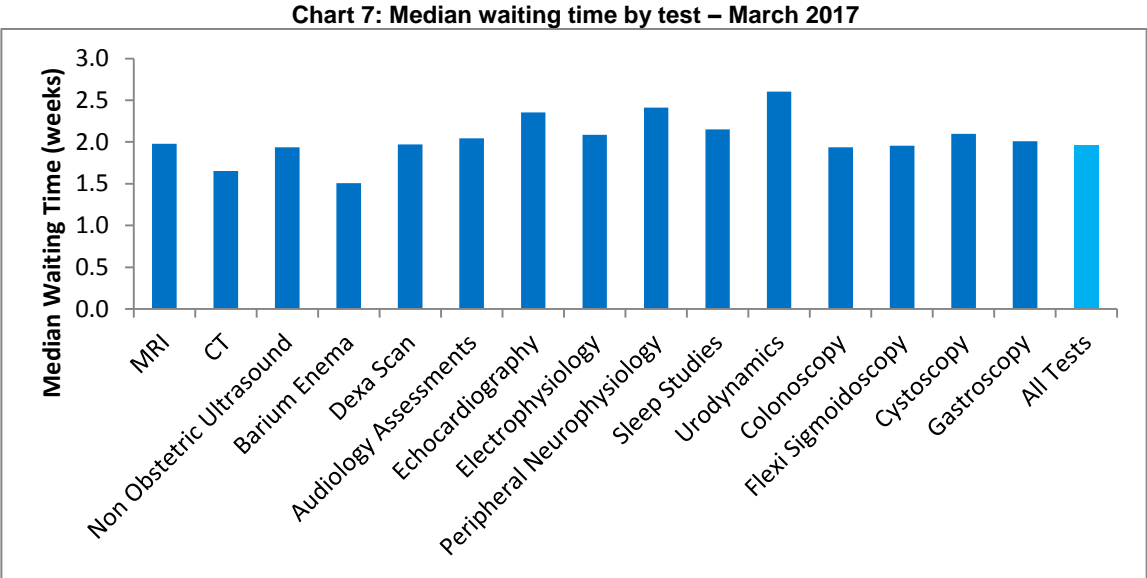
Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – March 2016 and March 2017

	Mar-16	Mar-17	Growth (%age)
MRI	179,933	190,534	5.9%
CT	106,009	123,507	16.5%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	318,498	330,184	3.7%
Barium Enema	1,174	1,144	-2.6%
Dexa Scan	26,038	28,452	9.3%
Audiology Assessments	47,282	48,669	2.9%
Echocardiography	58,069	66,974	15.3%
Electrophysiology	1,060	1,159	9.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,308	19,697	7.6%
Sleep Studies	7,847	7,819	-0.4%
Urodynamics	4,289	4,995	16.5%
Colonoscopy	34,825	35,938	3.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,376	16,033	-2.1%
Cystoscopy	13,832	13,013	-5.9%
Gastroscopy	42,789	45,892	7.3%
All Tests	876,329	934,010	6.6%

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

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of March 2017 the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.0 weeks from time of referral. This is a decrease of 0.1 weeks compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting was Barium Enema at 1.5 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 2.6 weeks (Chart 7).



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,937,885 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during March 2017. This is an increase of 213,000 (1.0%) from March 2016.
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound with 639,200 tests taking place. This accounted for 33.0% of all activity in March 2017. The test with the lowest activity was Barium Enema with 2,200 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.1% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. The number of tests conducted this year to date increased by 5.7% from the same period last year (also 4.4% adjusted for working days).

Table 6: Total Activity Growth by Test

	Mar-17	Mar-16	YTD 16/17	YTD 15/16	Growth Mar 17 vs Mar 16	Growth YTD 16/17 vs YTD 15/16	Adjusted Growth Mar 17 vs Mar 16	Adjusted Growth YTD 16/17 vs YTD 15/16
MRI	307,545	272,126	3,425,118	3,144,880	13.0%	8.9%	3.2%	7.6%
CT	490,382	434,484	5,377,908	5,021,181	12.9%	7.1%	3.1%	5.8%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	639,216	581,695	7,122,706	6,862,731	9.9%	3.8%	0.3%	2.6%
Barium Enema	2,185	2,085	24,117	29,401	4.8%	-18.0%	-4.3%	-18.9%
Dexa Scan	37,201	34,465	420,555	399,379	8.0%	5.3%	-1.4%	4.1%
Audiology Assessments	111,384	101,471	1,226,958	1,238,634	9.8%	-0.9%	0.2%	-2.1%
Echocardiography	135,774	118,430	1,480,641	1,369,745	14.6%	8.1%	4.7%	6.8%
Electrophysiology	2,499	2,035	27,683	27,901	22.8%	-0.8%	12.1%	-1.9%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,402	17,692	223,434	204,534	9.7%	9.2%	0.1%	8.0%
Sleep Studies	13,021	11,416	147,610	139,140	14.1%	6.1%	4.1%	4.8%
Urodynamics	7,334	6,610	81,628	78,116	11.0%	4.5%	1.3%	3.3%
Colonoscopy	48,265	38,563	502,963	455,401	25.2%	10.4%	14.3%	9.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	27,735	22,421	288,853	264,388	23.7%	9.3%	12.9%	8.0%
Cystoscopy	29,775	24,760	312,629	289,690	20.3%	7.9%	9.8%	6.6%
Gastroscopy	66,145	56,673	695,537	684,998	16.7%	1.5%	6.6%	0.3%
All Tests	1,937,885	1,724,926	21,358,340	20,210,119	12.3%	5.7%	2.6%	4.4%

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 Unify2 where it checked and signed off by commissioners. For further details on how the data is collected and the Unify2 system, please refer to the [Data Quality and Methodology Statement](#).

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 [Unify2 Revisions Policy Document](#).

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 8th June 2017. [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 with in 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 unify2@dh.gsi.gov.uk

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 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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