



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

August 2018 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 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 August 2018 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 August 2018 was 28,700. This was 3.1% 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 March 2008.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or longer was not met this month.
- Compared with August 2017 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 9,400, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 0.9 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 3.1% (August 2018).
- At the end of August 2018, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Dexa Scan with 1.3%. The test with the highest proportion was Colonoscopy, with 11.4% 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 2.2 weeks at the end of August 2018.
- There were 931,300 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of August 2018. This is an increase of 56,300 from August 2017. 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 0.5%.
- A total of 1,893,000 diagnostic tests were undertaken in August 2018. This is an increase of 61,000 from August 2017. In the last 12 months activity continues to show an increasing trend with an average monthly increase of 0.3%.
- East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust did not submit due to an update of their patient administration system.
- St Helens and Knowsley Hospital Services NHS Trust did not submit data this month due to an update of their patient administration system.
- Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust submitted a partial return that excluded data for Colonoscopy, Flexi Sigmoidoscopy and Gastroscopy due to implementation of an EPR system.

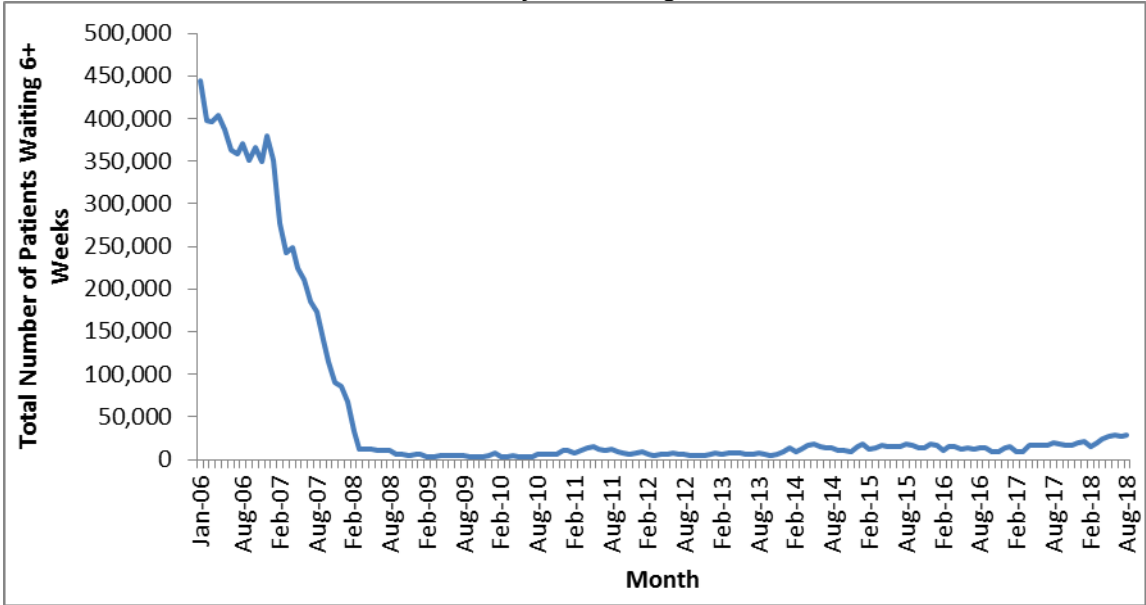
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

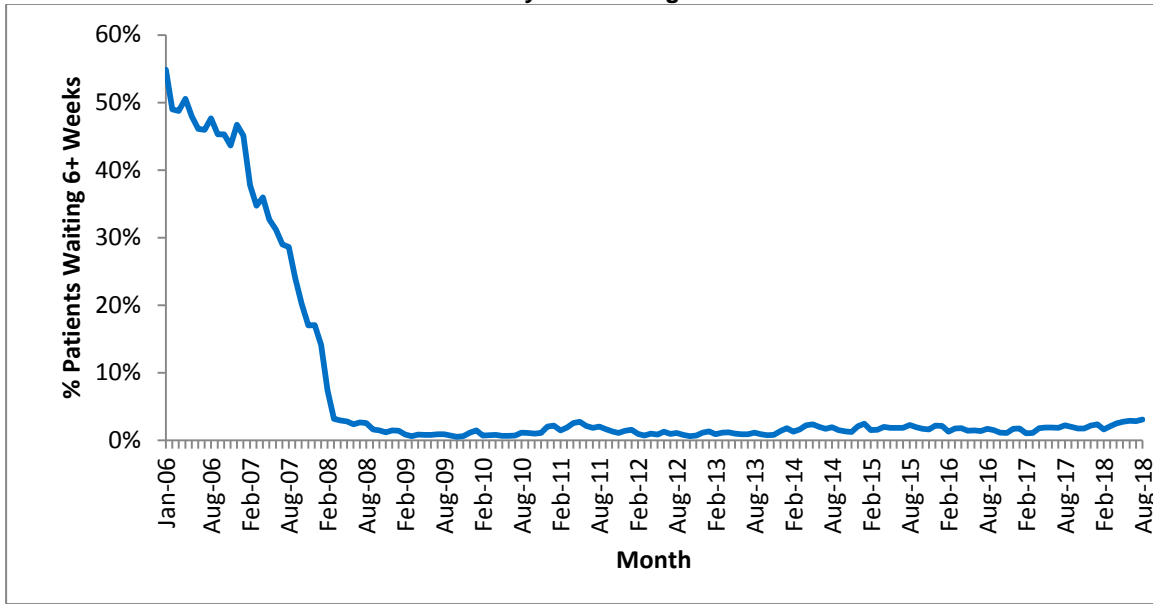
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait 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 August 2018 there was an increase of 1,000 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 August 2018



- 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 3.1% (August 2018). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013. This was the worst performance in the last 12 months and since March 2008.

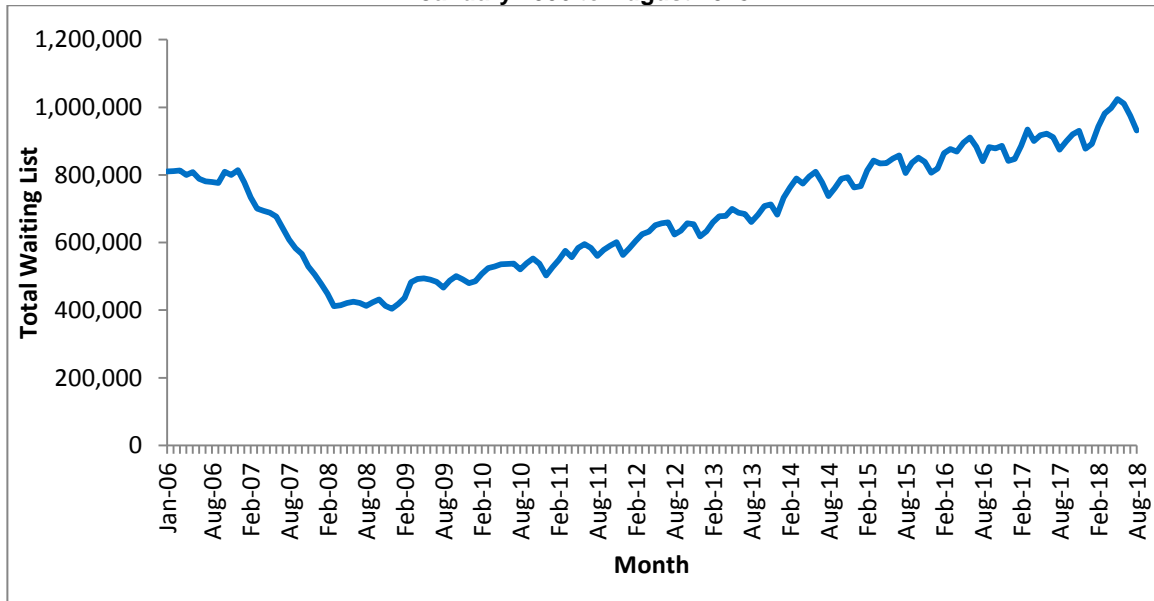
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to August 2018**



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 0.5%.

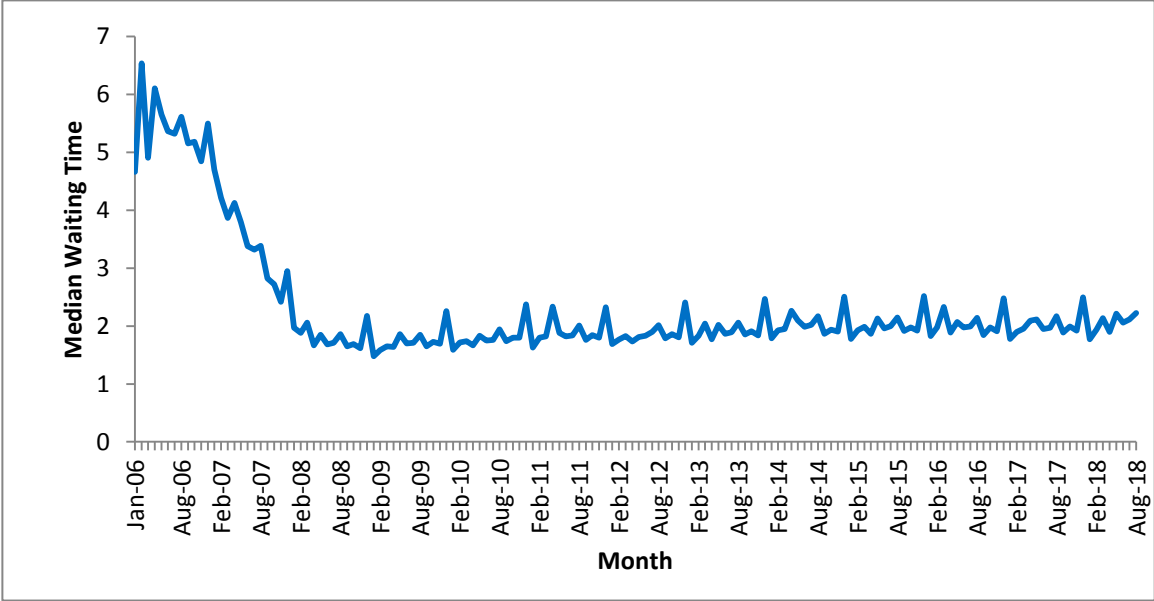
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to August 2018**



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 2.5 weeks (December 2017) and a low of 1.8 weeks (January 2018).

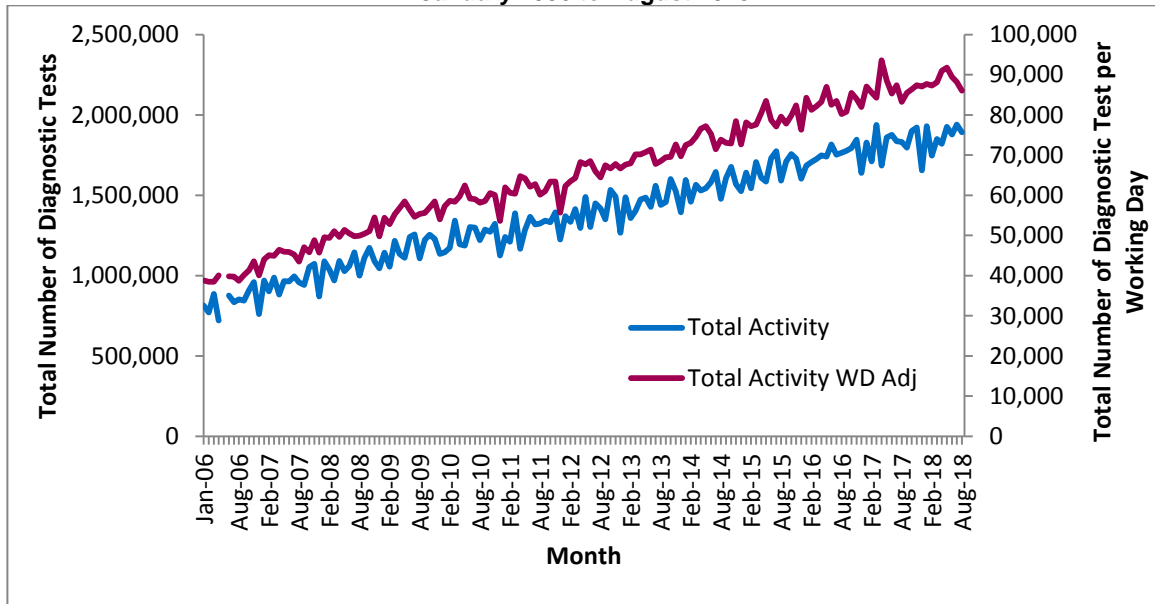
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to August 2018



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 0.3%.

Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests January 2006 to August 2018



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 largest changes have been for Flexi Sigmoidoscopy, where the average monthly increase was 0.7%. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Electrophysiology, where the average monthly decrease was 1.4% (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – August 2017 and August 2018

	Aug-17	Aug-18	Average monthly growth
MRI	298,694	304,471	0.2%
CT	477,885	509,594	0.5%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	601,327	615,357	0.2%
Barium Enema	2,036	1,942	-0.4%
Dexa Scan	37,024	39,089	0.5%
Audiology Assessments	102,594	101,836	-0.1%
Echocardiography	125,844	131,032	0.3%
Electrophysiology	2,979	2,526	-1.4%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,769	18,403	0.3%
Sleep Studies	11,534	11,347	-0.1%
Urodynamics	6,786	6,516	-0.3%
Colonoscopy	42,043	42,431	0.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	24,477	26,486	0.7%
Cystoscopy	24,334	25,366	0.3%
Gastrosocopy	56,673	56,629	0.0%
All Tests	1,831,999	1,893,025	0.3%

4 August 2018 Data

This section analyses the August 2018 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 August 2018, there were a total of 28,700 patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 3.1% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with August 2017, the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 9,400, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 0.9 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with August 2017, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Barium Enema, which increased by 4.3 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Dexa Scan, which decreased by 0.4 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – August 2017 and August 2018

	Aug-17	Aug-18	Difference (%age points)
MRI	1.3%	3.2%	1.9
CT	1.9%	2.6%	0.7
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	1.0%	1.5%	0.5
Barium Enema	0.6%	4.9%	4.3
Dexa Scan	1.6%	1.3%	-0.4
Audiology Assessments	2.2%	1.9%	-0.3
Echocardiography	4.3%	4.1%	-0.2
Electrophysiology	2.0%	2.9%	0.9
Peripheral Neurophysiology	2.3%	3.0%	0.6
Sleep Studies	5.1%	4.9%	-0.3
Urodynamics	9.9%	11.3%	1.4
Colonoscopy	7.6%	11.4%	3.8
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	6.2%	8.0%	1.8
Cystoscopy	6.6%	6.9%	0.4
Gastroscopy	4.8%	5.5%	0.7
All Tests	2.2%	3.1%	0.9

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with August 2017, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Endoscopy with an increase of 1.9 percentage points. Imaging increased by 0.9 percentage points while Physiological Measurement did not change (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

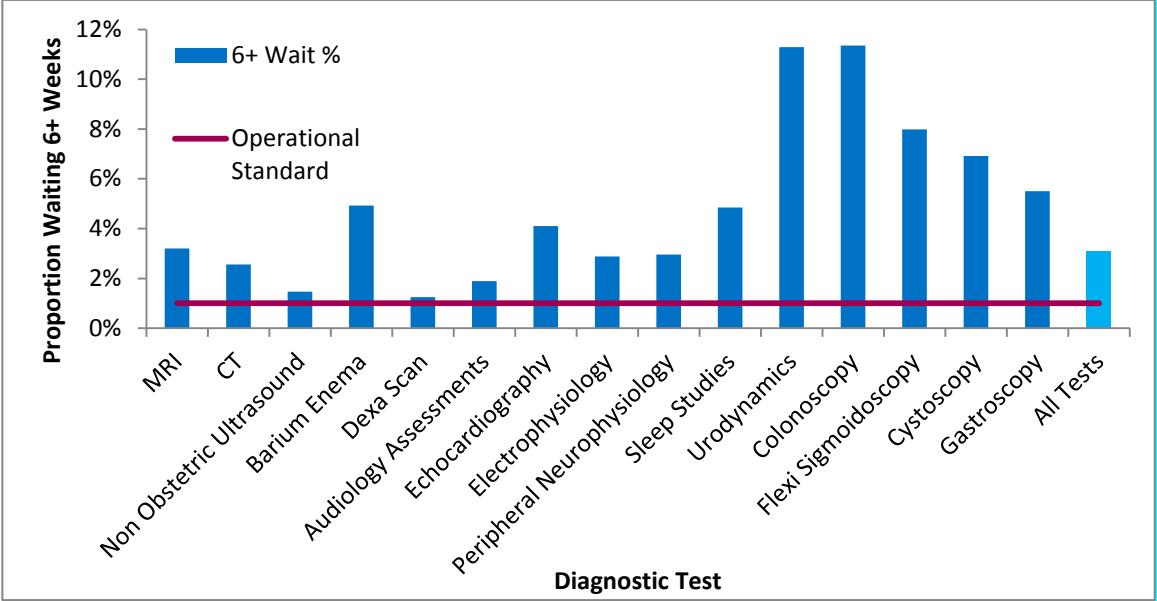
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – August 2017 and August 2018

	Aug-17	Aug-18	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	1.2%	2.1%	0.9
Physiological Measurement	3.6%	3.6%	0.0
Endoscopy	6.2%	8.1%	1.9
Total	2.2%	3.1%	0.9

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 0 of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Dexa Scan (1.3%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Colonoscopy (11.4%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – August 2018



4.1.6. 74 of the 146 acute trusts that submitted data for August 2018 failed to meet the 1% operational standard. Two acute trusts did not submit data.

4.1.7. 134 of the 196 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 30 more than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month and 8 more than in August 2017².

¹ Includes NHS England

² 208 Commissioners in August 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 1.9% and 9.7% (Table 4).

Table 4: August 2018 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	7,465	2.8%	265,695	545,109	2.2
Midlands and East	5,052	1.9%	272,973	547,396	2.2
London	3,544	2.2%	162,454	305,805	2.2
South West	9,530	9.7%	97,782	187,696	2.4
South East	2,966	2.3%	128,178	291,788	2.2
England	28,705	3.1%	931,347	1,893,025	2.2

*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 August 2018 there were a total of 931,300 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 56,300 (6.4%) from August 2017.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 36.1% of the total waiting list, or 336,300 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 – August 2017 and August 2018

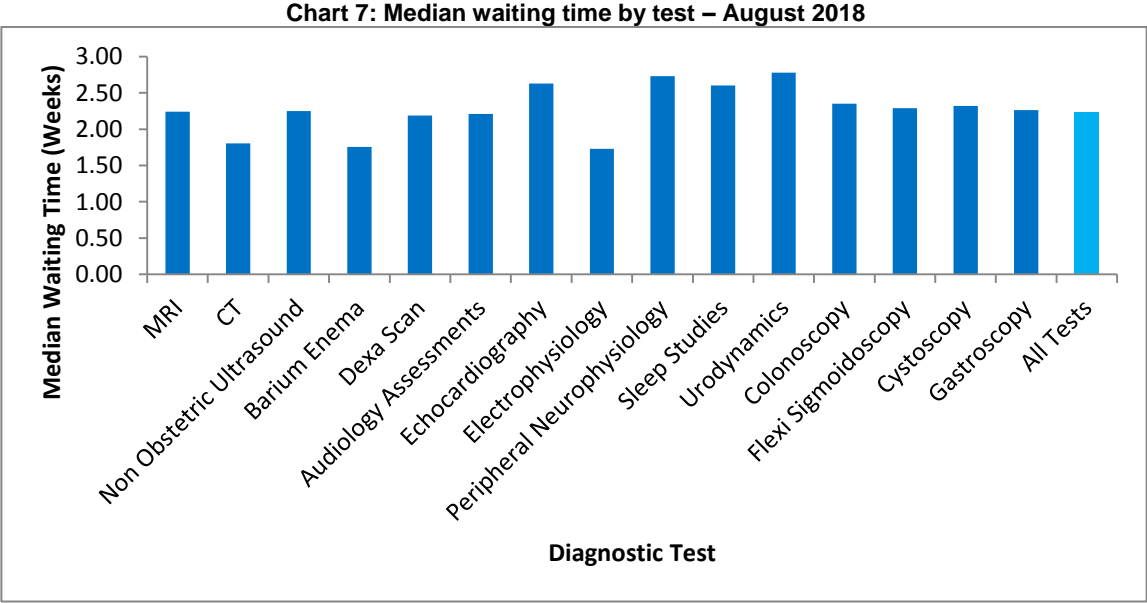
	Aug-17	Aug-18	Growth (%age)
MRI	176,168	186,371	5.8%
CT	110,899	121,900	9.9%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	313,408	336,347	7.3%
Barium Enema	1,151	1,157	0.5%
Dexa Scan	27,873	29,470	5.7%
Audiology Assessments	42,912	41,633	-3.0%
Echocardiography	66,363	69,289	4.4%
Electrophysiology	1,688	762	-54.9%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,224	19,214	5.4%
Sleep Studies	8,417	8,658	2.9%
Urodynamics	4,311	4,562	5.8%
Colonoscopy	35,279	39,541	12.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,172	17,071	5.6%
Cystoscopy	12,856	13,703	6.6%
Gastroscopy	39,355	41,669	5.9%
All Tests	875,076	931,347	6.4%

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

- 4.2.3. There have been large increases in the number of patients waiting for certain tests. The largest percentage growth has been for Colonoscopy where the waiting list increased by 12.1% compared with August 2017. The largest reduction has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list decreased by 54.9%.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of August 2018 the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.2 weeks from the time of referral. This is an increase of 0.1 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Electrophysiology at 1.7 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 2.8 weeks (Chart 7).



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,893,000 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during August 2018. This is an increase of 61,000 (3.3%) from August 2017 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound with 615,400 tests taking place. This accounted for 32.5% of all activity in August 2018. The test with the lowest activity was Barium Enema with 1,900 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 2.9% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – August 2017 and August 2018

	Aug-18	Aug-17	YTD 18/19	YTD 17/18	Growth Aug 18 vs Aug 17	Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18	Adjusted Growth Aug 18 vs Aug 17	Adjusted Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18
MRI	304,471	298,694	1,492,563	1,464,176	1.9%	1.9%	1.9%	0.0%
CT	509,594	477,885	2,500,629	2,342,828	6.6%	6.7%	6.6%	4.7%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	615,357	601,327	3,124,437	2,990,787	2.3%	4.5%	2.3%	2.5%
Barium Enema	1,942	2,036	9,901	10,121	-4.6%	-2.2%	-4.6%	-4.0%
Dexa Scan	39,089	37,024	191,199	179,850	5.6%	6.3%	5.6%	4.3%
Audiology Assessments	101,836	102,594	524,151	517,363	-0.7%	1.3%	-0.7%	-0.6%
Echocardiography	131,032	125,844	654,964	620,345	4.1%	5.6%	4.1%	3.6%
Electrophysiology	2,526	2,979	15,095	12,309	-15.2%	22.6%	-15.2%	20.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,403	17,769	94,468	92,785	3.6%	1.8%	3.6%	-0.1%
Sleep Studies	11,347	11,534	56,126	56,686	-1.6%	-1.0%	-1.6%	-2.9%
Urodynamics	6,516	6,786	32,649	33,961	-4.0%	-3.9%	-4.0%	-5.7%
Colonoscopy	42,431	42,043	214,207	218,922	0.9%	-2.2%	0.9%	-4.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	26,486	24,477	131,198	125,054	8.2%	4.9%	8.2%	2.9%
Cystoscopy	25,366	24,334	127,445	130,407	4.2%	-2.3%	4.2%	-4.1%
Gastroscopy	56,629	56,673	288,389	294,931	-0.1%	-2.2%	-0.1%	-4.1%
All Tests	1,893,025	1,831,999	9,457,421	9,090,525	3.3%	4.0%	3.3%	2.1%

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

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 is 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](#).

Revisions were last published in May 2018 for the months November 2017 to December 2017 prior to the decommissioning of Unify2.

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 November 2018. [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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