



# **NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data**

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## **October 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 October 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 October 2018 was 23,000. This was 2.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or longer was not met this month.
- Compared with October 2017 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 7,000, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 0.6 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 October 2018, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 0.7%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 11.0% 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 2.0 weeks at the end of October 2018.
- There were 984,500 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of October 2018. This is an increase of 64,600 from October 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 0.6%.
- A total of 2,026,800 diagnostic tests were undertaken in October 2018. This is an increase of 126,500 from October 2017. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.5% (0.2% adjusted for working days).
- St Helens and Knowsley Hospital Services NHS Trust did not submit data this month due to an update of their patient administration system.
- East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust submitted a partial submitted that excluded activity data due to an update of their patient administration system.
- Weston Area Health NHS Trust submitted a partial return that excluded data for Imaging due to a technical issue.

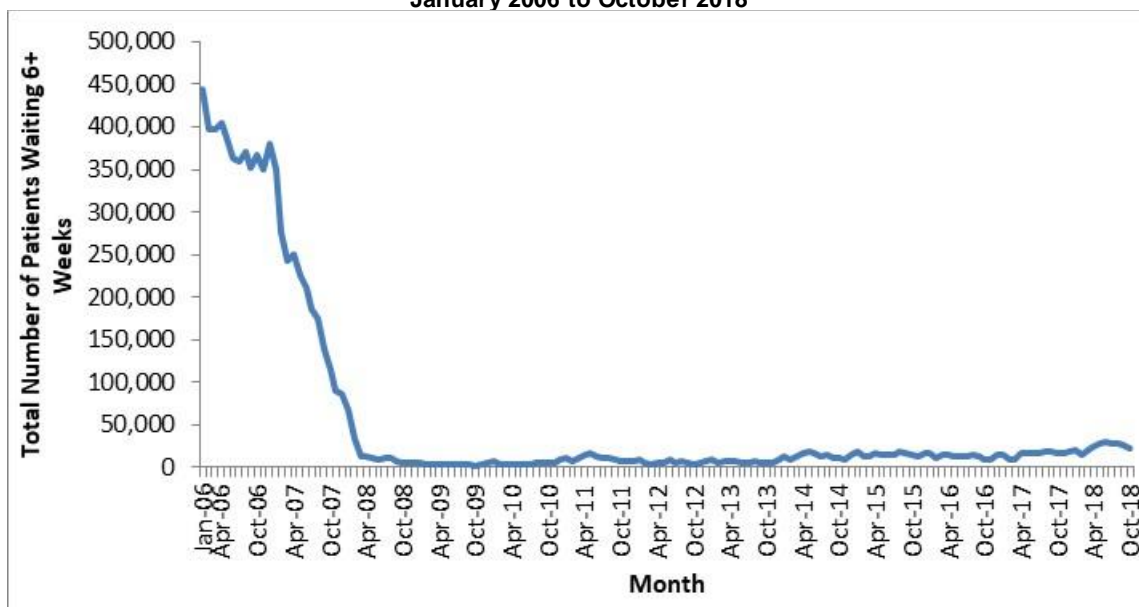
### 3 National Trends

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

#### 3.1 6+ Week Waits

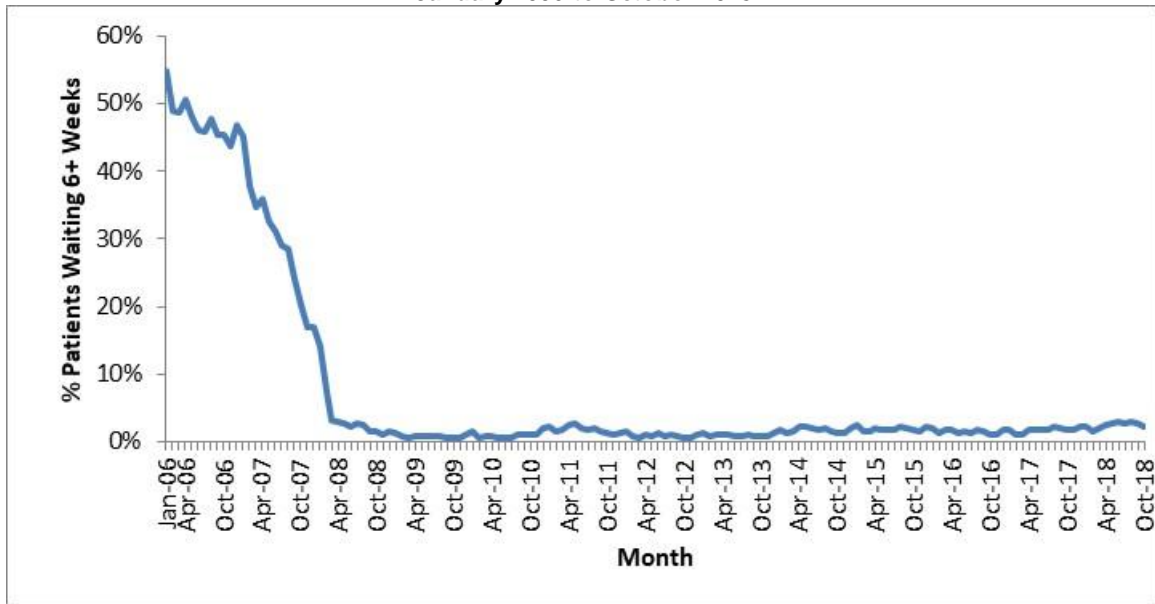
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait 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 October 2018 there was a decrease of 2,300 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 October 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.

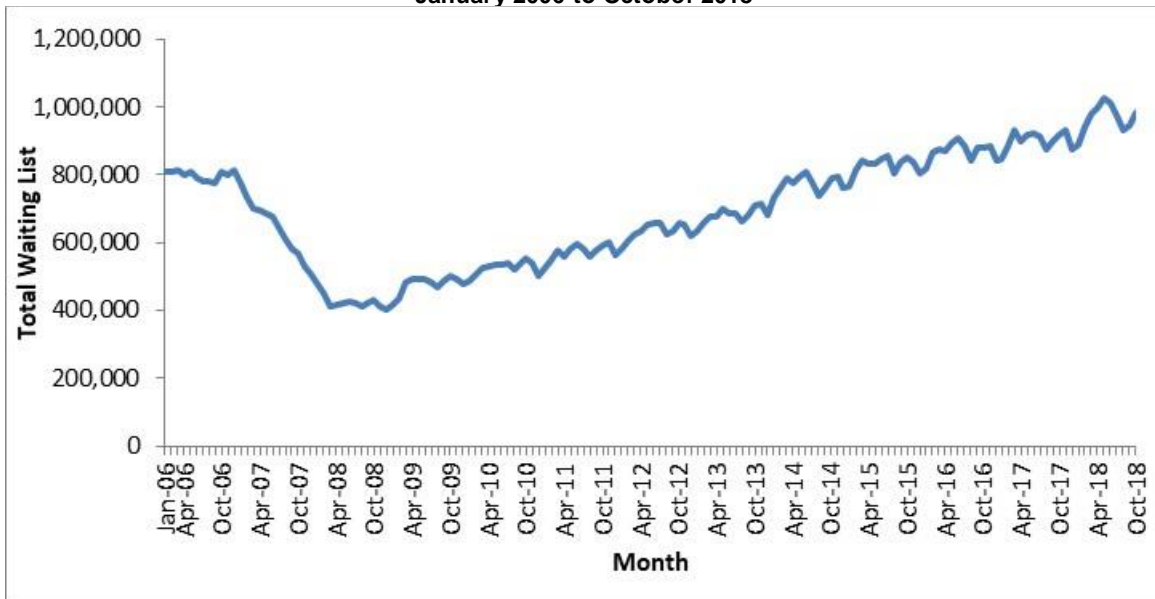
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to October 2018**



### 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 0.6%.

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

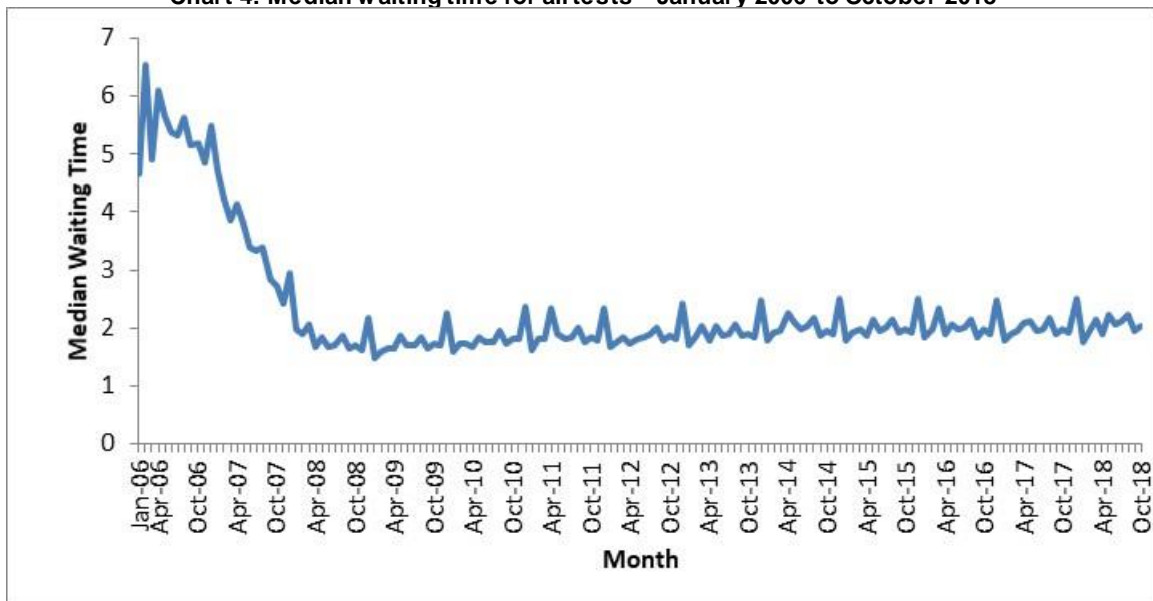




### 3.3 Median Waiting Time

- 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).

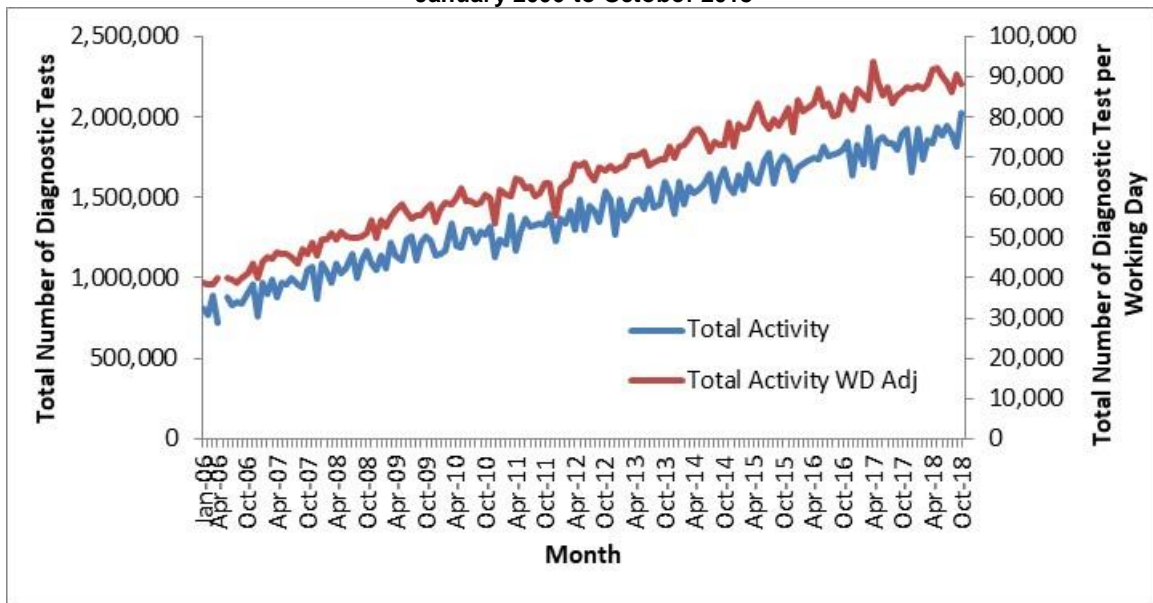
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to October 2018



### 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 increased slightly over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.5%; the average monthly change in activity per working day was an increase of 0.2%.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests January 2006 to October 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 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 Electrophysiology, where the average monthly decrease was 2.0% (Table 1).

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

	Oct-17	Oct-18	Average monthly growth
MRI	306,086	312,861	0.2%
CT	490,127	528,194	0.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	624,184	677,722	0.7%
Barium Enema	2,225	2,095	-0.5%
Dexa Scan	38,045	41,441	0.7%
Audiology Assessments	109,791	117,238	0.5%
Echocardiography	133,782	140,340	0.4%
Electrophysiology	3,421	2,698	-2.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,022	20,343	0.1%
Sleep Studies	12,015	12,427	0.3%
Urodynamics	6,693	7,549	1.0%
Colonoscopy	43,561	47,209	0.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	25,442	28,332	0.9%
Cystoscopy	26,810	27,609	0.2%
Gastroscopy	58,097	60,719	0.4%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,900,301</b>	<b>2,026,777</b>	<b>0.5%</b>

## 4 October 2018 Data

This section analyses the October 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 October 2018, there were a total of 23,000 patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 2.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with October 2017, the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 7,000, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 0.6 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with October 2017, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Colonoscopy, which increased by 4.3 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Audiology Assessments, which decreased by 0.9 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Oct-17	Oct-18	Difference (%age points)
MRI	0.8%	2.1%	<b>1.3</b>
CT	1.5%	1.4%	<b>0.0</b>
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	0.8%	0.7%	<b>-0.1</b>
Barium Enema	0.1%	0.9%	<b>0.8</b>
Dexa Scan	1.6%	1.2%	<b>-0.4</b>
Audiology Assessments	2.0%	1.2%	<b>-0.9</b>
Echocardiography	3.3%	3.6%	<b>0.3</b>
Electrophysiology	1.0%	2.7%	<b>1.6</b>
Peripheral Neurophysiology	1.7%	3.0%	<b>1.3</b>
Sleep Studies	4.1%	5.9%	<b>1.8</b>
Urodynamics	7.8%	11.0%	<b>3.2</b>
Colonoscopy	6.6%	11.0%	<b>4.3</b>
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	4.7%	6.7%	<b>2.0</b>
Cystoscopy	5.1%	7.8%	<b>2.6</b>
Gastroscopy	4.3%	5.9%	<b>1.5</b>
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>0.6</b>

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with October 2017, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Endoscopy with an increase of 2.8 percentage points. Physiological Measurement and Imaging both increased by 0.3 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

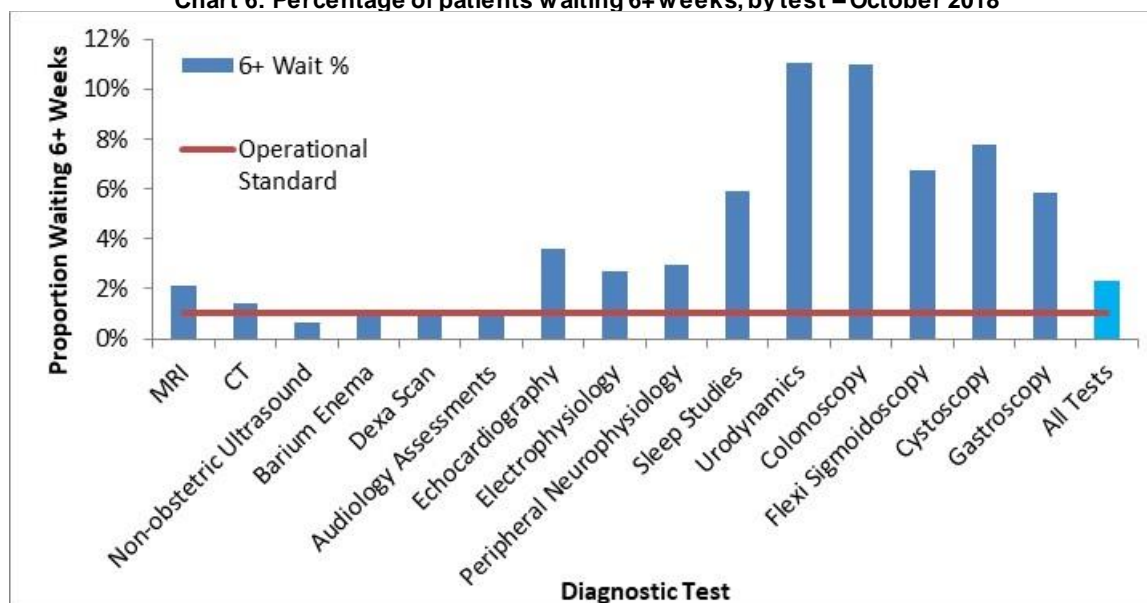
**Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – October 2017 and October 2018**

	Oct-17	Oct-18	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	0.9%	1.2%	0.3
Physiological Measurement	2.8%	3.2%	0.3
Endoscopy	5.3%	8.0%	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>0.6</b>

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 Non-obstetric Ultrasound (0.7%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Urodynamics (11.0%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 56 of the 148 acute trusts that submitted data for October 2018 failed to meet the 1% operational standard. One acute trust did not submit data.

4.1.7. 107 of the 196 Commissioners<sup>1</sup> failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 5 less than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month and 23 more than in October 2017<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Includes NHS England

<sup>2</sup> 208 Commissioners in October 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 1.5% and 6.2% (Table 4).

**Table 4: October 2018 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Regional Team\***

<b>Region</b>	<b>Number of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end</b>	<b>Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end</b>	<b>Total number of patients waiting at month end</b>	<b>Total activity undertaken in month</b>	<b>Median waiting time</b>
North	5,660	2.0%	280,593	592,299	2.0
Midlands and East	4,296	1.5%	294,518	589,532	2.0
London	3,830	2.2%	172,639	326,559	2.1
South West	6,049	6.2%	97,301	195,626	2.2
South East	3,024	2.2%	135,129	306,867	2.0
<b>England</b>	<b>22,996</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>984,531</b>	<b>2,026,777</b>	<b>2.0</b>

\*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 October 2018 there were a total of 984,500 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 64,600 (7.0%) from October 2017.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 35.9% of the total waiting list, or 353,600 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.1% of the total waiting list, or 600 patients (Table 5).

**Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – October 2017 and October 2018**

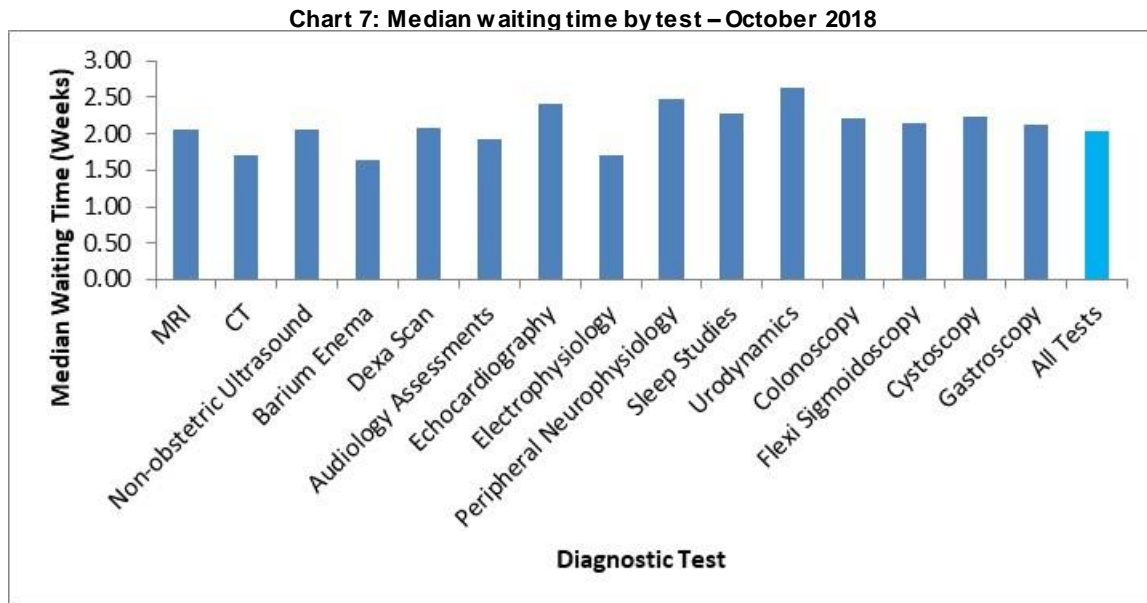
	Oct-17	Oct-18	Growth (%age)
MRI	193,557	203,408	5.1%
CT	119,665	130,505	9.1%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	323,867	353,577	9.2%
Barium Enema	1,220	1,337	9.6%
Dexa Scan	29,461	30,406	3.2%
Audiology Assessments	46,345	43,475	-6.2%
Echocardiography	66,232	70,552	6.5%
Electrophysiology	1,762	599	-66.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,542	19,596	0.3%
Sleep Studies	8,827	8,706	-1.4%
Urodynamics	4,179	4,625	10.7%
Colonoscopy	35,191	41,162	17.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,441	17,942	9.1%
Cystoscopy	13,455	15,294	13.7%
Gastroscopy	40,205	43,347	7.8%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>919,949</b>	<b>984,531</b>	<b>7.0%</b>

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 17.0% compared with October 2017. The largest reduction has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list decreased by 66.0%.

### 4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of October 2018, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.0 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 Barium Enema at 1.6 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 2,026,800 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during October 2018. This is an increase of 126,500 (6.7%) from October 2017 (an increase of 2.0% adjusted for working days) (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 677,700 tests taking place. This accounted for 33.4% of all activity in October 2018. 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 3.2% from the same period last year.

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

	Oct-18	Oct-17	YTD 18/19	YTD 17/18	Growth Oct 18 vs Oct 17	Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18	Adjusted Growth Oct 18 vs Oct 17	Adjusted Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18
MRI	312,861	306,086	2,111,206	2,063,141	2.2%	2.3%	-2.2%	1.0%
CT	528,194	490,127	3,523,632	3,300,430	7.8%	6.8%	3.1%	5.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	677,722	624,184	4,419,217	4,205,125	8.6%	5.1%	3.9%	3.7%
Barium Enema	2,095	2,225	13,791	14,224	-5.8%	-3.0%	-9.9%	-4.3%
Dexa Scan	41,441	38,045	267,820	252,029	8.9%	6.3%	4.2%	4.8%
Audiology Assessments	117,238	109,791	738,414	728,109	6.8%	1.4%	2.1%	0.1%
Echocardiography	140,340	133,782	919,036	878,471	4.9%	4.6%	0.3%	3.2%
Electrophysiology	2,698	3,421	20,359	18,721	-21.1%	8.7%	-24.6%	7.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,343	20,022	132,868	130,787	1.6%	1.6%	-2.8%	0.2%
Sleep Studies	12,427	12,015	79,062	80,346	3.4%	-1.6%	-1.1%	-2.9%
Urodynamics	7,549	6,693	46,956	47,139	12.8%	-0.4%	7.9%	-1.7%
Colonoscopy	47,209	43,561	303,997	303,863	8.4%	0.0%	3.7%	-1.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	28,332	25,442	184,350	174,182	11.4%	5.8%	6.5%	4.4%
Cystoscopy	27,609	26,810	179,326	181,348	3.0%	-1.1%	-1.5%	-2.4%
Gastroscopy	60,719	58,097	403,131	408,501	4.5%	-1.3%	0.0%	-2.6%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>2,026,777</b>	<b>1,900,301</b>	<b>13,343,165</b>	<b>12,786,416</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>4.4%</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	<b>3.0%</b>

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 Revisions

5.1. Data has been revised for the months January 2018 to September 2018. This covered a total of 100 revisions from 39 organisations. The amendments have had a small impact on the national data (Table 7).

Table 7: Revisions published on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Month	Total Activity			Total Waiting List			Total 6+ week waits		
	Original	Revised	Difference	Original	Revised	Difference	Original	Revised	Difference
January	1,929,687	1,929,711	24	891,414	891,193	- 221	20,904	20,803	- 101
February	1,745,983	1,737,072	- 8,911	943,254	943,452	198	15,047	14,921	- 126
March	1,850,377	1,851,351	974	981,504	979,831	- 1,673	20,314	20,236	- 78
April	1,819,453	1,831,873	12,420	997,738	998,942	1,204	24,716	24,679	- 19
May	1,926,555	1,938,563	12,008	1,025,865	1,025,279	1,414	27,825	27,855	30
June	1,878,170	1,890,755	12,585	1,011,481	1,013,153	1,672	29,031	29,037	6
July	1,940,218	1,945,863	5,645	975,252	976,031	779	27,661	27,574	- 87
August	1,893,025	1,895,665	2,640	931,347	932,881	1,534	28,705	28,553	- 152
September	1,809,335	1,813,669	4,334	944,691	946,133	1,442	25,233	25,269	36

5.2. These revisions have had minimal impact on the national proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more or the median waiting times for each of these nine months.

## 6 Annex

### 6.1 Methodology

6.1.1. 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.

6.1.2. 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](#).

### 6.2 Data Revision

6.2.1. 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 December 2018 for the months January 2018 to September 2018 alongside October 2018 data.

### 6.3 Data Availability

6.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. The next publication of this report and accompanying data will be 10<sup>th</sup> January 2018. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here.](#)

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

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

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

## 6.4 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.

## 6.5 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](mailto: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](#).

## 6.6 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 5<sup>th</sup> April 2018. NHS England will publish a response to the feedback received as part of this consultation once results have been analysed.

## 6.7 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](mailto:nhsengland.media@nhs.net)

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

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