



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

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December 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 December 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 December 2018 was 31,400. This was 3.3% 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 December 2017 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 12,200, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 1.1 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 3.3% (December 2018).
- At the end of December 2018, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Dexa Scan with 1.0%. The test with the highest proportion was Colonoscopy, with 13.6% 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 2.6 weeks at the end of December 2018.
- There were 951,100 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of December 2018. This is an increase of 73,200 from December 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 0.7%.
- A total of 1,758,100 diagnostic tests were undertaken in December 2018. This is an increase of 103,000 from December 2017. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.5%.
- North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust submitted a partial return that excluded some activity data for Cardiography - Echocardiography due to a coding issue.
- Weston Area Health NHS Trust submitted a partial return that excluded data for Imaging due to a technical issue.

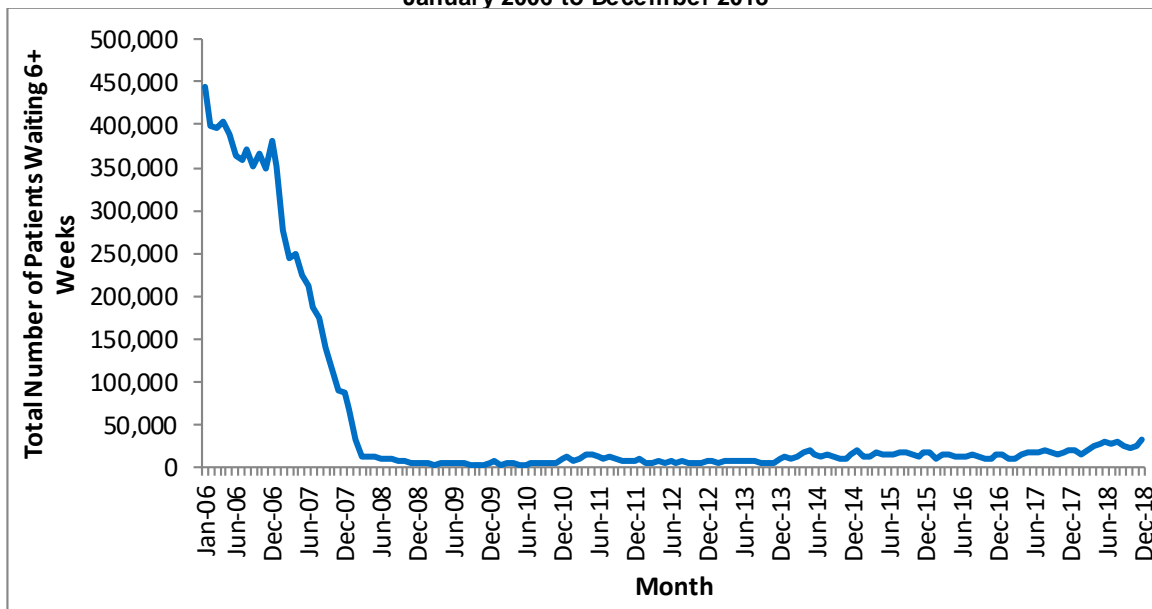
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

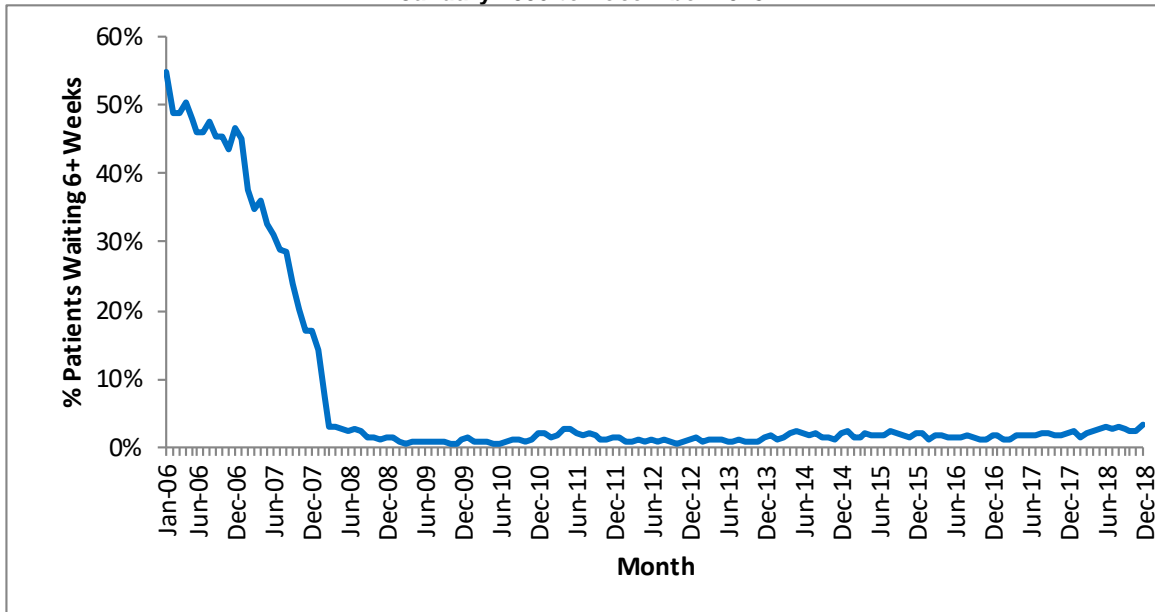
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait 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 December 2018 there was an increase of 7,500 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 December 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 3.3% (December 2018). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013. 3.3% in December 2018 was the worst performance in the last 12 months and since February 2008.

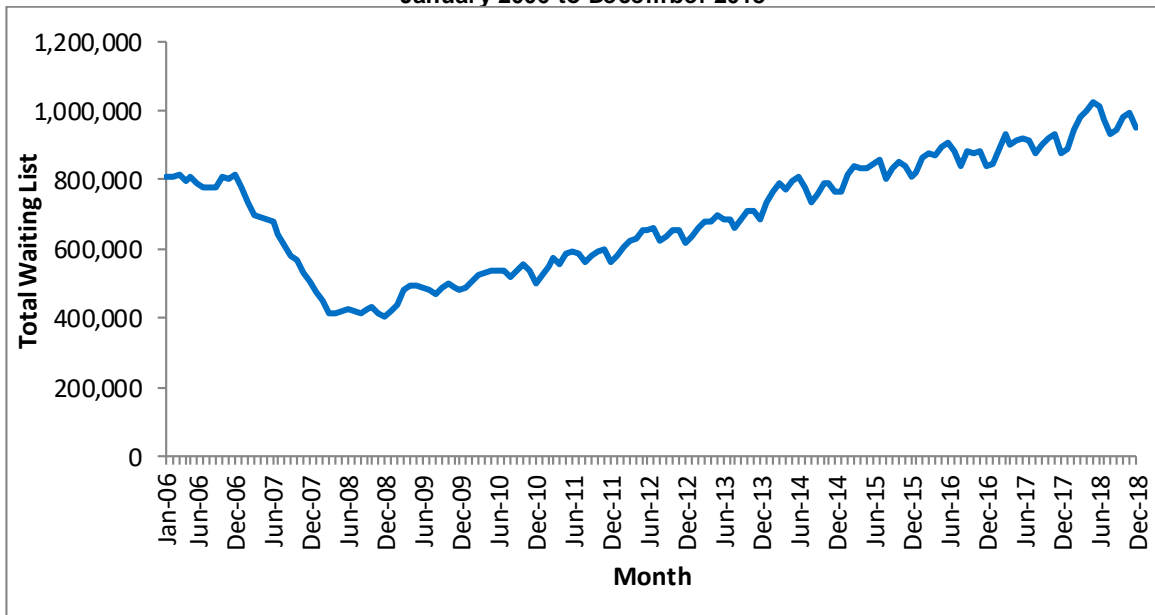
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to December 2018**



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 0.7%.

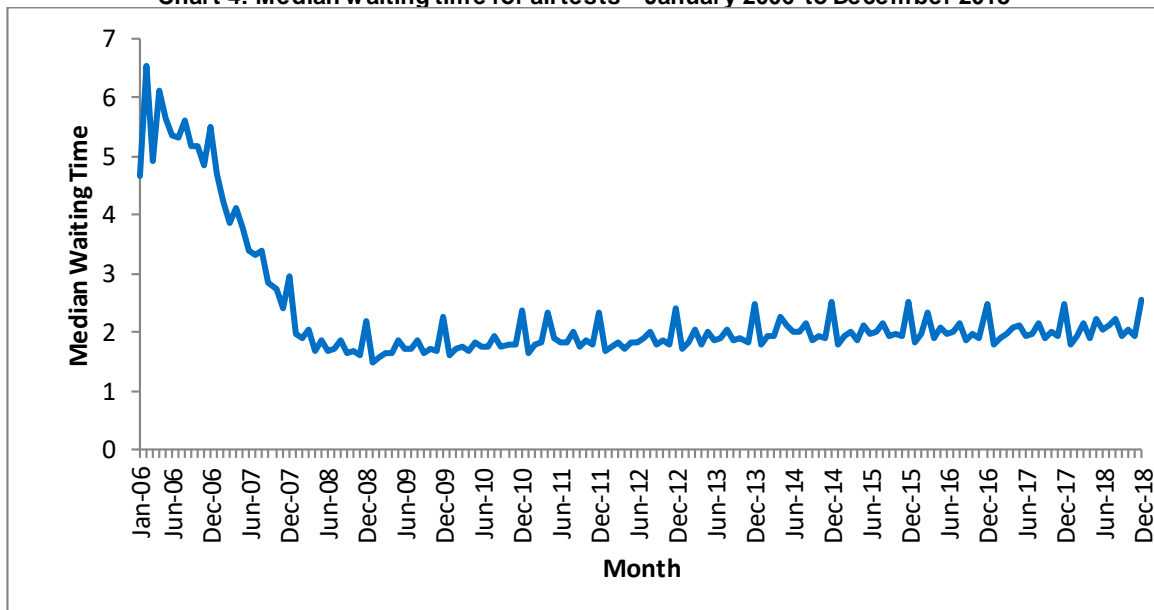
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to December 2018**



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

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

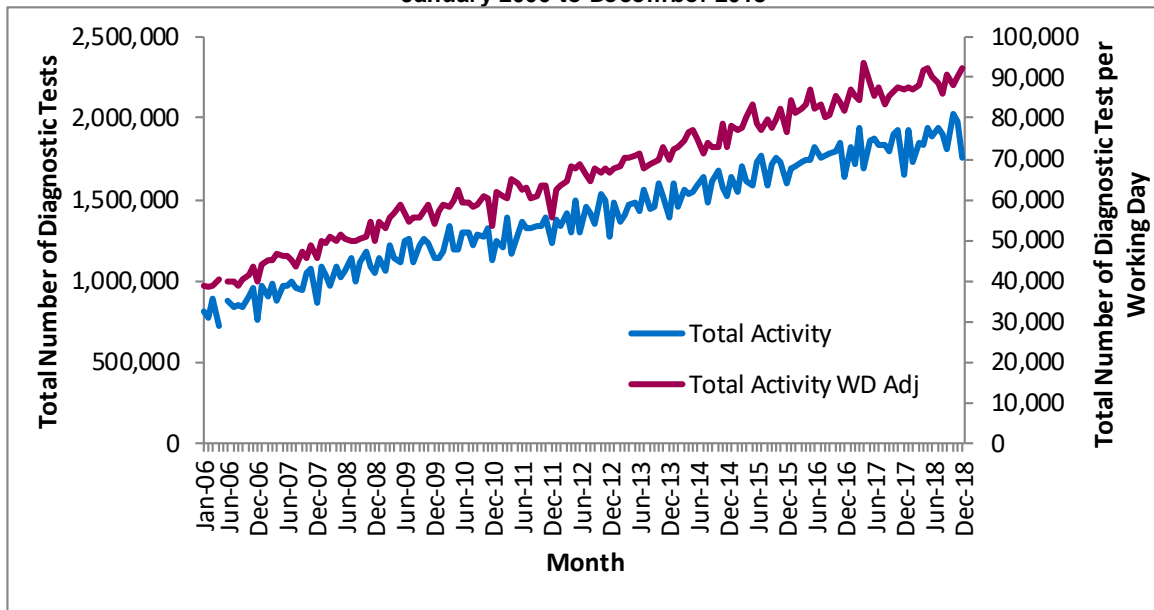


3.4 Total Activity

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 0.5%.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to December 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 Colonoscopy, 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 – December 2017 and December 2018

	Dec-17	Dec-18	Average monthly growth
MRI	274,492	284,917	0.3%
CT	455,789	491,945	0.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	529,320	569,113	0.6%
Barium Enema	1,730	1,878	0.7%
Dexa Scan	31,055	31,964	0.2%
Audiology Assessments	88,280	90,596	0.2%
Echocardiography	111,825	115,582	0.3%
Electrophysiology	2,739	2,143	-2.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	15,855	16,711	0.4%
Sleep Studies	9,363	8,912	-0.4%
Urodynamics	5,482	6,011	0.8%
Colonoscopy	35,112	39,701	1.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	21,479	22,728	0.5%
Cystoscopy	22,319	23,977	0.6%
Gastroscopy	50,259	51,925	0.3%
All Tests	1,655,099	1,758,103	0.5%

4 December 2018 Data

This section analyses the December 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 December 2018, there were a total of 31,400 patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 3.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with December 2017, the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 12,200, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 1.1 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with December 2017, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Colonoscopy, which increased by 6.3 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Dexa Scan, which decreased by 1.7 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Dec-17	Dec-18	Difference (%age points)
MRI	1.6%	2.7%	1.2
CT	1.5%	2.3%	0.7
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	1.0%	1.3%	0.3
Barium Enema	0.3%	1.3%	1.1
Dexa Scan	2.7%	1.0%	-1.7
Audiology Assessments	2.8%	1.6%	-1.3
Echocardiography	3.2%	6.4%	3.2
Electrophysiology	1.1%	3.6%	2.6
Peripheral Neurophysiology	1.8%	2.9%	1.1
Sleep Studies	6.5%	5.8%	-0.7
Urodynamics	10.5%	12.9%	2.4
Colonoscopy	7.3%	13.6%	6.3
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	5.1%	8.7%	3.6
Cystoscopy	6.4%	8.2%	1.8
Gastroscopy	4.6%	7.2%	2.5
All Tests	2.2%	3.3%	1.1

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with December 2017, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Endoscopy with an increase of 3.9 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 1.5 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 0.5 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

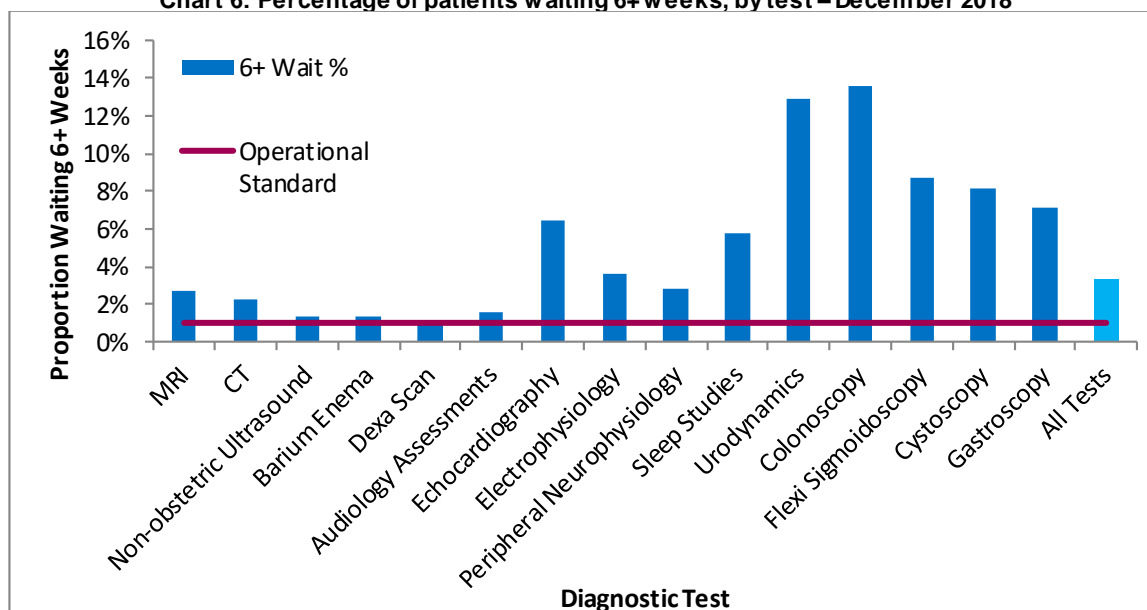
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – December 2017 and December 2018

	Dec-17	Dec-18	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	1.3%	1.9%	0.5
Physiological Measurement	3.3%	4.8%	1.5
Endoscopy	5.8%	9.8%	3.9
Total	2.2%	3.3%	1.1

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 1 of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Dexa Scan (0.95%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Colonoscopy (13.6%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 78 of the 149 acute trusts that submitted data for December 2018 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. 136 of the 196 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 29 more than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month and 16 more than in December 2017².

¹ Includes NHS England

² 208 Commissioners in December 2017

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 1.8% and 8.1% (Table 4).

Table 4: December 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	8,416	3.0%	278,043	517,150	2.6
Midlands and East	4,944	1.8%	278,439	522,542	2.5
London	6,451	3.9%	163,366	280,369	2.6
South West	7,598	8.1%	93,459	163,829	2.8
South East	3,820	2.9%	133,656	261,071	2.5
England	31,353	3.3%	951,054	1,758,103	2.6

*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 December 2018 there were a total of 951,100 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 73,200 (8.3%) from December 2017.

4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 35.5% of the total waiting list, or 337,700 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 – December 2017 and December 2018

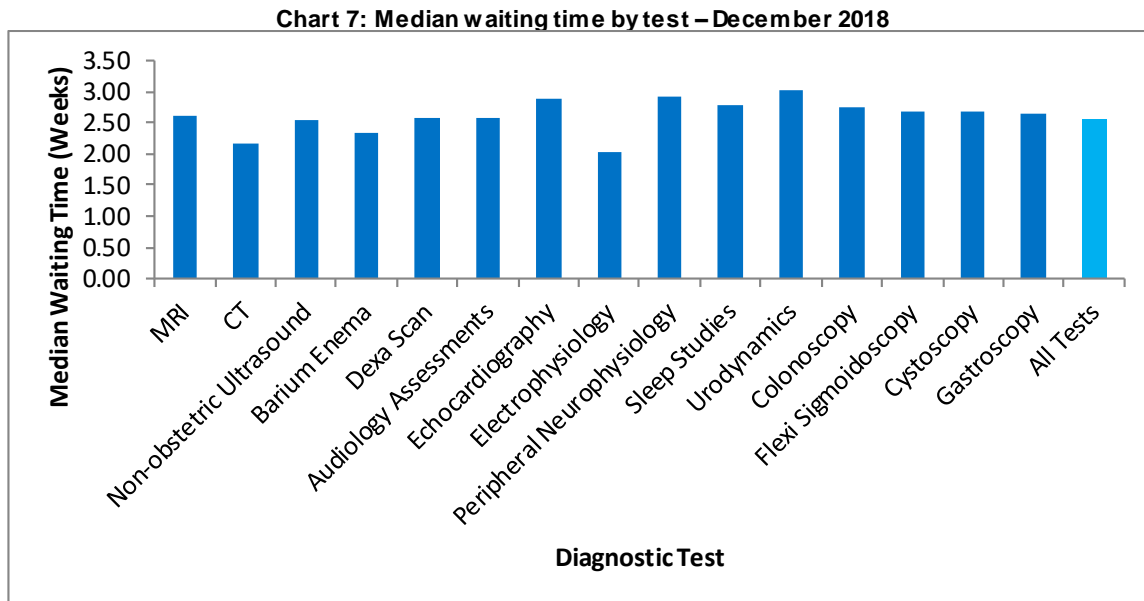
	Dec-17	Dec-18	Growth (%age)
MRI	180,966	195,488	8.0%
CT	112,753	123,939	9.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	308,368	337,718	9.5%
Barium Enema	1,185	1,433	20.9%
Dexa Scan	29,214	28,700	-1.8%
Audiology Assessments	41,739	39,467	-5.4%
Echocardiography	63,521	72,756	14.5%
Electrophysiology	1,712	804	-53.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,391	19,273	-0.6%
Sleep Studies	8,581	9,144	6.6%
Urodynamics	4,298	5,040	17.3%
Colonoscopy	35,318	40,776	15.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,202	18,466	7.3%
Cystoscopy	13,107	14,758	12.6%
Gastroscopy	40,494	43,292	6.9%
All Tests	877,849	951,054	8.3%

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 20.9% compared with December 2017. The largest reduction has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list decreased by 53.0%.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of December 2018, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.6 weeks from the time of referral. This is an increase of 0.6 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Electrophysiology at 2.0 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 3.0 weeks (Chart 7).



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 1,758,100 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during December 2018. This is an increase of 103,000 (6.2%) from December 2017 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 569,100 tests taking place. This accounted for 32.4% of all activity in December 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 3.5% from the same period last year (3.1% adjusted for working days).

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

	Dec-18	Dec-17	YTD 18/19	YTD 17/18	Growth Dec 18 vs Dec 17	Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18	Adjusted Growth Dec 18 vs Dec 17	Adjusted Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18
MRI	284,917	274,492	2,703,043	2,640,844	3.8%	2.4%	3.8%	1.3%
CT	491,945	455,789	4,529,294	4,242,054	7.9%	6.8%	7.9%	5.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	569,113	529,320	5,652,124	5,377,462	7.5%	5.1%	7.5%	4.0%
Barium Enema	1,878	1,730	17,747	18,212	8.6%	-2.6%	8.6%	-3.6%
Dexa Scan	31,964	31,055	339,448	321,091	2.9%	5.7%	2.9%	4.6%
Audiology Assessments	90,596	88,280	944,719	930,354	2.6%	1.5%	2.6%	0.5%
Echocardiography	115,582	111,825	1,172,562	1,124,678	3.4%	4.3%	3.4%	3.2%
Electrophysiology	2,143	2,739	25,213	24,936	-21.8%	1.1%	-21.8%	0.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,711	15,855	169,420	167,107	5.4%	1.4%	5.4%	0.3%
Sleep Studies	8,912	9,363	99,811	101,849	-4.8%	-2.0%	-4.8%	-3.0%
Urodynamics	6,011	5,482	60,692	59,735	9.6%	1.6%	9.6%	0.5%
Colonoscopy	39,701	35,112	391,435	383,456	13.1%	2.1%	13.1%	1.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	22,728	21,479	235,173	221,796	5.8%	6.0%	5.8%	4.9%
Cystoscopy	23,977	22,319	231,179	231,605	7.4%	-0.2%	7.4%	-1.2%
Gastroscopy	51,925	50,259	515,697	518,455	3.3%	-0.5%	3.3%	-1.6%
All Tests	1,758,103	1,655,099	17,087,557	16,363,634	6.2%	4.4%	6.2%	3.3%

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 14th March 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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