

# NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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

## **February 2019 Monthly Report**

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# 1 Executive summary

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

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 and NHS Improvement'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 February 2019 Key Findings

- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of February 2019 was 23,900. 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 February 2018 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 9,000, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 0.7 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 2.1% (March 2018) and 3.6% (January 2019).
- At the end of February 2019, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Barium Enema with 0.5%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 12.9% 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 2.1 weeks at the end of February 2019.
- There were 1,040,800 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of February 2019. This is an increase of 97,300 from February 2018. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test continues to show an increasing trend with an average monthly increase of 0.8%.
- A total of 1,849,000 diagnostic tests were undertaken in February 2019. This is an increase of 111,900 from February 2018. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.5%.

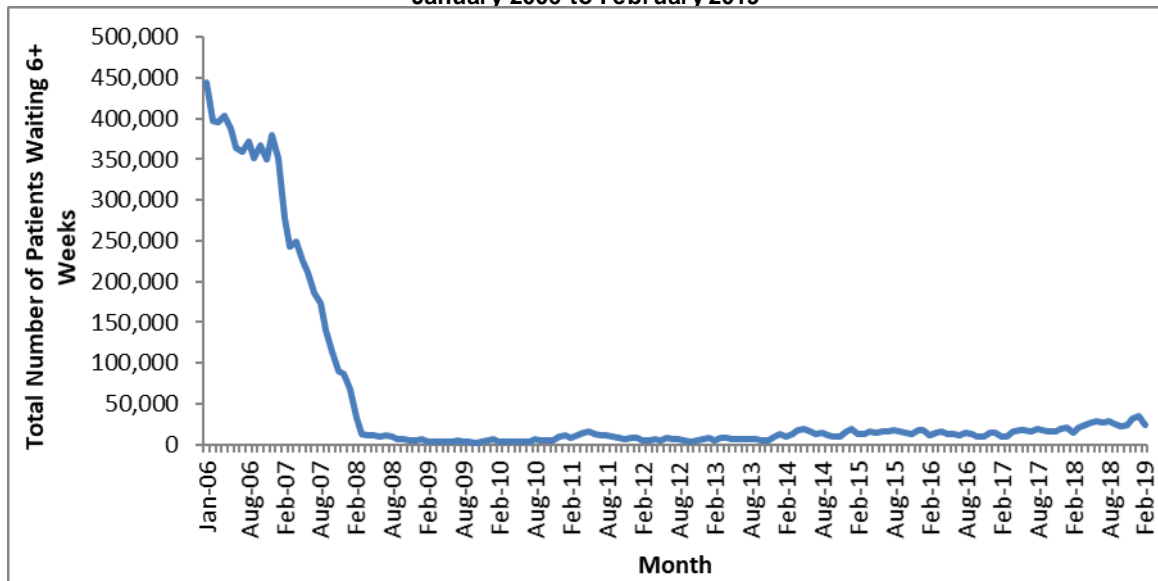
### 3 National Trends

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

#### 3.1 6+ Week Waits

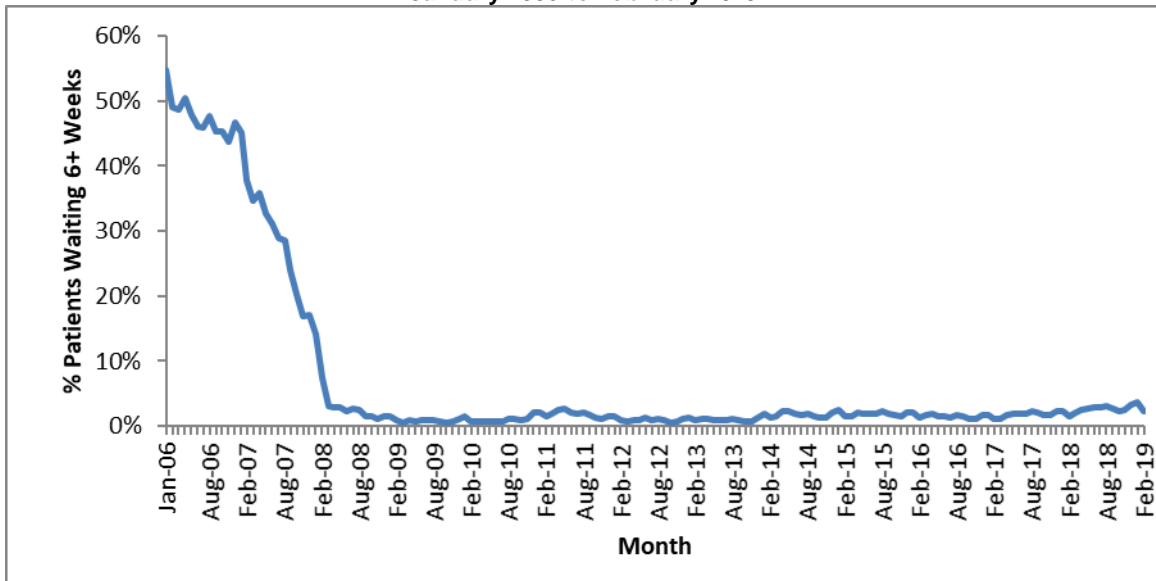
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait 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 February 2019 there was a decrease of 11,600 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 February 2019



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer shows a similar drop between January 2007 and the 6 week milestone in March 2008 before stabilising (Chart 2). In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 2.1% (March 2018) and 3.6% (January 2019). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

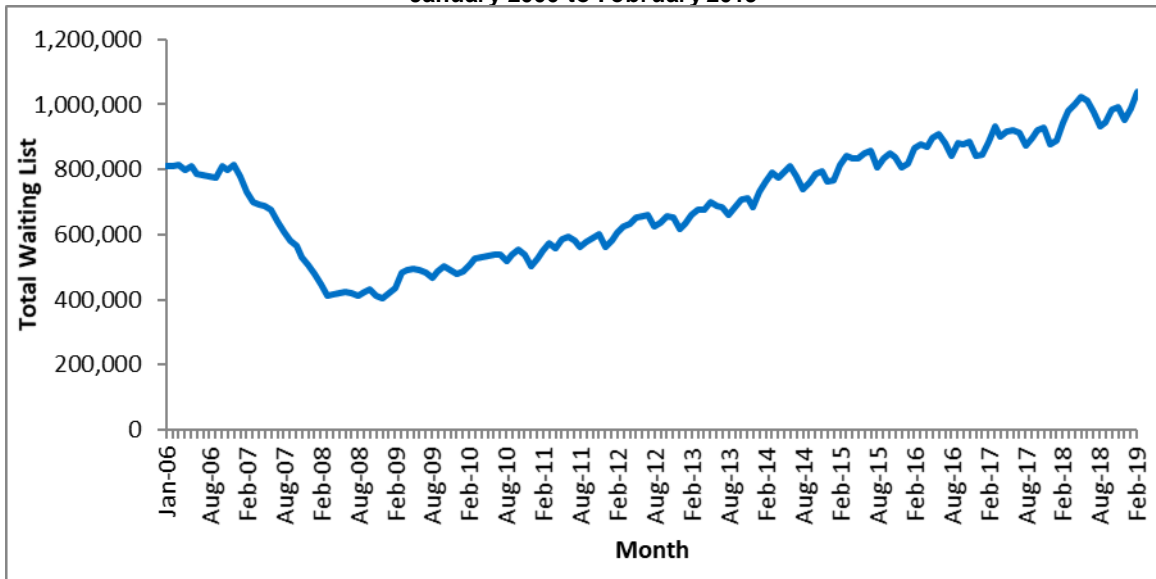
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to February 2019**



### 3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As seen with the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer, the total number of patients waiting at the month end dropped dramatically between January 2007 and the 6 week milestone in March 2008 (Chart 3). Between March 2008 and January 2009 the total waiting list remained stable, after which the underlying trend has shown an increase. In the last 12 months the average monthly increase was 0.8%.

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

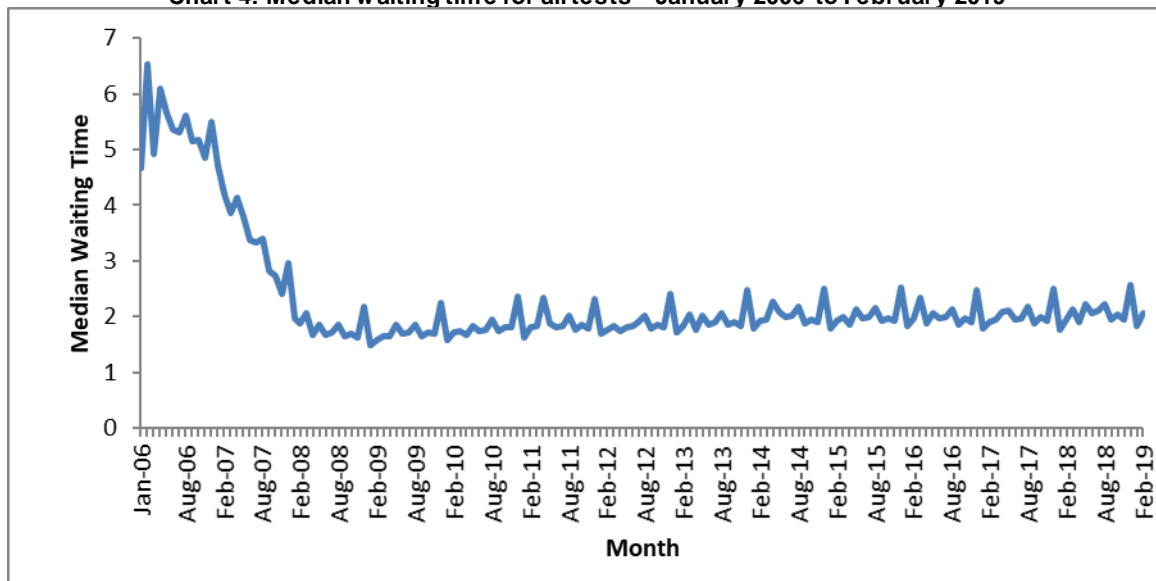




### 3.3 Median Waiting Time

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

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

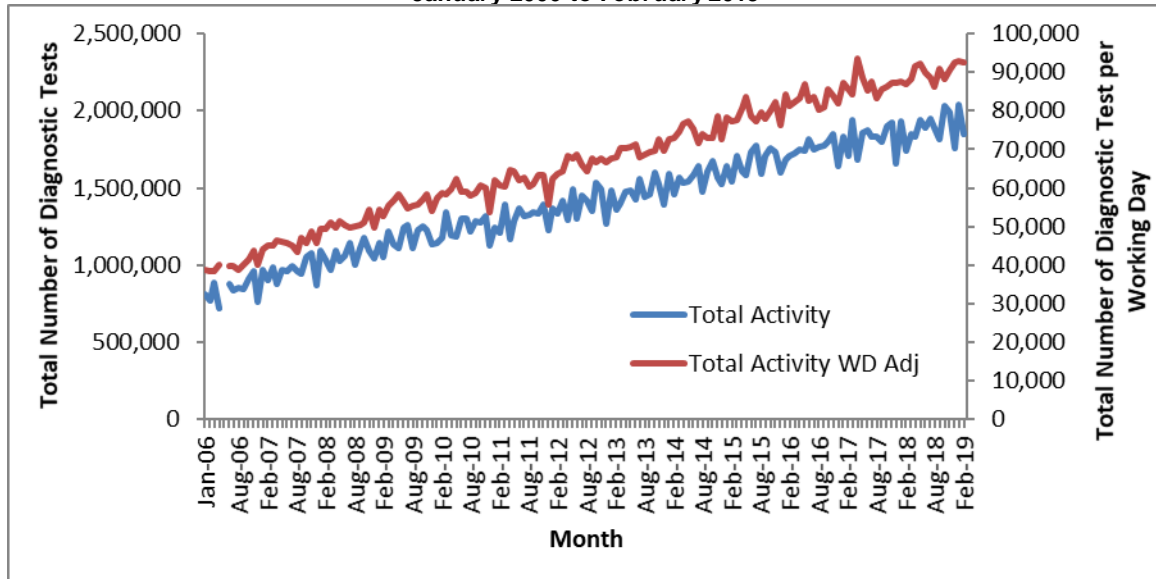


### 3.4 Total Activity

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

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

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



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

3.4.3. In the previous 12 months, individual tests have shown slight changes in activity. The test with the largest increase in activity was 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 1.0% (Table 1).

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

	Feb-18	Feb-19	Average monthly growth
MRI	275,222	290,012	0.4%
CT	457,033	486,862	0.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	570,517	614,324	0.6%
Barium Enema	1,802	1,799	0.0%
Dexa Scan	33,592	36,227	0.6%
Audiology Assessments	98,600	99,615	0.1%
Echocardiography	121,743	130,601	0.6%
Electrophysiology	2,858	2,537	-1.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,556	17,778	0.1%
Sleep Studies	10,298	10,525	0.2%
Urodynamics	6,143	6,707	0.7%
Colonoscopy	39,370	44,506	1.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	24,506	25,696	0.4%
Cystoscopy	23,352	24,878	0.5%
Gastroscopy	54,480	56,923	0.4%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,737,072</b>	<b>1,848,990</b>	<b>0.5%</b>

## 4 February 2019 Data

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

### 4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of February 2019, there were a total of 23,900 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 February 2018, the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 9,000, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 0.7 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with February 2018, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Urodynamics, which increased by 4.9 percentage points. The tests with the largest decrease was Audiology Assessments which decreased by 1.2 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Feb-18	Feb-19	Difference (%age points)
MRI	1.2%	1.9%	<b>0.8</b>
CT	1.6%	1.7%	<b>0.1</b>
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	0.5%	0.6%	<b>0.1</b>
Barium Enema	0.4%	0.5%	<b>0.1</b>
Dexa Scan	1.3%	0.5%	<b>-0.8</b>
Audiology Assessments	2.0%	0.8%	<b>-1.2</b>
Echocardiography	2.9%	5.3%	<b>2.4</b>
Electrophysiology	0.8%	4.4%	<b>3.6</b>
Peripheral Neurophysiology	1.9%	2.2%	<b>0.3</b>
Sleep Studies	4.9%	4.3%	<b>-0.6</b>
Urodynamics	8.0%	12.9%	<b>4.9</b>
Colonoscopy	5.1%	9.7%	<b>4.6</b>
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	3.2%	6.0%	<b>2.8</b>
Cystoscopy	4.5%	7.4%	<b>2.9</b>
Gastroscopy	3.7%	5.8%	<b>2.1</b>
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>0.7</b>

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with February 2018, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Endoscopy with an increase of 3.2 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 1.1 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 0.2 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

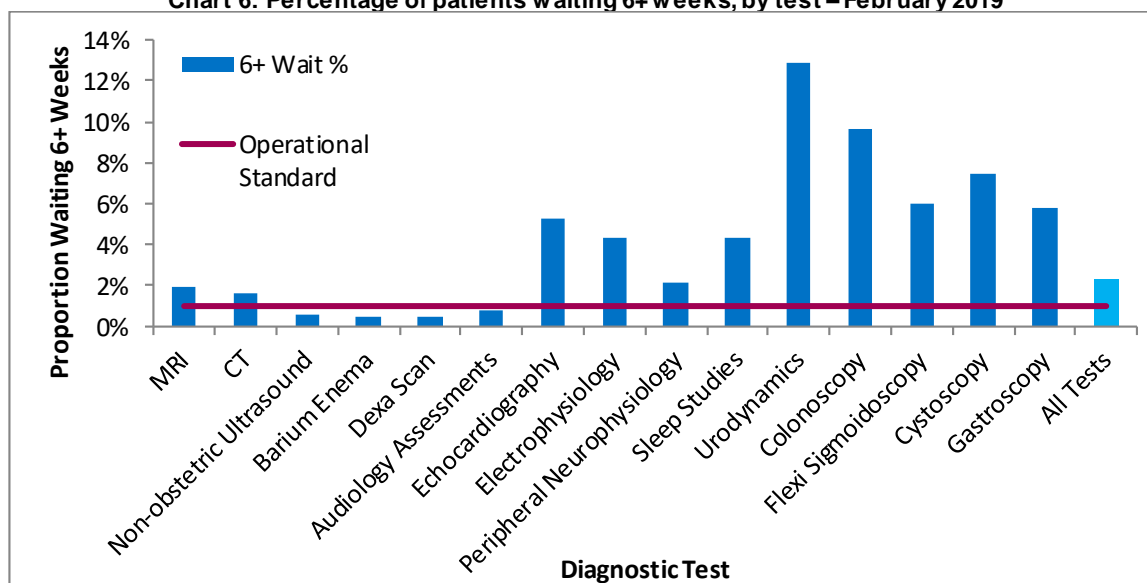
**Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – February 2018 and February 2019**

	Feb-18	Feb-19	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	0.9%	1.2%	<b>0.2</b>
Physiological Measurement	2.7%	3.8%	<b>1.1</b>
Endoscopy	4.2%	7.3%	<b>3.2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>0.7</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 4 of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer were Barium Enema and Dexa Scan (0.5%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Urodynamics (12.9%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 62 of the 149 acute trusts that submitted data for February 2019 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. 107 of the 196 Commissioners<sup>1</sup> failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 42 less than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month and 33 more than in February 2018<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

<sup>2</sup> 208 Commissioners in February 2018

4.1.8. None of the five NHS England and NHS Improvement Regional Teams met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test varied by region between 1.4% and 5.8% (Table 4).

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

Region	Number of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end	Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
North	6,200	2.0%	303,345	547,225	2.1
Midlands and East	4,185	1.4%	305,211	542,502	2.0
London	3,793	2.1%	178,742	294,709	2.0
South West	5,814	5.8%	100,931	173,565	2.2
South East	3,836	2.6%	147,714	276,278	2.0
<b>England</b>	<b>23,941</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>1,040,778</b>	<b>1,848,990</b>	<b>2.1</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 February 2019 there were a total of 1,040,800 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 97,300 (10.3%) from February 2018.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 36.2% of the total waiting list, or 376,300 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 – February 2018 and February 2019**

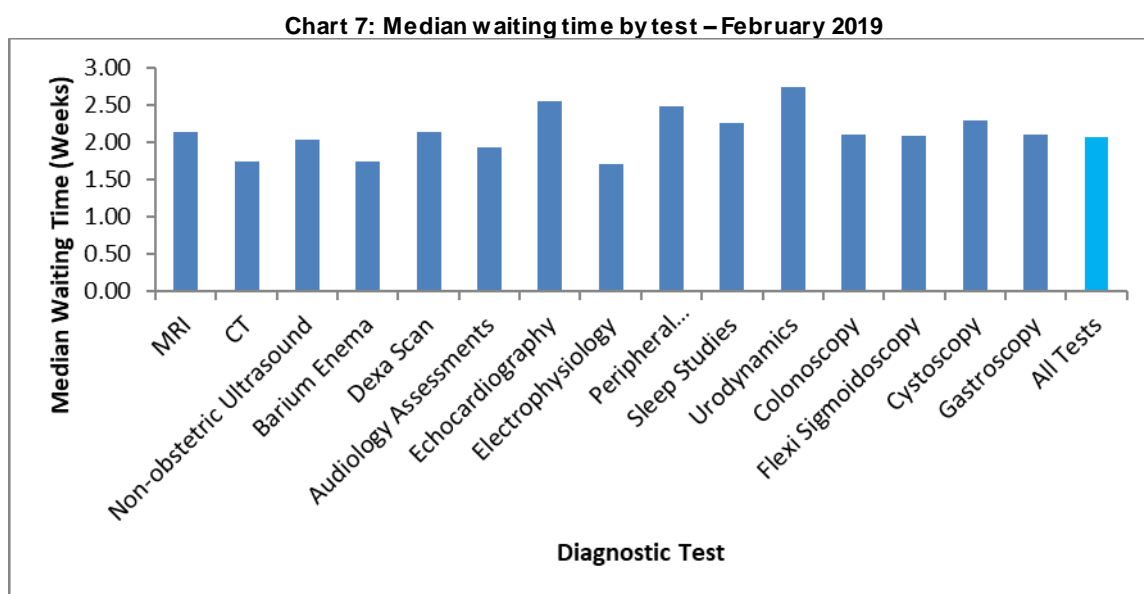
	Feb-18	Feb-19	Growth (%age)
MRI	194,539	211,477	8.7%
CT	125,503	137,467	9.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	334,247	376,338	12.6%
Barium Enema	1,239	1,418	14.4%
Dexa Scan	30,920	31,918	3.2%
Audiology Assessments	46,608	44,159	-5.3%
Echocardiography	68,657	80,262	16.9%
Electrophysiology	1,852	776	-58.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,824	19,598	4.1%
Sleep Studies	8,538	9,106	6.7%
Urodynamics	4,086	5,212	27.6%
Colonoscopy	35,163	41,477	18.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,985	19,161	12.8%
Cystoscopy	14,481	15,793	9.1%
Gastroscopy	41,810	46,616	11.5%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>943,452</b>	<b>1,040,778</b>	<b>10.3%</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 Urodynamics where the waiting list increased by 27.6% compared with February 2018. The largest reduction has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list decreased by 58.1%.

### 4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of February 2019, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.1 weeks from the time of referral. This is an increase of 0.2 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 2.7 weeks (Chart 7).



### 4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 1,849,000 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during February 2019. This is an increase of 111,900 (6.4%) from February 2018 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 614,300 tests taking place. This accounted for 33.2% of all activity in February 2019. The test with the lowest activity was Barium Enema with 1,800 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 4.0% from the same period last year.

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

	Feb-19	Feb-18	YTD 18/19	YTD 17/18	Growth Feb 19 vs Feb 18	Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18	Adjusted Growth Feb 19 vs Feb 18	Adjusted Growth YTD 18/19 vs YTD 17/18
MRI	290,012	275,222	3,312,761	3,219,167	5.4%	2.9%	5.4%	2.0%
CT	486,862	457,033	5,556,290	5,202,195	6.5%	6.8%	6.5%	5.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	614,324	570,517	6,956,020	6,586,695	7.7%	5.6%	7.7%	4.7%
Barium Enema	1,799	1,802	21,625	22,149	-0.2%	-2.4%	-0.2%	-3.2%
Dexa Scan	36,227	33,592	416,967	392,970	7.8%	6.1%	7.8%	5.2%
Audiology Assessments	99,615	98,600	1,157,659	1,139,809	1.0%	1.6%	1.0%	0.7%
Echocardiography	130,601	121,743	1,446,428	1,382,939	7.3%	4.6%	7.3%	3.7%
Electrophysiology	2,537	2,858	31,268	31,233	-11.2%	0.1%	-11.2%	-0.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,778	17,556	208,123	204,682	1.3%	1.7%	1.3%	0.8%
Sleep Studies	10,525	10,298	120,683	124,164	2.2%	-2.8%	2.2%	-3.6%
Urodynamics	6,707	6,143	74,913	72,909	9.2%	2.7%	9.2%	1.9%
Colonoscopy	44,506	39,370	482,845	465,940	13.0%	3.6%	13.0%	2.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	25,696	24,506	289,102	272,780	4.9%	6.0%	4.9%	5.1%
Cystoscopy	24,878	23,352	281,903	280,917	6.5%	0.4%	6.5%	-0.5%
Gastroscopy	56,923	54,480	633,949	631,868	4.5%	0.3%	4.5%	-0.5%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,848,990</b>	<b>1,737,072</b>	<b>20,990,536</b>	<b>20,030,417</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>3.9%</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 July 2018 to January 2019. This covered a total of 27 revisions from 11 organisations. The amendments have had a small impact on the national data (Table 7).

**Table 7: Revisions published on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2019**

Month	Total Activity			Total Waiting List			Total 6+ week waits		
	Original	Revised	Difference	Original	Revised	Difference	Original	Revised	Difference
July	1,940,218	1,945,303	5,085	975,252	976,052	-800	27,661	27,574	87
August	1,893,025	1,894,334	1,309	931,347	932,779	-1,432	28,705	28,554	151
September	1,809,335	1,816,673	7,338	944,691	947,932	-3,241	25,233	25,280	-47
October	2,026,777	2,029,880	3,103	984,531	986,582	-2,051	22,996	23,024	-28
November	1,986,289	1,989,602	3,313	992,197	993,544	-1,347	23,890	23,892	-2
December	1,758,103	1,761,310	3,207	951,054	953,335	-2,281	31,353	31,359	-6
January	2,047,054	2,043,253	-3,801	990,022	990,019	3	35,538	35,505	33

- 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 seven months.

## 6 Annex

### 6.1 Methodology

5.1.1. NHS England and NHS Improvement 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 and NHS Improvement 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](#).

### 6.2 Data Revision

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

Revisions were published in April 2019 for the months July 2018 through to January 2019.

### 6.3 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 9<sup>th</sup> May 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.](#)

### 6.4 Glossary

#### **Area Team**

A geographical area of NHS England and NHS Improvement 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 and NHS Improvement 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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