

# NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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

## **August 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 more 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 more for a diagnostic test.

NHS England and NHS Improvement's planning guidance states that there is a threshold of 1% for this pledge. The financial penalty for non-delivery of the standard is set out in the NHS Standard Contract 2019/20.

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 more 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 2019 Key Findings

- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of August 2019 was 42,900. This was 4.3% 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 more was not met this month.
- Compared with August 2018 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 14,400, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 1.2 percentage points.
- In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 2.3% (October 2018 and February 2019) and 4.3% (August 2019).
- At the end of August 2019, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Dexa Scan with 1.0%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 17.0% of patients waiting six weeks or more.
- 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 2.3 weeks at the end of July 2019.
- There were 997,300 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of August 2019. This is an increase of 64,600 from August 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 0.6%.
- A total of 1,908,100 diagnostic tests were undertaken in August 2019. This is an increase of 13,800 from August 2018. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.1% (0.4% when adjusted for working days).
- As of July 2019 Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust (RT2) services have transferred to Salford Royal Foundation Trust (RM3); going forward DM01 data is now being reported by Salford Royal Foundation Trust (RM3)
- The following organisations did not submit Diagnostics (DM01) data this month:
  - North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust (RGN)
  - University College London Hospitals NHS Trust (RRV)

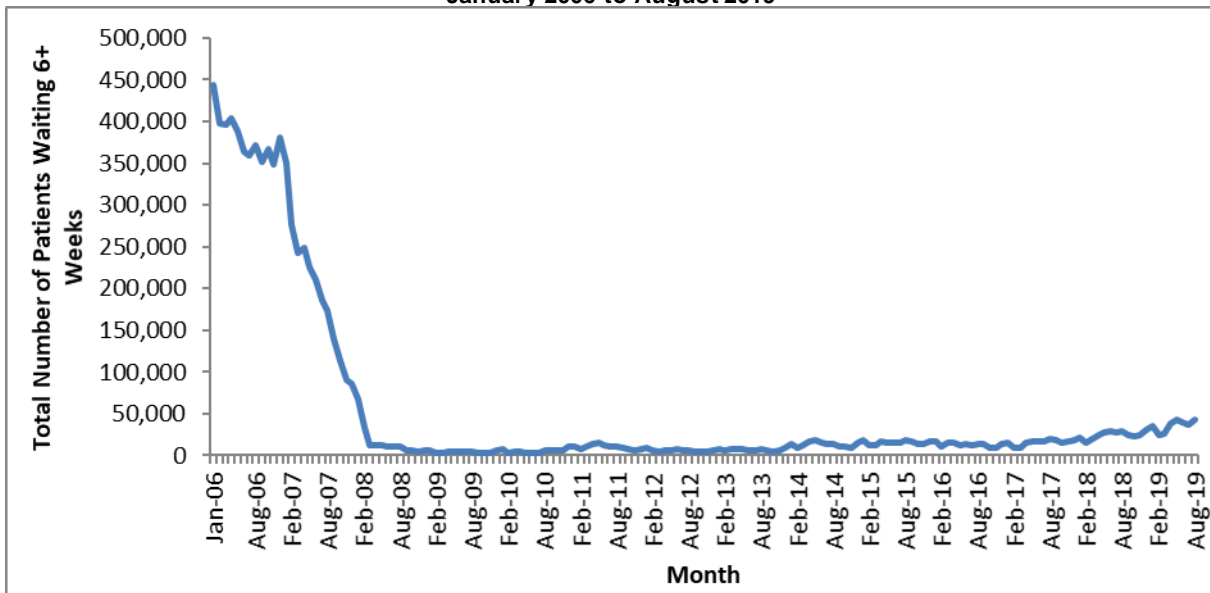
### 3 National Trends

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

#### 3.1 6+ Week Waits

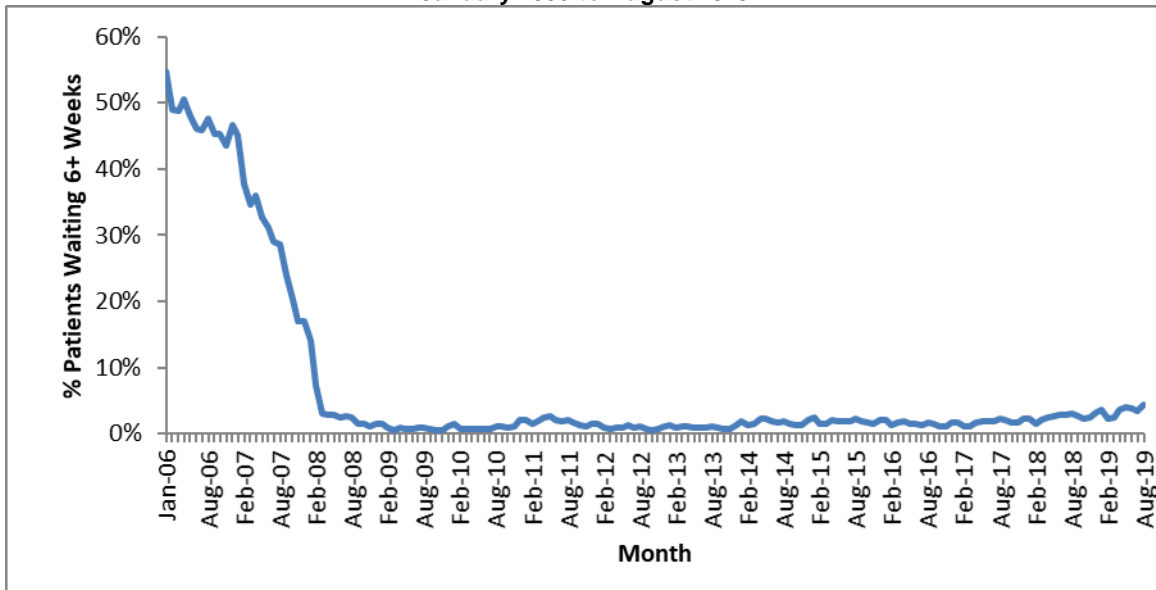
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more 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 more. Between October 2013 and May 2014 there was a significant increase in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more. That number has since continued to fluctuate. In August 2019 there was an increase of 5,800 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to August 2019



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more 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 more at the end of a month has varied between 2.3% (October 2018 and February 2019) and 4.3% (August 2019). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

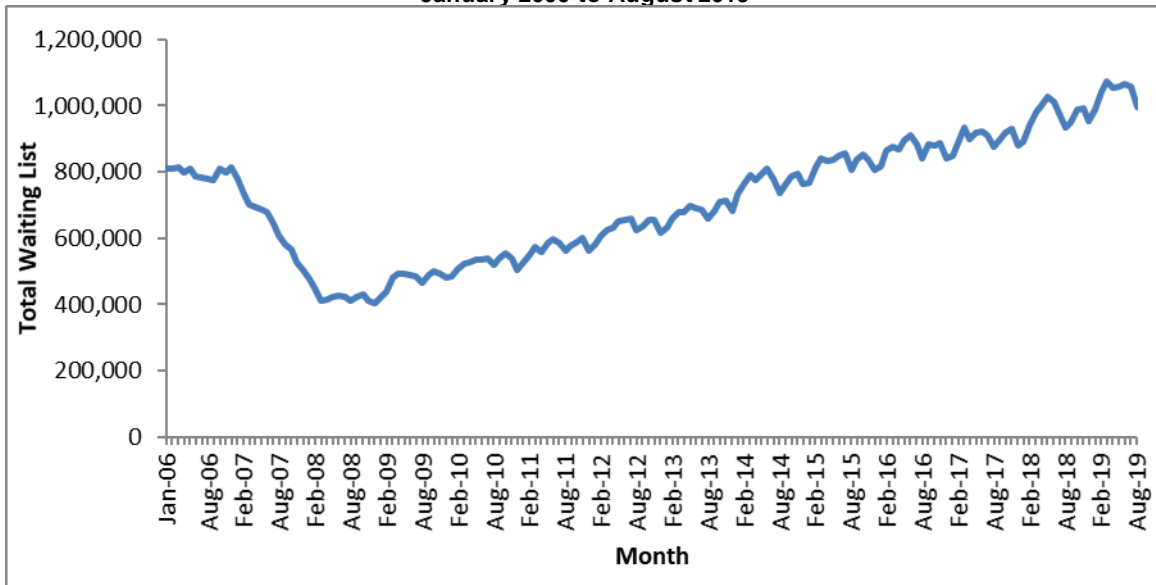
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to August 2019**



### 3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As seen with the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more, 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 August 2019**

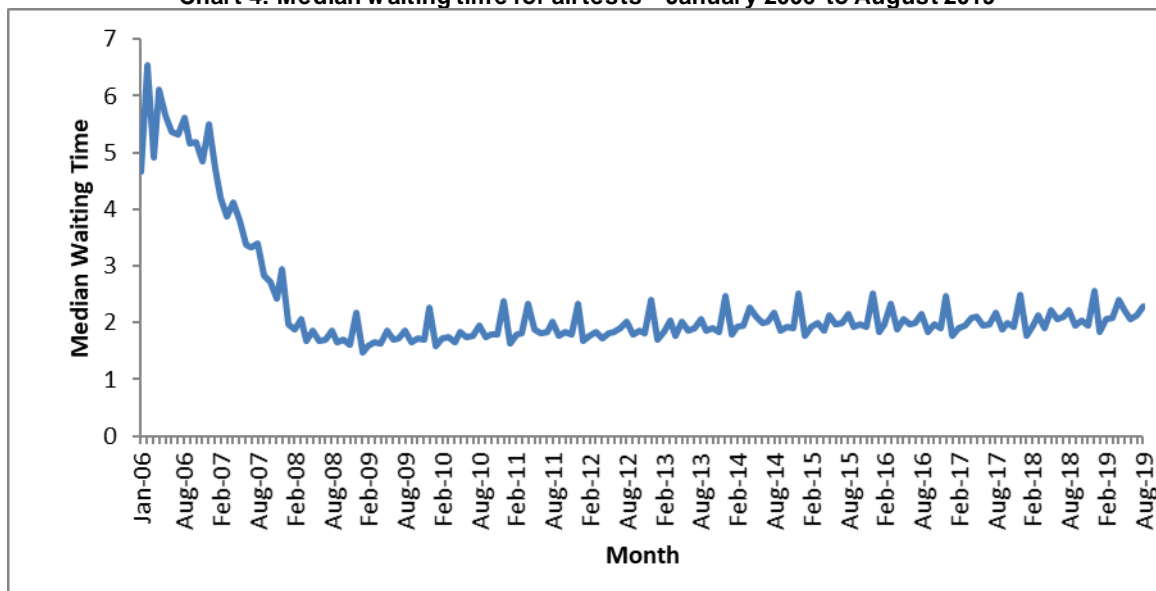




### 3.3 Median Waiting Time

3.3.1. The average (median) waiting time displays a similar trend to the total waiting list and 6 weeks or more 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 2.1 weeks, with a high of 2.6 weeks (December 2018) and a low of 1.8 weeks (January 2019).

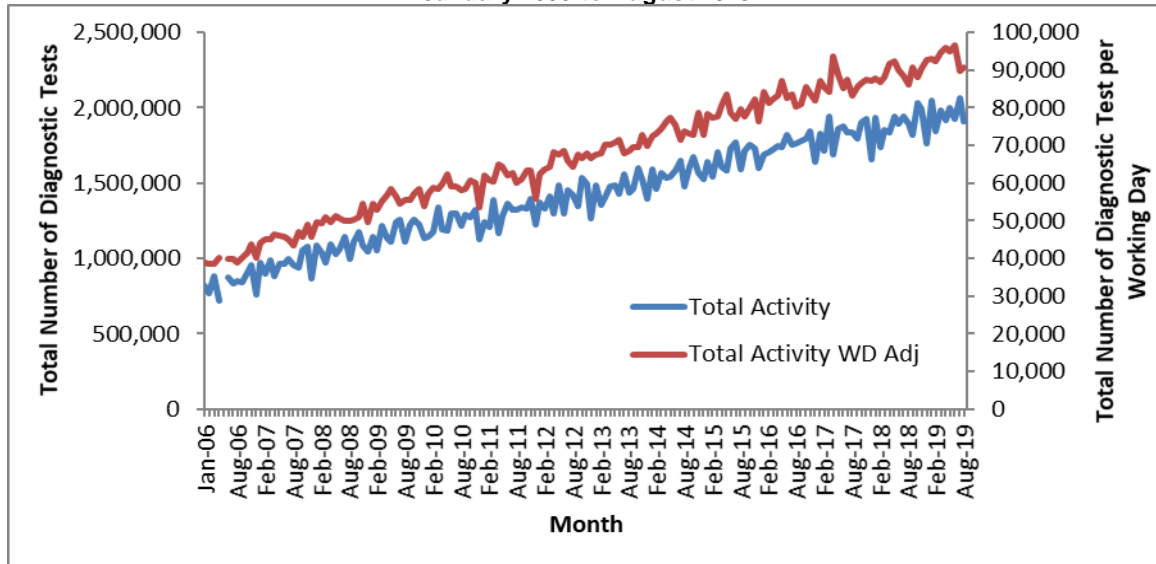
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to August 2019



### 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 0.1% (0.4% when adjusted for working days).

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests January 2006 to August 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 Barium Enema, where the average monthly increase was 4.1%. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Electrophysiology, where the average monthly decrease was 1.6% (Table 1).

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

	Aug-18	Aug-19	Average monthly growth
MRI	304,551	304,269	0.0%
CT	508,953	520,865	0.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	617,831	618,954	0.0%
Barium Enema	1,938	3,140	4.1%
Dexa Scan	39,125	38,636	-0.1%
Audiology Assessments	101,854	101,089	-0.1%
Echocardiography	130,997	132,338	0.1%
Electrophysiology	2,526	2,078	-1.6%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,410	17,993	-0.2%
Sleep Studies	11,101	10,361	-0.6%
Urodynamics	6,478	6,486	0.0%
Colonoscopy	42,431	45,920	0.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	26,486	25,886	-0.2%
Cystoscopy	25,024	23,868	-0.4%
Gastroscopy	56,629	56,216	-0.1%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,894,334</b>	<b>1,908,099</b>	<b>0.1%</b>

## 4 August 2019 Data

This section analyses the August 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 August 2019, there were a total of 42,900 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 4.3% 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.
- 4.1.2. Compared with August 2018, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 14,400, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 1.2 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with August 2018, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Urodynamics, which increased by 5.7 percentage points. The tests with the largest decrease was Barium Enema which decreased by 2.2 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Aug-18	Aug-19	Difference (%age points)
MRI	3.1%	2.5%	-0.6
CT	2.5%	3.1%	0.6
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	1.5%	2.8%	1.3
Barium Enema	4.9%	2.7%	-2.2
Dexa Scan	1.3%	1.0%	-0.3
Audiology Assessments	1.9%	2.1%	0.2
Echocardiography	4.1%	7.6%	3.5
Electrophysiology	2.9%	1.4%	-1.5
Peripheral Neurophysiology	3.0%	5.3%	2.3
Sleep Studies	4.9%	7.8%	3.0
Urodynamics	11.3%	17.0%	5.7
Colonoscopy	11.4%	12.9%	1.6
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	8.0%	11.7%	3.7
Cystoscopy	6.9%	9.1%	2.2
Gastroscopy	5.5%	10.3%	4.8
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>4.3%</b>	<b>1.2</b>

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with August 2018, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an increase of 3.2 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 2.5 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 0.6 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

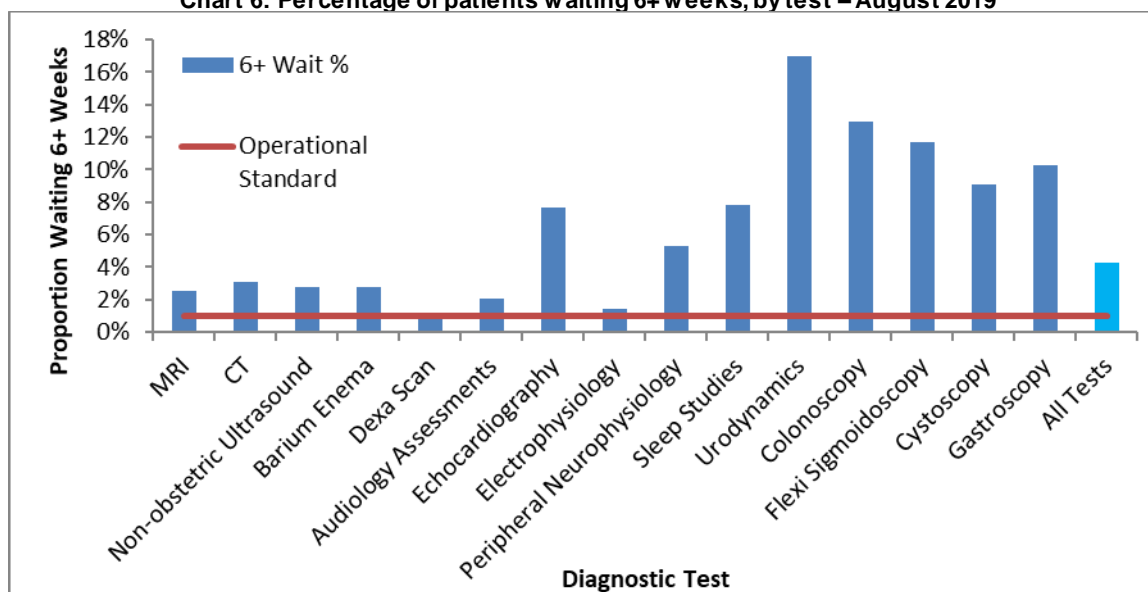
**Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – August 2018 and August 2019**

	Aug-18	Aug-19	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	2.1%	2.7%	0.6
Physiological Measurement	3.6%	6.0%	2.5
Endoscopy	8.1%	11.3%	3.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>4.3%</b>	<b>1.2</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 1 of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Dexa Scan (0.96%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Urodynamics (17.0%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 93 of the 146 acute trusts that submitted data for August 2019 failed to meet the 1% operational standard. Two acute Trusts did not submit data this month.

4.1.7. 173 of the 192 Commissioners<sup>1</sup> failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 24 more than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month and 40 more than in August 2018<sup>2</sup>.

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

<sup>2</sup> 196 Commissioners in July 2018

4.1.8. None of the seven NHS England and NHS Improvement Regional Teams met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 2.5% and 9.7% (Table 4).

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

Region	Number of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
London	6,118	3.6%	171,576	295,434	2.3
South West	10,136	9.7%	104,556	184,450	2.6
South East	5,691	4.0%	141,946	288,360	2.2
Midlands	4,437	2.5%	177,630	349,821	2.2
East of England	4,320	4.0%	108,351	202,522	2.3
North West	3,984	3.0%	132,539	259,311	2.2
North East and Yorkshire	8,098	5.2%	156,641	313,071	2.3
<b>England</b>	<b>42,947</b>	<b>4.3%</b>	<b>997,343</b>	<b>1,908,099</b>	<b>2.3</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 August 2019 there were a total of 997,300 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 64,600 (6.9%) from August 2018.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 36.4% of the total waiting list, or 363,000 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.1% of the total waiting list, or 1,200 patients (Table 5).

**Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – August 2018 and August 2019**

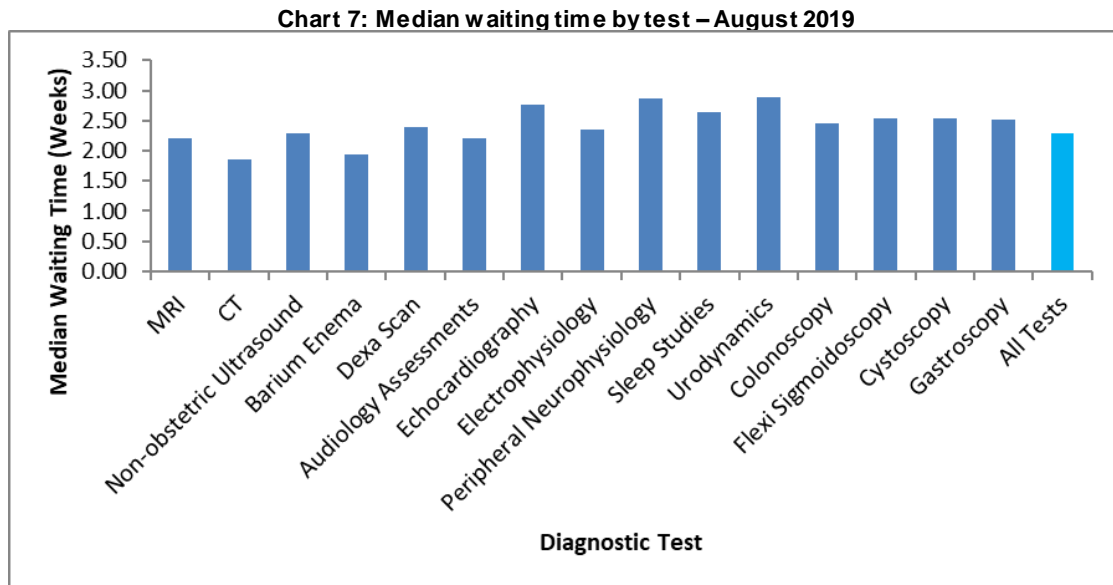
	Aug-18	Aug-19	Growth (%age)
MRI	186,273	188,326	1.1%
CT	121,872	127,218	4.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	337,573	363,000	7.5%
Barium Enema	1,157	1,711	47.9%
Dexa Scan	29,469	31,310	6.2%
Audiology Assessments	41,963	44,758	6.7%
Echocardiography	69,289	82,181	18.6%
Electrophysiology	762	1,210	58.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,217	20,325	5.8%
Sleep Studies	8,658	9,410	8.7%
Urodynamics	4,562	4,535	-0.6%
Colonoscopy	39,541	44,388	12.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,071	19,082	11.8%
Cystoscopy	13,703	14,592	6.5%
Gastroscopy	41,669	45,297	8.7%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>932,779</b>	<b>997,343</b>	<b>6.9%</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.

- 4.2.3. There have been large increases in the number of patients waiting for certain tests. The largest percentage growth has been for Electrophysiology where the waiting list increased by 58.8% compared with August 2018. The waiting list for Urodynamics decreased by 0.6%.

### 4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of August 2019, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.3 weeks from the time of referral. This is a decrease of 0.2 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 1.8 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 2.9 weeks (Chart 7).



### 4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 1,908,100 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during August 2019. This is an increase of 13,800 (0.7%) from August 2018 (and increase of 5.5% when adjusted for working days) (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 619,000 tests taking place. This accounted for 32.4% of all activity in August 2019. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology 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 4.5% from the same period last year (4.9 when adjusted for working days).

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

	Aug-19	Aug-18	YTD 19/20	YTD 18/19	Growth Aug 19 vs Aug 18	Growth YTD 19/20 vs YTD 18/19	Adjusted Growth Aug 19 vs Aug 18	Adjusted Growth YTD 19/20 vs YTD 18/19
MRI	304,269	304,551	1,531,233	1,505,880	-0.1%	1.7%	4.7%	2.7%
CT	520,865	508,953	2,618,567	2,510,246	2.3%	4.3%	7.2%	5.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	618,954	617,831	3,253,460	3,145,730	0.2%	3.4%	5.0%	4.4%
Barium Enema	3,140	1,938	15,461	9,897	62.0%	56.2%	69.7%	57.7%
Dexa Scan	38,636	39,125	200,740	191,805	-1.2%	4.7%	3.5%	5.7%
Audiology Assessments	101,089	101,854	533,242	524,299	-0.8%	1.7%	4.0%	2.7%
Echocardiography	132,338	130,997	686,489	654,280	1.0%	4.9%	5.8%	5.9%
Electrophysiology	2,078	2,526	11,499	15,096	-17.7%	-23.8%	-13.8%	-23.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,993	18,410	96,019	94,477	-2.3%	1.6%	2.4%	2.6%
Sleep Studies	10,361	11,101	52,989	55,639	-6.7%	-4.8%	-2.2%	-3.9%
Urodynamics	6,486	6,478	33,900	32,536	0.1%	4.2%	4.9%	5.2%
Colonoscopy	45,920	42,431	227,438	214,207	8.2%	6.2%	13.4%	7.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	25,886	26,486	132,069	131,198	-2.3%	0.7%	2.4%	1.6%
Cystoscopy	23,868	25,024	126,537	127,144	-4.6%	-0.5%	-0.1%	0.5%
Gastroscopy	56,216	56,629	291,843	288,394	-0.7%	1.2%	4.0%	2.2%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,908,099</b>	<b>1,894,334</b>	<b>9,811,486</b>	<b>9,500,828</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>3.3%</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>4.3%</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.



## 5 Annex

### 5.1 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](#).

### 5.2 Data Revisions

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 last published in September 2019 for the months January 2019 through to June 2019.

### 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 14<sup>th</sup> November 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 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.

## **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](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](#).

## **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 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.

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

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

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