

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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December 2020 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 2020/21.

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 documentation](#).

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 December 2020 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and data for the current reporting period may therefore not be comparable to previous periods.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of December 2020 was 345,700. This was 29.2% 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 more was not met this month.
- Compared with December 2019 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 303,800, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 25.0 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 2.8% (February 2020) and 58.5% (May 2020).
- At the end of December 2020, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 7.9%. The test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy, with 53.0% 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 3.6 weeks at the end of December 2020.
- There were 1,185,100 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of December 2020. This is an increase of 179,800 from December 2019. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has increased, with a reduction in March as a result of the COVID-19 crisis followed by growth in the waiting list and some subsequent reductions.
- A total of 1,678,300 diagnostic tests were undertaken in December 2020. This is a decrease of 164,400 from December 2019. Monthly activity was increasing slightly until it fell sharply from March 2020 before services started to resume from May 2020 onwards.

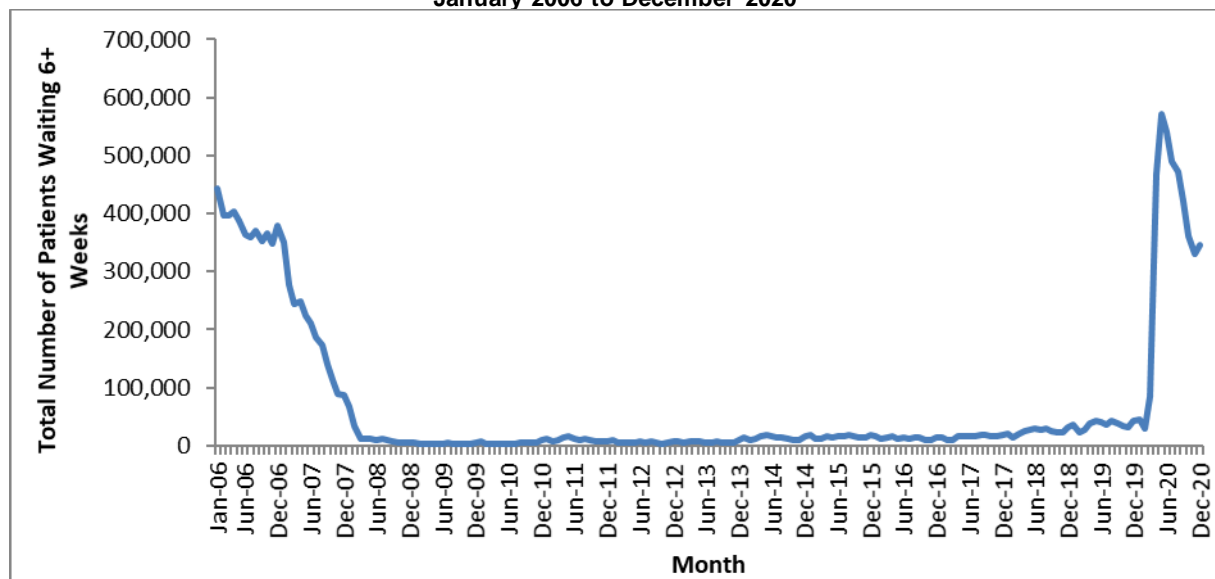
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

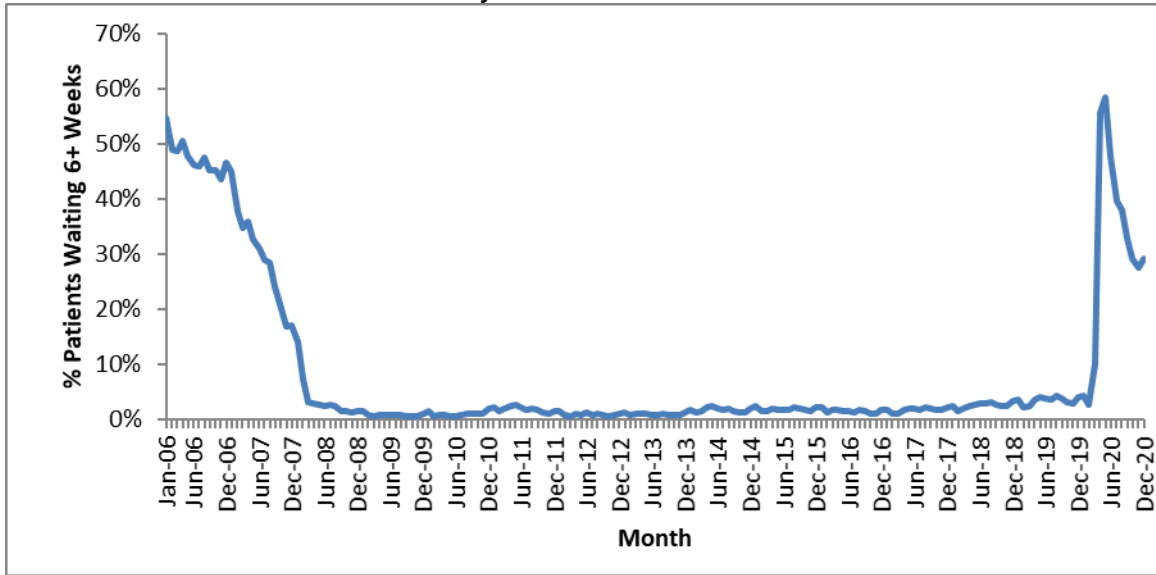
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 there were fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between December 2013 and May 2014. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In December 2020 there was a small increase of 15,300 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 December 2020



- 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) prior to the COVID-19 period. In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 2.8% (February 2020) and 58.5% (May 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

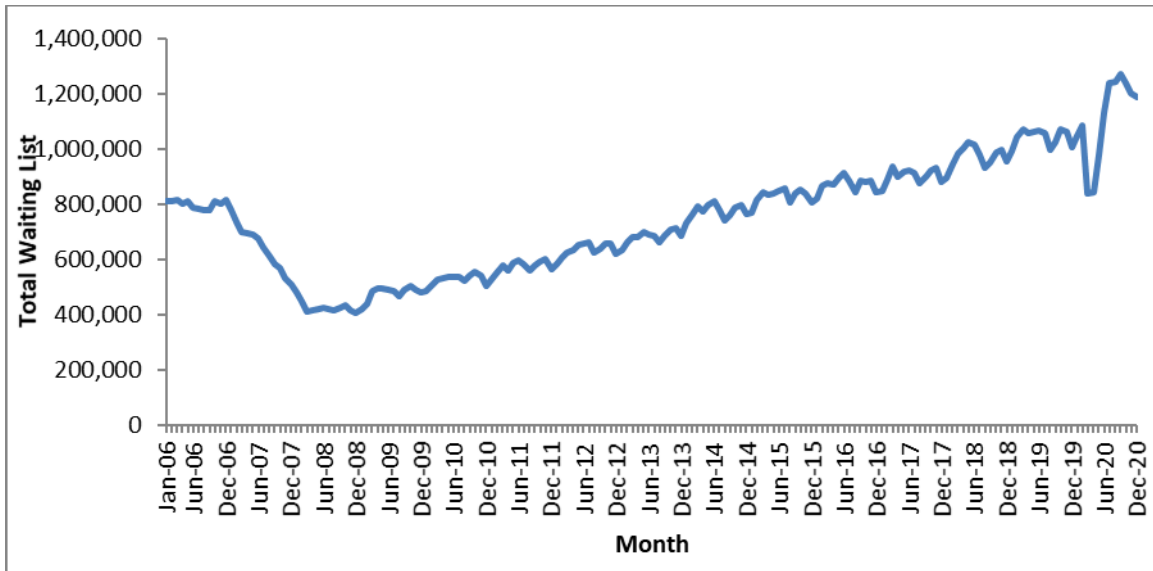
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to December 2020**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As 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). Following a period with a stable total waiting list between March 2008 and January 2009, the underlying trend showed a steady increase before dropping sharply in March 2020 and subsequently rising due to the impact of COVID-19. The total waiting list is now reducing again.

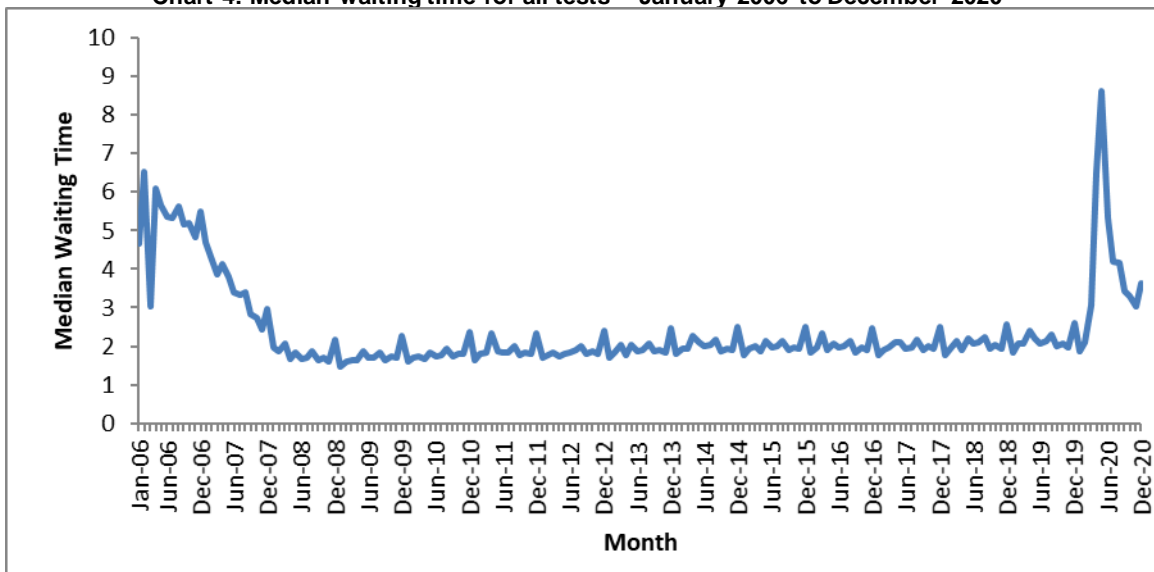
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to December 2020**



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 two years leading to the 6-week milestone, the median waiting time remained stable until the COVID-19 period (Chart 4). The data shows significant increases during December every year as a result of the higher number of bank holidays and resulting lower activity. In the last 12 months, the median waiting time had a high of 8.6 weeks (May 2020) and a low of 1.9 weeks (January 2020). The median waiting time in December 2020 was 3.6 weeks.

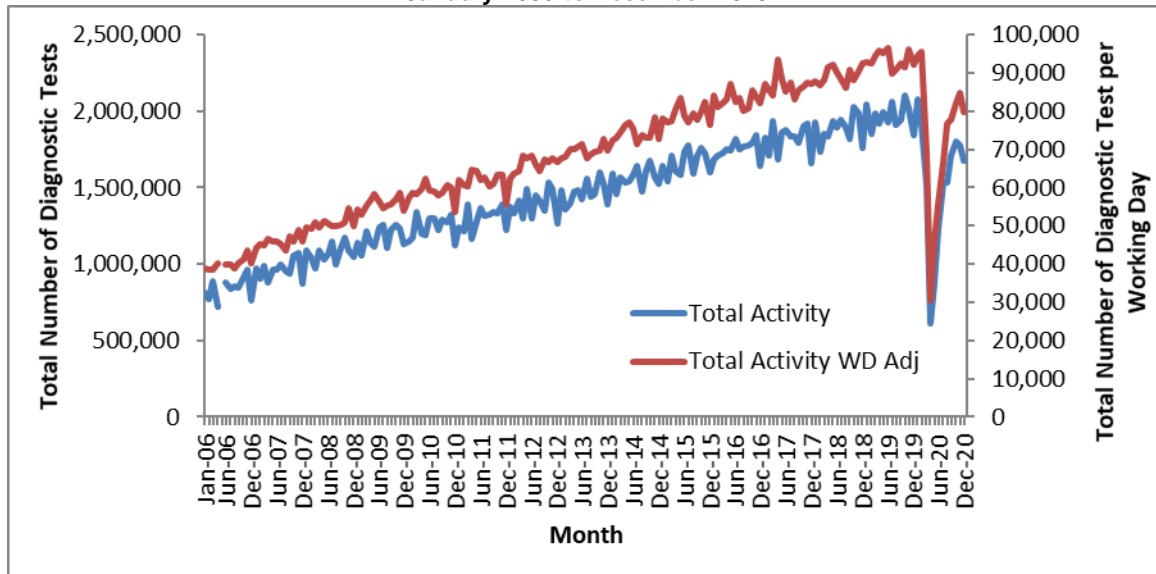
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to December 2020



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 until the COVID-19 period. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced (Chart 5).
- 3.4.2. Monthly activity decreased markedly following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Total activity in April 2020 fell by 68% compared to April 2019 but subsequently started to recover until the latest months.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to December 2020**



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 differing changes in activity. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Flexi Sigmoidoscopy, where December 2020 activity was 3.8% lower per month than December 2019 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – December 2019 and December 2020

	Dec-19	Dec-20	Average monthly growth
MRI	293,294	265,374	-0.8%
CT	519,926	519,716	0.0%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	595,373	529,129	-1.0%
Barium Enema	2,731	2,815	0.3%
Dexa Scan	35,861	28,082	-2.0%
Audiology Assessments	93,430	67,270	-2.7%
Echocardiography	124,657	113,515	-0.8%
Electrophysiology	865	593	-3.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,229	13,955	-2.2%
Sleep Studies	9,274	7,540	-1.7%
Urodynamics	5,961	4,596	-2.1%
Colonoscopy	42,473	40,056	-0.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	24,097	15,155	-3.8%
Cystoscopy	22,975	22,627	-0.1%
Gastroscopy	53,576	47,899	-0.9%
All Tests	1,842,722	1,678,322	-0.8%

4 December 2020 Data

This section analyses the December 2020 diagnostic waiting times and activity data and includes comparisons between tests, regions, providers and commissioners.

6+ week waits performance became significantly worse from March to May 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis but started to improve from June.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of December 2020, there were a total of 345,700 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 29.2% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with December 2019, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 303,800, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 25.0 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with December 2019, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Gastroscopy, which increased by 42.1 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was Barium Enema, which increased by 6.5 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – December 2019 and December 2020

	Dec-19	Dec-20	Difference (%age points)
MRI	3.4%	21.4%	18.1
CT	3.1%	19.2%	16.0
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	1.9%	20.0%	18.1
Barium Enema	1.4%	7.9%	6.5
Dexa Scan	1.1%	39.7%	38.7
Audiology Assessments	1.9%	35.3%	33.4
Echocardiography	6.6%	42.3%	35.7
Electrophysiology	2.3%	10.7%	8.4
Peripheral Neurophysiology	5.9%	35.1%	29.2
Sleep Studies	6.9%	29.5%	22.6
Urodynamics	16.3%	51.3%	35.0
Colonoscopy	13.1%	48.5%	35.5
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	11.6%	51.6%	40.0
Cystoscopy	8.4%	43.8%	35.4
Gastroscopy	10.8%	53.0%	42.1
All Tests	4.2%	29.2%	25.0

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with December 2019, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an increase of 38.7 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 33.9 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 18.7 percentage

points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

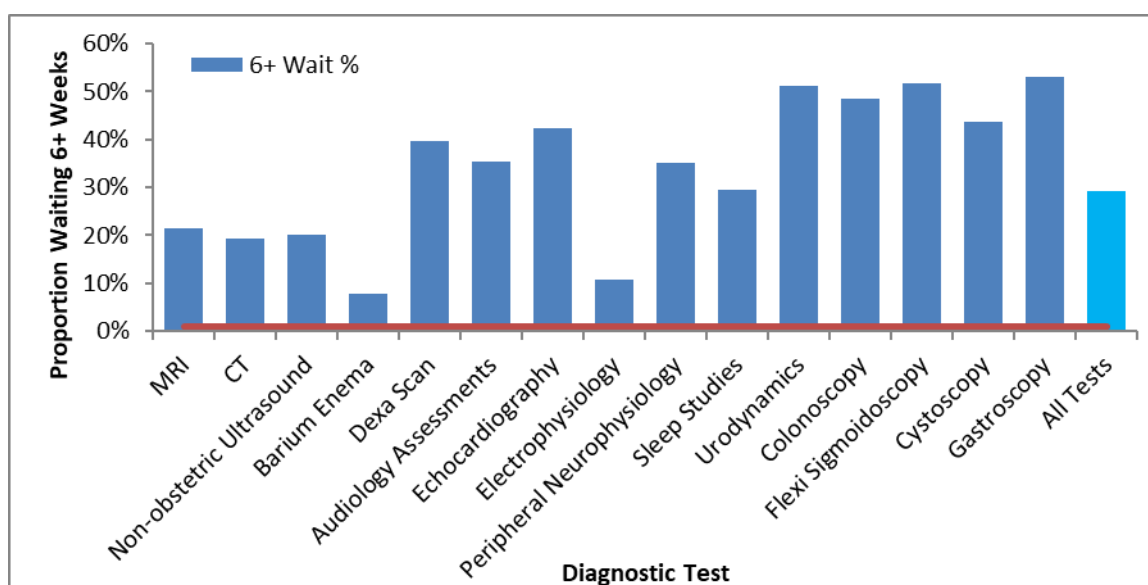
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – December 2019 and December 2020

	Dec-19	Dec-20	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	2.5%	21.2%	18.7
Physiological Measurement	5.6%	39.5%	33.9
Endoscopy	11.5%	50.2%	38.7
Total	4.2%	29.2%	25.0

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 none of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema (7.9%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy (53.0%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – December 2020



- 4.1.6. 139 of the 141 acute trusts that submitted data for December 2020 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.7. All 135 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 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 21.6% (London) and 33.9% (North West) (Table 4).

¹ Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

- 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 region.

Table 4: December 2020 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	36,950	21.6%	171,218	273,988	3.2
South West	34,948	30.3%	115,256	163,666	3.7
South East	34,443	21.7%	158,718	257,640	3.2
Midlands	70,728	31.2%	226,376	297,126	3.8
East of England	49,187	33.5%	146,660	190,093	4.0
North West	62,376	33.9%	183,884	228,075	4.0
North East and Yorkshire	56,399	31.2%	180,623	257,563	3.7
England	345,664	29.2%	1,185,133	1,678,322	3.6

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of December 2020 there were a total of 1,185,100 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 179,800 (17.9%) from December 2019.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 32.8% of the total waiting list, or 388,700 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.06% of the total waiting list, or 700 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – December 2019 and December 2020

	Dec-19	Dec-20	Growth (%age)
MRI	203,034	212,824	4.8%
CT	135,584	141,489	4.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	342,547	388,700	13.5%
Barium Enema	1,617	1,446	-10.6%
Dexa Scan	29,972	40,853	36.3%
Audiology Assessments	40,925	46,260	13.0%
Echocardiography	84,312	116,986	38.8%
Electrophysiology	472	681	44.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,253	24,039	13.1%
Sleep Studies	9,724	8,931	-8.2%
Urodynamics	4,948	7,069	42.9%
Colonoscopy	45,536	66,375	45.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	20,844	28,036	34.5%
Cystoscopy	15,387	23,009	49.5%
Gastroscopy	49,194	78,435	59.4%
All Tests	1,005,349	1,185,133	17.9%

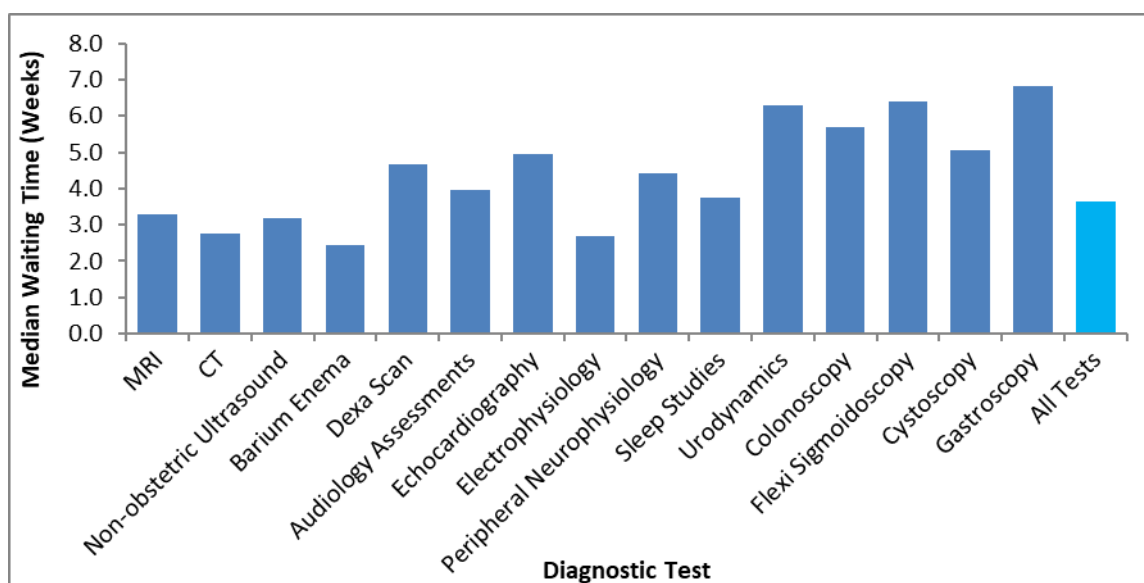
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Gastroscopy, where the waiting list grew by 59.4% compared with December 2019.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of December 2020, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.6 weeks from the time of referral, up from 3.0 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 2.5 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Gastroscopy at 6.8 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – December 2020



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 1,678,300 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during December 2020. This is a decrease of 164,400 (13.3%) from December 2019 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 529,100 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.5% of all activity in December 2020. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 600 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.04% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has decreased by 22.7% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – December 2019 and December 2020

	Dec-20	Dec-19	YTD 20/21	YTD 19/20	Growth Dec 20 vs Dec 19	Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20	Adjusted Growth Dec 20 vs Dec 19	Adjusted Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20
MRI	265,374	293,294	2,014,677	2,772,515	-9.5%	-27.3%	-13.8%	-27.3%
CT	519,716	519,926	4,248,045	4,754,041	0.0%	-10.6%	-4.8%	-10.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	529,129	595,373	3,945,885	5,855,990	-11.1%	-32.6%	-15.4%	-32.6%
Barium Enema	2,815	2,731	21,469	27,620	3.1%	-22.3%	-1.8%	-22.3%
Dexa Scan	28,082	35,861	190,491	361,565	-21.7%	-47.3%	-25.4%	-47.3%
Audiology Assessments	67,270	93,430	435,455	962,626	-28.0%	-54.8%	-31.4%	-54.8%
Echocardiography	113,515	124,657	865,041	1,235,992	-8.9%	-30.0%	-13.3%	-30.0%
Electrophysiology	593	865	4,670	18,730	-31.4%	-75.1%	-34.7%	-75.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	13,955	18,229	99,212	175,610	-23.4%	-43.5%	-27.1%	-43.5%
Sleep Studies	7,540	9,274	54,474	96,685	-18.7%	-43.7%	-22.6%	-43.7%
Urodynamics	4,596	5,961	29,697	60,949	-22.9%	-51.3%	-26.6%	-51.3%
Colonoscopy	40,056	42,473	262,726	416,680	-5.7%	-36.9%	-10.2%	-36.9%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	15,155	24,097	104,984	239,605	-37.1%	-56.2%	-40.1%	-56.2%
Cystoscopy	22,627	22,975	166,239	227,878	-1.5%	-27.0%	-6.2%	-27.0%
Gastroscopy	47,899	53,576	302,807	521,644	-10.6%	-42.0%	-14.9%	-42.0%
All Tests	1,678,322	1,842,722	12,745,872	17,728,130	-8.9%	-28.1%	-13.3%	-28.1%

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

5 Annex

5.1 Methodology

5.1.1. NHS England 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 April 2020 for the months July 2019 through to December 2019.

5.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here.](#)

5.4 Glossary

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 patients have been waiting for a diagnostic test. The median is the middle value when waiting times are put in numerical order. 50% of patients have been waiting 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.

Region

One of seven geographical areas of NHS England and NHS Improvement responsible for the quality, financial and operational performance of all NHS organisations in their region.

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 [here](#).

Feedback about the user's experiences of using these statistics is available [here](#).

5.6 Consultation

Between 8 February 2018 and 5 April 2018, NHS England and NHS Improvement consulted on the future of the Quarterly Diagnostics Census and Monthly Diagnostics Waiting Times and Activity Returns. The outcome document for the consultation was published 30 December 2019 and confirmed the decision to stop collecting the Quarterly Diagnostics Census on a permanent basis and to continue the monthly diagnostics waiting times and activity return (DM01) in its current form. Find out more at: <https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/consultation/diagnostics-census-waiting-times-activity-return>

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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