

# NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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

## **October 2021 Monthly Report**

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NHS England and NHS Improvement

## Contents

Contents .....	3
1 Executive summary .....	4
1.1 National Statistics .....	5
2 October 2021 Key Findings .....	6
3 National Trends .....	7
3.1 6+ Week Waits .....	7
3.2 Total Waiting List .....	8
3.3 Median Waiting Time .....	9
3.4 Total Activity .....	9
4 October 2021 Data .....	11
4.1 6+ Week Waits .....	11
4.2 Total Waiting List .....	13
4.3 Median Waiting Times .....	14
4.4 Total Activity .....	15
5 Annex .....	17
5.1 Methodology .....	17
5.2 Data Revisions .....	17
5.3 Data Availability .....	17
5.4 Glossary .....	17
5.5 Feedback Welcomed .....	18
5.6 Consultation .....	18
5.7 Additional Information .....	18

# 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 October 2021 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic 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 October 2021 was 356,800. This was 25.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month and the best performance in the last 3 months.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or more was not met this month.
- Compared with October 2020 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 5,600 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 4.2 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 22.3% (May 2021) and 33.3% (January 2021).
- At the end of October 2021, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 7.6%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 46.0% 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 3.1 weeks at the end of October 2021.
- There were 1,428,400 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of October 2021. This is an increase of 188,400 from October 2020. A drop in the number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test in March 2020 as a result of COVID-19 was followed by growth in the waiting list, with some subsequent reductions.
- A total of 1,923,800 diagnostic tests were undertaken in October 2021. This is an increase of 121,500 from October 2020. Monthly activity was increasing slightly until it fell sharply from March 2020 before services started to resume from October 2020 onwards.

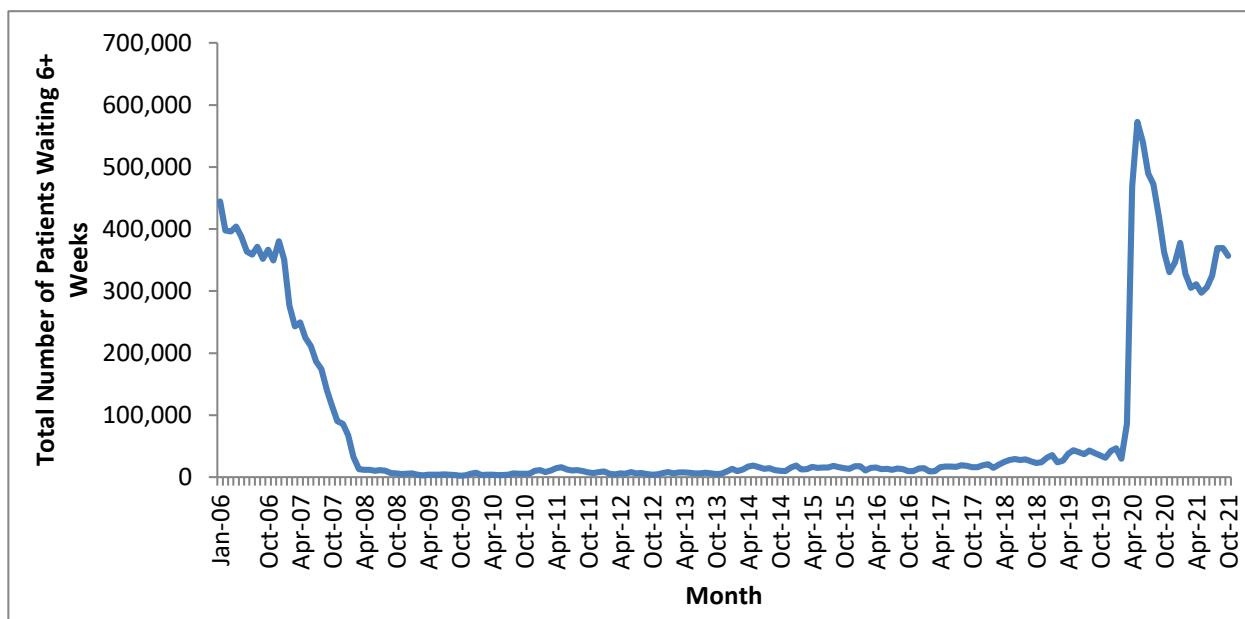
### 3 National Trends

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

#### 3.1 6+ Week Waits

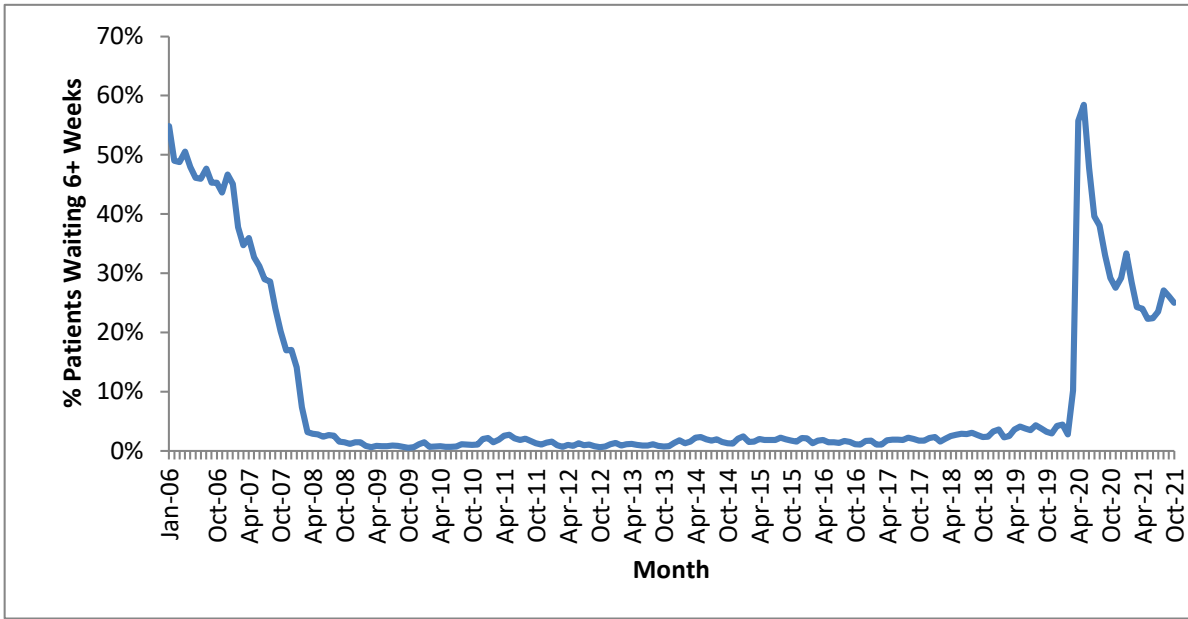
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 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 October 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In October 2021 there was a decrease of 12,400 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 October 2021



- 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 22.3% (May 2021) and 33.3% (January 2021). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

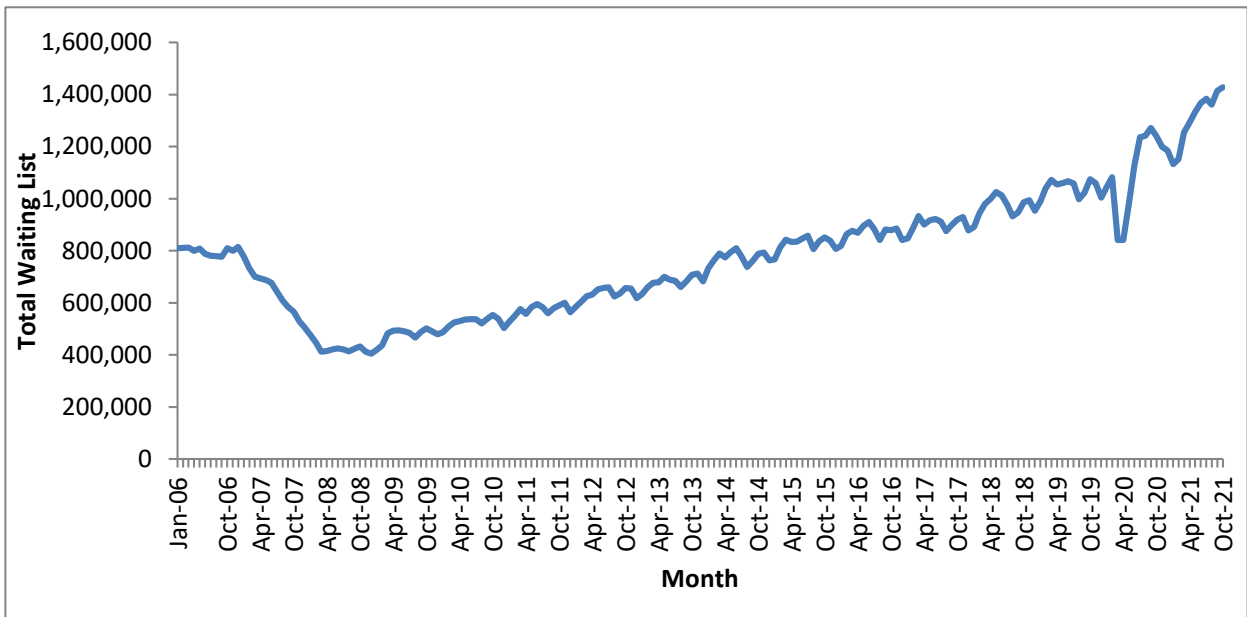
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to October 2021**



### 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.

**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to October 2021**

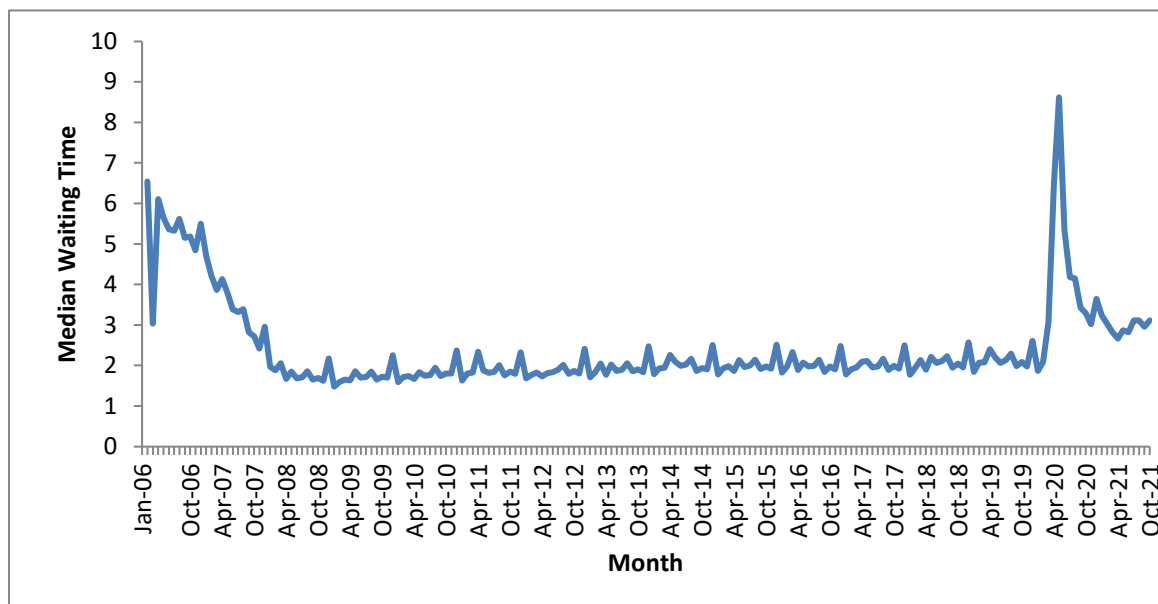




### 3.3 Median Waiting Time

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 3.6 weeks (December 2020) and a low of 2.7 weeks (April 2021). The median waiting time in October 2021 was 3.1 weeks.

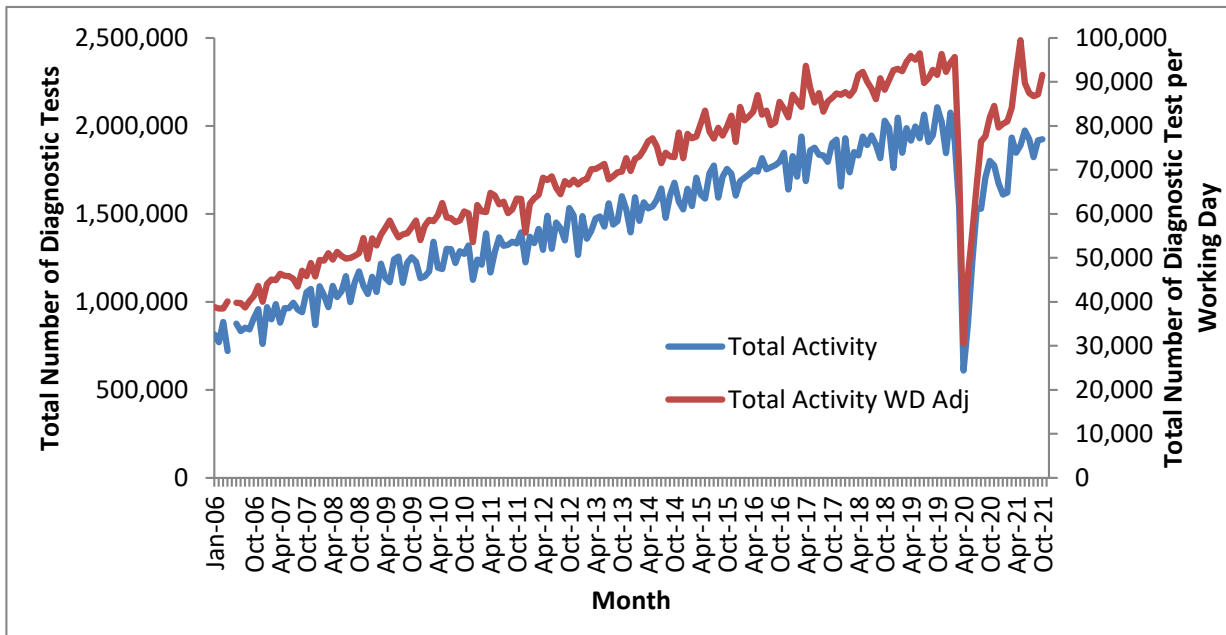
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to October 2021



### 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 with some further set-backs.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests January 2006 to October 2021**



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 biggest reduction in activity was Barium Enema where October 2021 activity was 0.5% lower per month than October 2020 (Table 1).

**Table 1: Total activity, by test – October 2020 and October 2021**

	Oct-20	Oct-21	Average monthly growth
MRI	282,303	317,742	1.0%
CT	541,843	584,626	0.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	573,188	590,929	0.3%
Barium Enema	2,946	2,790	-0.5%
Dexa Scan	34,986	37,588	0.6%
Audiology Assessments	67,909	79,848	1.4%
Echocardiography	124,711	127,342	0.2%
Electrophysiology	456	677	3.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,343	17,807	0.7%
Sleep Studies	8,594	10,114	1.4%
Urodynamics	5,093	5,443	0.6%
Colonoscopy	46,514	50,028	0.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,865	17,102	-0.4%
Cystoscopy	26,189	26,069	0.0%
Gastroscopy	53,362	55,663	0.4%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,802,302</b>	<b>1,923,768</b>	<b>0.5%</b>

## 4 October 2021 Data

This section analyses the October 2021 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 2020.

### 4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of October 2021, there were a total of 356,800 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 25.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with October 2020, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 5,600, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 4.2 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with October 2020, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was MRI, which increased by 3.1 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Gastroscopy, which decreased by 19.3 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – October 2020 and October 2021

	Oct-20	Oct-21	Difference (%age points)
MRI	19.6%	22.7%	3.1
CT	20.4%	18.7%	-1.7
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	19.3%	18.9%	-0.4
Barium Enema	9.7%	7.6%	-2.1
Dexa Scan	39.0%	30.1%	-8.9
Audiology Assessments	37.0%	21.5%	-15.5
Echocardiography	39.8%	42.2%	2.4
Electrophysiology	7.4%	9.0%	1.6
Peripheral Neurophysiology	35.1%	27.2%	-7.9
Sleep Studies	34.2%	23.5%	-10.7
Urodynamics	51.2%	46.0%	-5.3
Colonoscopy	51.3%	37.7%	-13.6
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	53.3%	37.1%	-16.3
Cystoscopy	44.8%	31.6%	-13.2
Gastroscopy	55.5%	36.2%	-19.3
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>29.2%</b>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>-4.2</b>

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with October 2020, the test type with the smallest decrease in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Imaging with a decrease of 0.2 percentage points. Physiological Measurement decreased by 4.1 percentage points, while Endoscopy decreased by 16.2 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

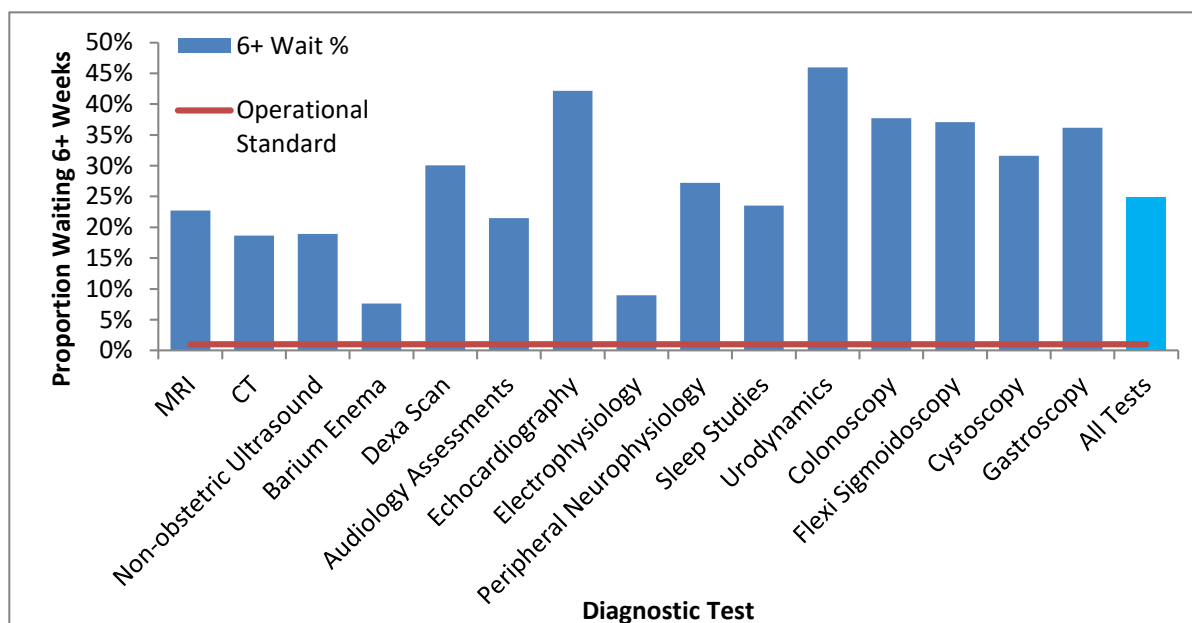
**Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – October 2020 and October 2021**

	Oct-20	Oct-21	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	20.7%	20.5%	-0.2
Physiological Measurement	38.5%	34.5%	-4.1
Endoscopy	52.6%	36.4%	-16.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>29.2%</b>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>-4.2</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 none of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema (7.6%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (46.0%) (Chart 6).

**Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – October 2021**



4.1.6. 131 of the 138 acute trusts that submitted data for October 2021 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. All 107 Commissioners<sup>1</sup> failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

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

- 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 13.2% (London) and 31.0% (East of England) (Table 4).
- 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: October 2021 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	26,659	13.2%	201,202	317,045	2.5
South West	40,790	29.8%	136,882	181,871	3.4
South East	33,264	17.4%	191,003	295,157	2.6
Midlands	93,489	30.3%	308,832	346,006	3.6
East of England	55,564	31.0%	179,297	211,818	3.5
North West	51,864	26.2%	197,650	261,554	3.3
North East and Yorkshire	54,649	25.9%	210,734	297,493	3.1
<b>England</b>	<b>356,330</b>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>1,425,925</b>	<b>1,912,165</b>	<b>3.1</b>

\*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

## 4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of October 2021 there were a total of 1,428,400 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 188,400 (15.2%) from October 2020.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 33.7% of the total waiting list, or 481,700 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.04% of the total waiting list, or 500 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – October 2020 and October 2021

	Oct-20	Oct-21	Growth (%age)
MRI	215,789	279,184	29.4%
CT	146,575	179,247	22.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	402,240	481,708	19.8%
Barium Enema	1,687	1,834	8.7%
Dexa Scan	46,816	54,359	16.1%
Audiology Assessments	54,113	67,808	25.3%
Echocardiography	118,378	147,815	24.9%
Electrophysiology	528	525	-0.6%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	26,176	26,085	-0.3%
Sleep Studies	10,453	12,122	16.0%
Urodynamics	7,282	7,509	3.1%
Colonoscopy	70,354	64,226	-8.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	29,834	22,506	-24.6%
Cystoscopy	23,196	19,681	-15.2%
Gastroscopy	86,600	63,806	-26.3%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,240,021</b>	<b>1,428,415</b>	<b>15.2%</b>

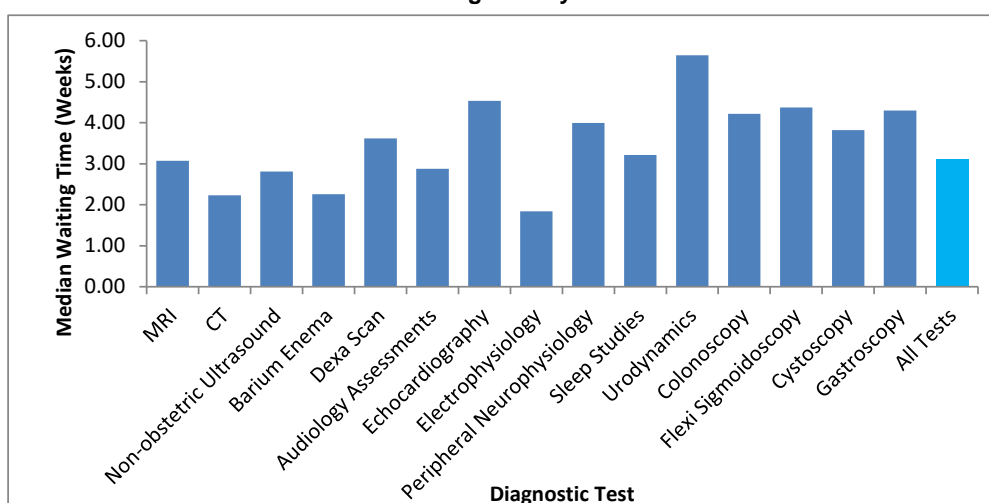
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for MRI, where the waiting list grew by 29.4% compared with October 2020.

### 4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of October 2021, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.1 weeks from the time of referral, up from 3.0 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Electrophysiology at 1.6 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 5.4 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – October 2021



## 4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,923,800 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during October 2021. This is an increase of 121,500 (11.8%) from October 2020 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 590,900 tests taking place. This accounted for 30.7% of all activity in October 2021. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 700 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 increased by 17.8% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – October 2020 and October 2021

	Oct-21	Oct-20	YTD 21/22	YTD 20/21	Growth Oct 21 vs Oct 20	Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21	Adjusted Growth Oct 21 vs Oct 20	Adjusted Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21
MRI	317,742	282,303	1,905,773	2,128,232	12.6%	-10.5%	17.9%	-11.1%
CT	584,626	541,843	3,402,596	3,596,932	7.9%	-5.4%	13.0%	-6.0%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	590,929	573,188	3,922,631	4,506,176	3.1%	-12.9%	8.0%	-13.5%
Barium Enema	2,790	2,946	18,324	14,744	-5.3%	24.3%	-0.8%	23.4%
Dexa Scan	37,588	34,986	227,075	267,054	7.4%	-15.0%	12.6%	-15.5%
Audiology Assessments	79,848	67,909	618,208	747,005	17.6%	-17.2%	23.2%	-17.8%
Echocardiography	127,342	124,711	832,769	940,418	2.1%	-11.4%	7.0%	-12.0%
Electrophysiology	677	456	7,827	18,588	48.5%	-57.9%	55.5%	-58.2%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,807	16,343	117,871	134,120	9.0%	-12.1%	14.1%	-12.7%
Sleep Studies	10,114	8,594	64,236	75,381	17.7%	-14.8%	23.3%	-15.4%
Urodynamics	5,443	5,093	39,886	49,105	6.9%	-18.8%	12.0%	-19.3%
Colonoscopy	50,028	46,514	282,500	318,285	7.6%	-11.2%	12.7%	-11.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,102	17,865	159,311	187,771	-4.3%	-15.2%	0.3%	-15.7%
Cystoscopy	26,069	26,189	161,463	183,715	-0.5%	-12.1%	4.3%	-12.7%
Gastroscopy	55,663	53,362	351,905	410,959	4.3%	-14.4%	9.3%	-14.9%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,923,768</b>	<b>1,802,302</b>	<b>12,112,375</b>	<b>13,578,485</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>-10.8%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>-11.4%</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. Adjusted growth takes account of working days in the period.



## 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 October 2021 for the months September 2019 through to December 2020.

### 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](mailto: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 March 2020 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](mailto:nhsengland.media@nhs.net)

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

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