

# NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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

## **January 2022 Monthly Report**

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NHS England and NHS Improvement

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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 January 2022 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to affect the current reporting period and comparisons with the previous year.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of January 2022 was 435,000. This was 30.0% 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 January 2021 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 57,300 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.3 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 30.0% (January 2022).
- At the end of January 2022, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 6.1%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 51.3% 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 2.9 weeks at the end of January 2022.
- There were 1,450,100 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of January 2022. This is an increase of 317,300 from January 2021.
- A total of 1,892,500 diagnostic tests were undertaken in January 2022. This is an increase of 283,300 from January 2021.

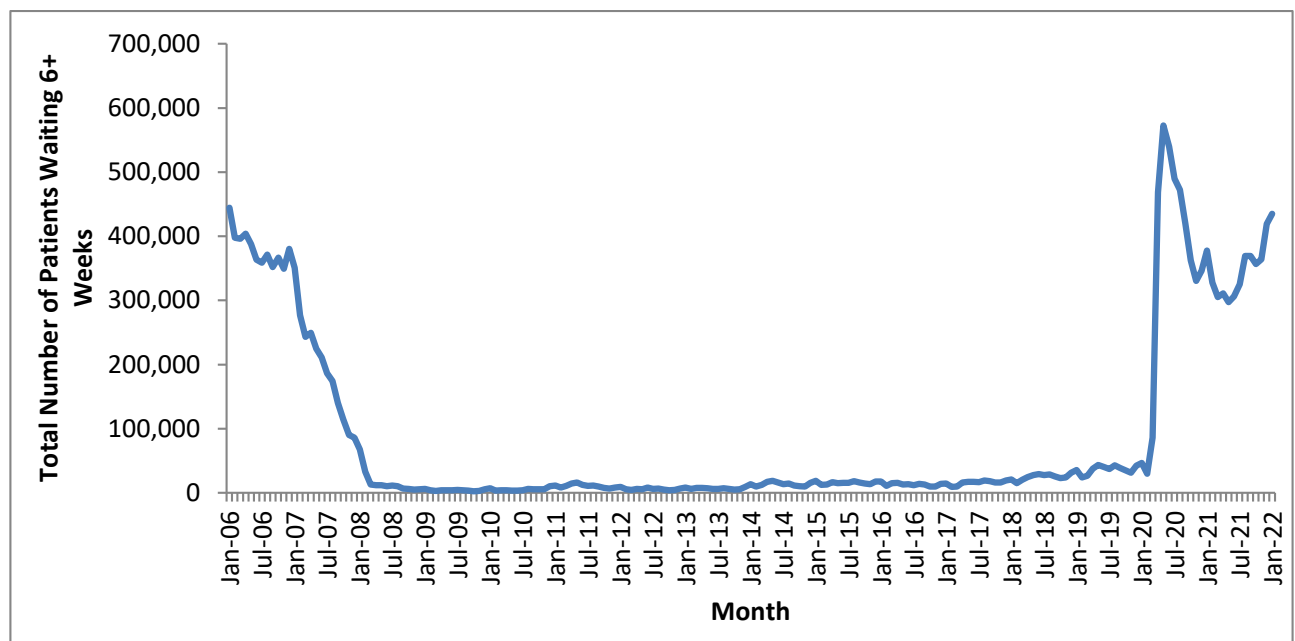
### 3 National Trends

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

#### 3.1 6+ Week Waits

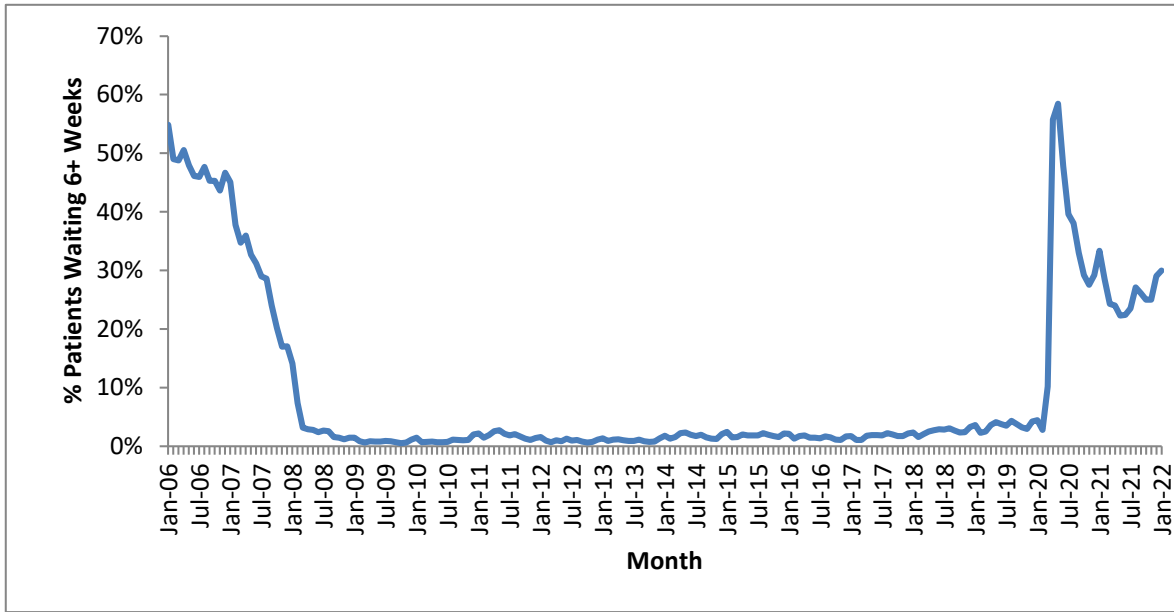
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 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 January 2022 there was an increase of 15,700 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 January 2022



- 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 30.0% (January 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

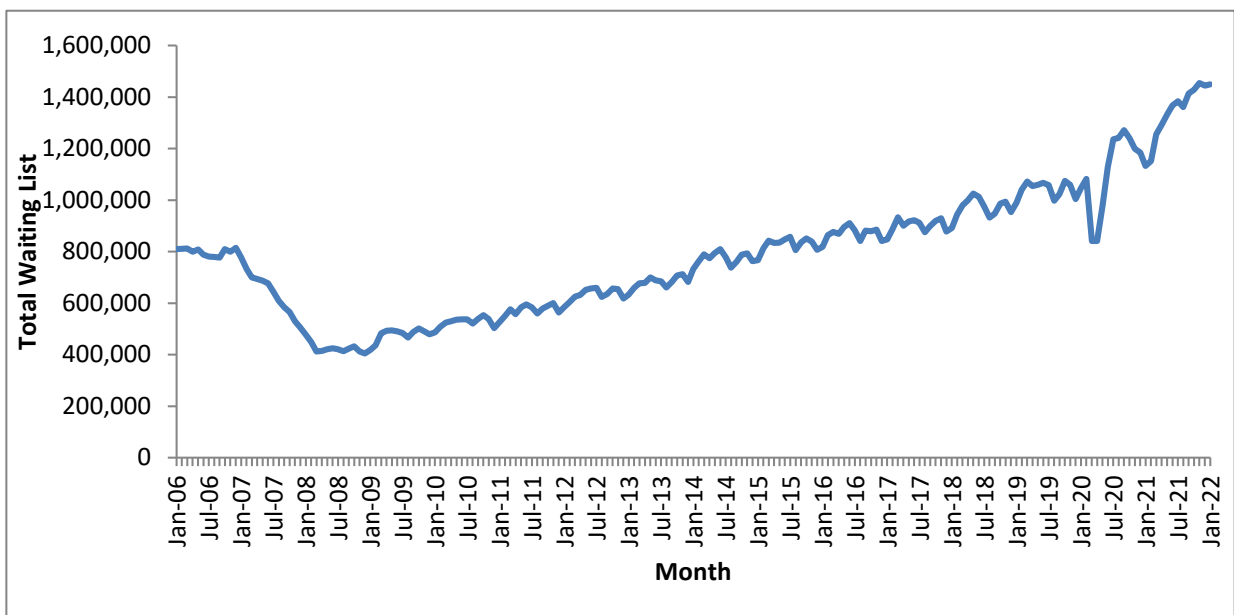
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to January 2022**



### 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 January 2022**

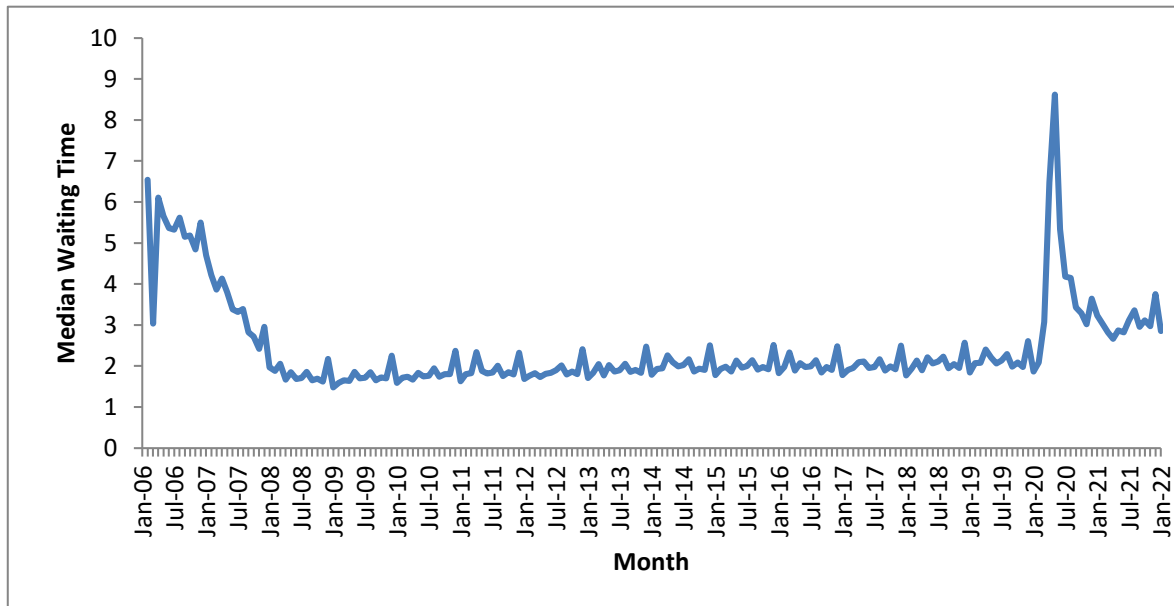




### 3.3 Median Waiting Time

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 3.8 weeks (December 2021) and a low of 2.7 weeks (April 2021). The median waiting time in January 2022 was 2.9 weeks.

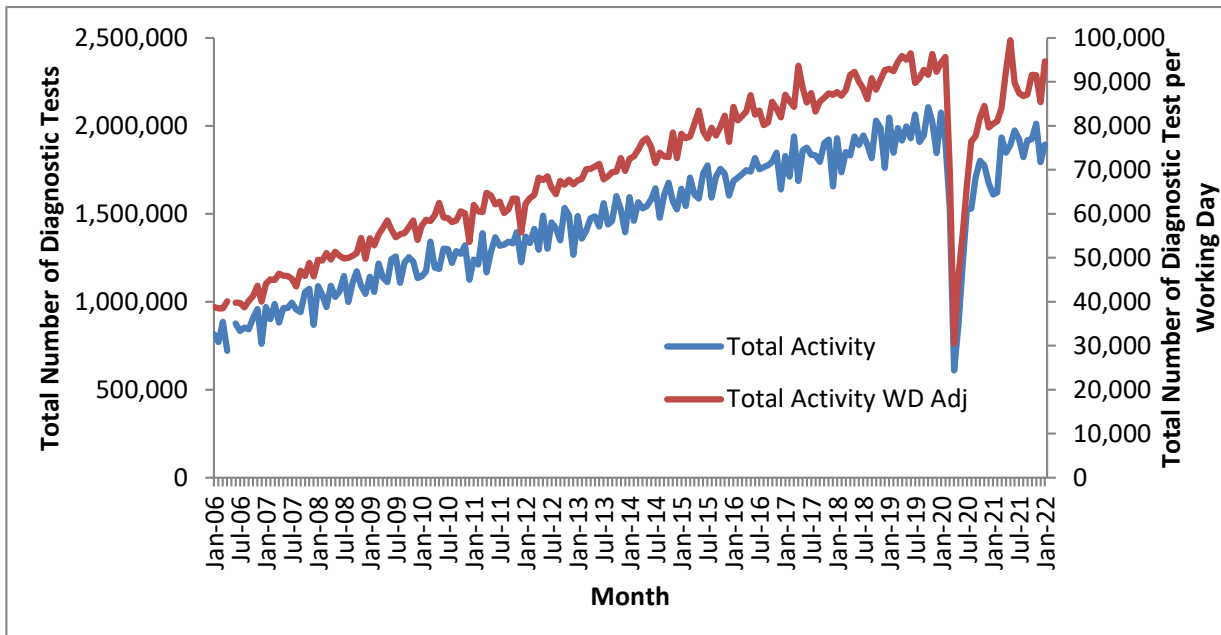
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to January 2022



### 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 January 2022**



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 smallest change in activity was CT where January 2022 activity was 1.1% higher per month than January 2021 (Table 1).

**Table 1: Total activity, by test – January 2021 and January 2022**

	Jan-21	Jan-22	Average monthly growth
MRI	264,520	305,392	1.2%
CT	512,169	582,363	1.1%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	507,383	585,179	1.2%
Barium Enema	2,212	2,986	2.5%
Dexa Scan	24,059	35,766	3.4%
Audiology Assessments	53,575	80,359	3.4%
Echocardiography	107,191	125,287	1.3%
Electrophysiology	492	610	1.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	12,960	17,649	2.6%
Sleep Studies	6,704	9,505	3.0%
Urodynamics	3,426	5,182	3.5%
Colonoscopy	37,840	47,746	2.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	13,868	16,127	1.3%
Cystoscopy	20,143	25,454	2.0%
Gastroscopy	42,639	52,913	1.8%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,609,181</b>	<b>1,892,518</b>	<b>1.4%</b>

## 4 January 2022 Data

This section analyses the January 2022 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 January 2022, there were a total of 435,000 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 30.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with January 2021, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 57,300, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.3 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with January 2021, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was MRI, which increased by 3.2 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Gastroscopy, which decreased by 16.6 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2021 and January 2022

	Jan-21	Jan-22	Difference (%age points)
MRI	25.8%	29.0%	3.2
CT	22.5%	22.9%	0.4
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	24.4%	22.9%	-1.5
Barium Enema	13.5%	6.1%	-7.4
Dexa Scan	45.3%	36.3%	-9.0
Audiology Assessments	37.8%	29.8%	-8.0
Echocardiography	45.7%	48.0%	2.3
Electrophysiology	11.3%	11.1%	-0.2
Peripheral Neurophysiology	44.0%	30.2%	-13.9
Sleep Studies	30.0%	31.9%	1.9
Urodynamics	57.0%	51.3%	-5.7
Colonoscopy	51.5%	40.7%	-10.8
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	55.0%	40.5%	-14.5
Cystoscopy	49.9%	34.0%	-15.9
Gastroscopy	55.4%	38.8%	-16.6
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>33.3%</b>	<b>30.0%</b>	<b>-3.3</b>

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with January 2021, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Imaging with an decrease of 0.2 percentage points. Physiological Measurement decreased

by 2.4 percentage points, while Endoscopy decreased by 14.3 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

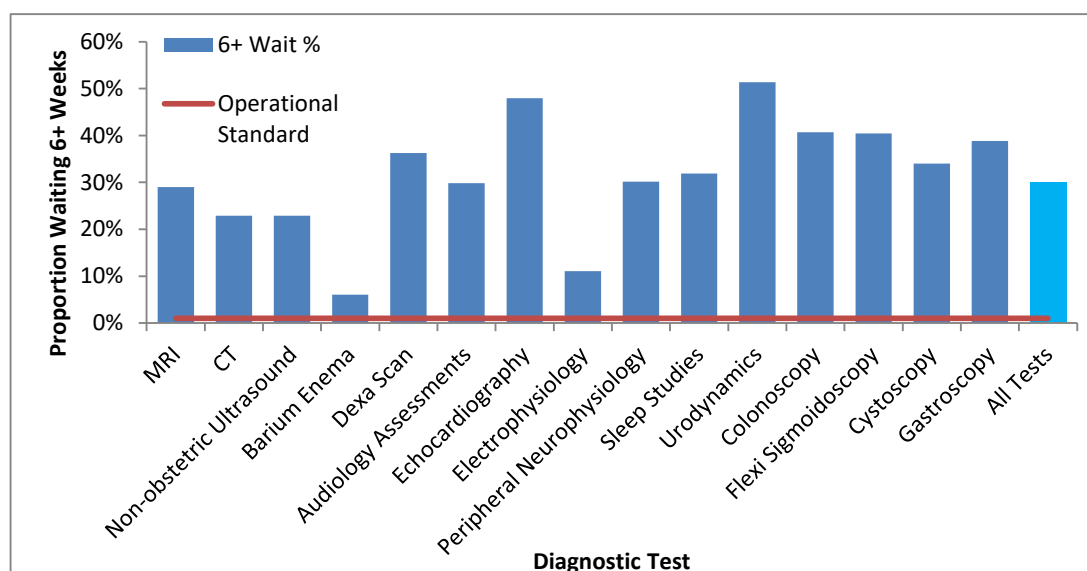
**Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – January 2021 and January 2022**

	Jan-21	Jan-22	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	25.5%	25.3%	-0.2
Physiological Measurement	43.5%	41.1%	-2.4
Endoscopy	53.4%	39.1%	-14.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>33.3%</b>	<b>30.0%</b>	<b>-3.3</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 (6.1%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (51.3%) (Chart 6).

**Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2022**



- 4.1.6. 135 of the 139 acute trusts that submitted data for January 2022 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.7. All 107 Commissioners<sup>1</sup> 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 17.2% (London) and 36.0% (Midlands) (Table 4).

<sup>1</sup> 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: January 2022 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	33,637	17.2%	195,286	312,683	2.1
South West	49,918	35.4%	140,876	182,312	3.3
South East	47,755	23.6%	202,081	294,396	2.5
Midlands	110,829	36.0%	307,827	334,869	3.5
East of England	65,723	35.6%	184,387	212,141	3.3
North West	65,546	31.8%	206,030	262,436	2.9
North East and Yorkshire	60,577	28.8%	210,523	281,966	2.8
<b>England</b>	<b>434,996</b>	<b>30.0%</b>	<b>1,450,051</b>	<b>1,892,518</b>	<b>2.9</b>

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

## 4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of January 2022 there were a total of 1,450,100 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 317,300 (28%) from January 2021.
- 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 475,800 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.05% of the total waiting list, or 700 patients (Table 5).

**Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – January 2021 and January 2022**

	Jan-21	Jan-22	Growth (%age)
MRI	198,138	280,139	41.4%
CT	141,629	185,023	30.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	366,004	475,825	30.0%
Barium Enema	1,407	1,627	15.6%
Dexa Scan	38,297	55,564	45.1%
Audiology Assessments	41,078	67,873	65.2%
Echocardiography	112,651	160,185	42.2%
Electrophysiology	639	695	8.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	24,330	24,361	0.1%
Sleep Studies	7,957	14,111	77.3%
Urodynamics	7,181	7,383	2.8%
Colonoscopy	64,743	65,519	1.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	28,196	22,409	-20.5%
Cystoscopy	23,204	21,912	-5.6%
Gastroscopy	77,344	67,425	-12.8%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,132,798</b>	<b>1,450,051</b>	<b>28.0%</b>

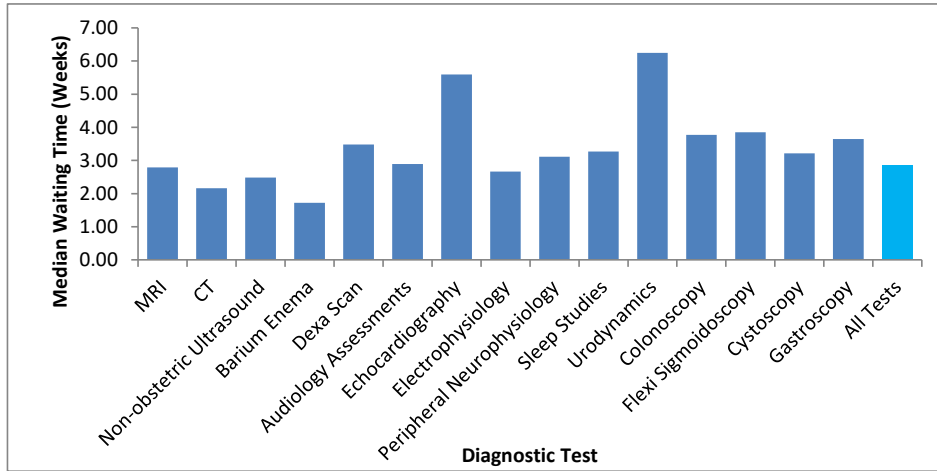
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Sleep Studies where the waiting list grew by 77.3% compared with January 2021.

## 4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of January 2022, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.9 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.8 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.7 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 6.2 weeks (Chart 7).

**Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – January 2022**



## 4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 1,892,500 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during January 2022. This is an increase of 283,300 (17.6%) from January 2021 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non Obstetric Ultrasound with 585,200 tests taking place. This accounted for 30.9% of all activity in January 2022. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 600 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.03% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 31.8% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – January 2021 and January 2022

	Jan-22	Jan-21	YTD 21/22	YTD 20/21	Growth Jan 22 vs Jan 21	Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21	Adjusted Growth Jan 22 vs Jan 21	Adjusted Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21
MRI	305,392	264,520	3,011,161	2,278,400	15.5%	32.2%	15.5%	31.5%
CT	582,363	512,169	5,790,355	4,752,932	13.7%	21.8%	13.7%	21.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	585,179	507,383	5,920,882	4,455,938	15.3%	32.9%	15.3%	32.2%
Barium Enema	2,986	2,212	30,739	23,652	35.0%	30.0%	35.0%	29.3%
Dexa Scan	35,766	24,059	364,680	214,609	48.7%	69.9%	48.7%	69.0%
Audiology Assessments	80,359	53,575	790,480	458,875	50.0%	72.3%	50.0%	71.3%
Echocardiography	125,287	107,191	1,277,500	979,684	16.9%	30.4%	16.9%	29.7%
Electrophysiology	610	492	7,821	5,193	24.0%	50.6%	24.0%	49.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,649	12,960	178,484	112,726	36.2%	58.3%	36.2%	57.5%
Sleep Studies	9,505	6,704	95,342	61,167	41.8%	55.9%	41.8%	55.0%
Urodynamics	5,182	3,426	55,076	33,542	51.3%	64.2%	51.3%	63.3%
Colonoscopy	47,746	37,840	480,121	301,369	26.2%	59.3%	26.2%	58.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,127	13,868	168,668	119,218	16.3%	41.5%	16.3%	40.7%
Cystoscopy	25,454	20,143	267,582	190,530	26.4%	40.4%	26.4%	39.7%
Gastroscopy	52,913	42,639	557,261	347,614	24.1%	60.3%	24.1%	59.5%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,892,518</b>	<b>1,609,181</b>	<b>18,996,152</b>	<b>14,335,449</b>	<b>17.6%</b>	<b>32.5%</b>	<b>17.6%</b>	<b>31.8%</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 January 2022 for the months September 2019 through to January 2021.

### 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.](#)

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