

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

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February 2023 Monthly Report

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Prepared by: Performance Analysis Team (Elective, Activity & Planning)
NHS England

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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.

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.

The NHS Standard Contract 2022/23 states that there is a standard threshold of 1% for this pledge. NHS England's planning guidance for 2023/24 requests that a threshold of at least 5% should be met by March 2025.

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+ Week 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 February 2023 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to affect the current reporting period and comparisons with previous years.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of February 2023 was 402,100. This was 25.1% 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 February 2022 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 40,100 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 1.1 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 24.8% (March 2022) and 31.3% (December 2022).
- At the end of February 2023, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 2.1%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 42.6% 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 3.0 weeks at the end of February 2023.
- There were 1,601,500 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of February 2023. This is an increase of 94,000 from February 2022.
- A total of 2,060,900 diagnostic tests were undertaken in February 2023. This is an increase of 199,300 from February 2022.

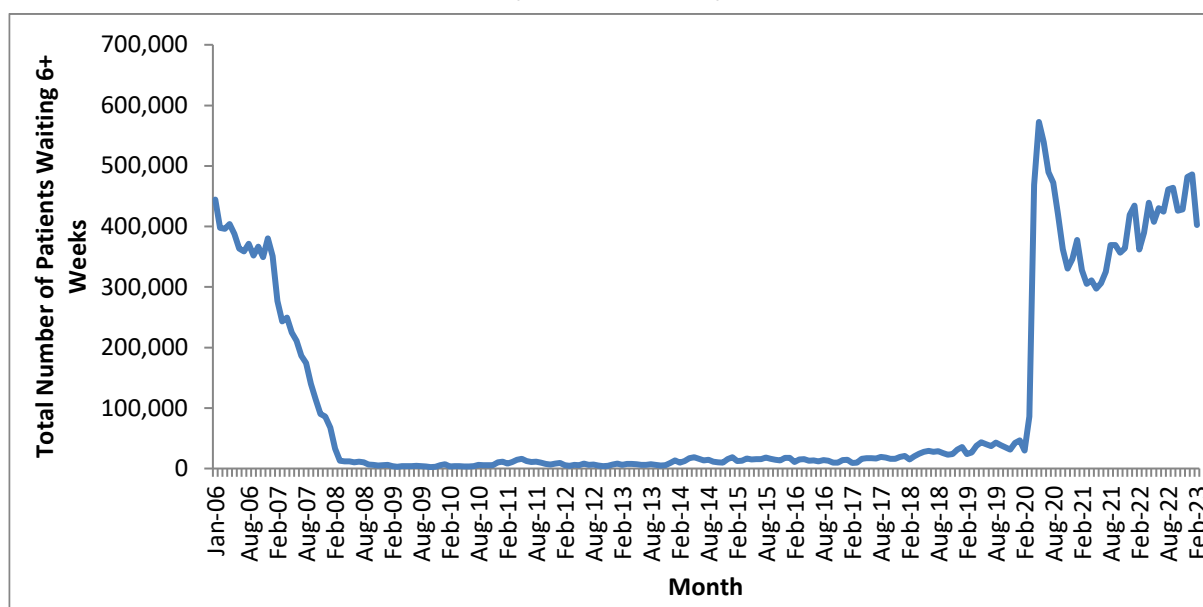
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

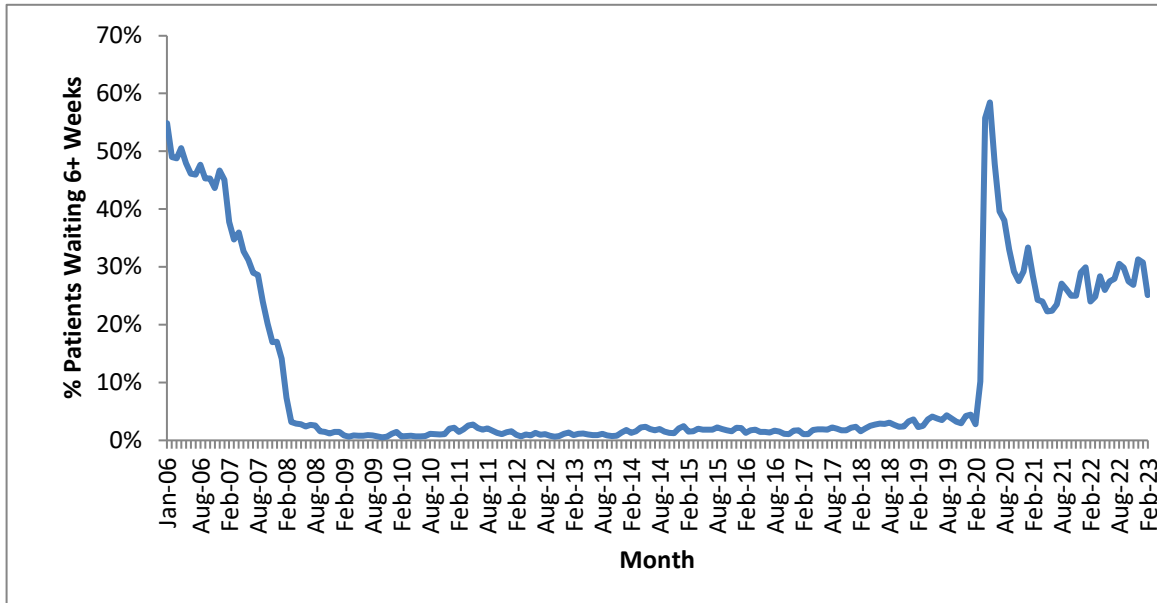
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008. Since March 2008 there were fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between December 2013 and May 2014.
- 3.1.2. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In February 2023 there was a decrease of 83,800 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 February 2023



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more shows a similar pattern (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 24.8% (March 2022) and 31.3% (December 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

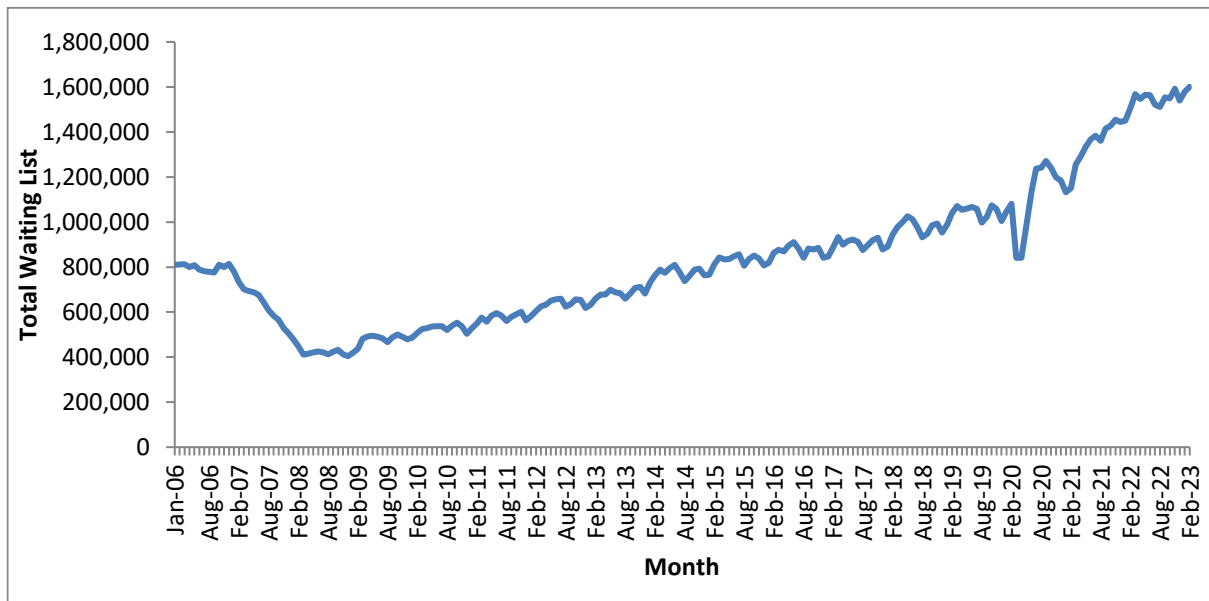
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to February 2023**



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 fell 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.

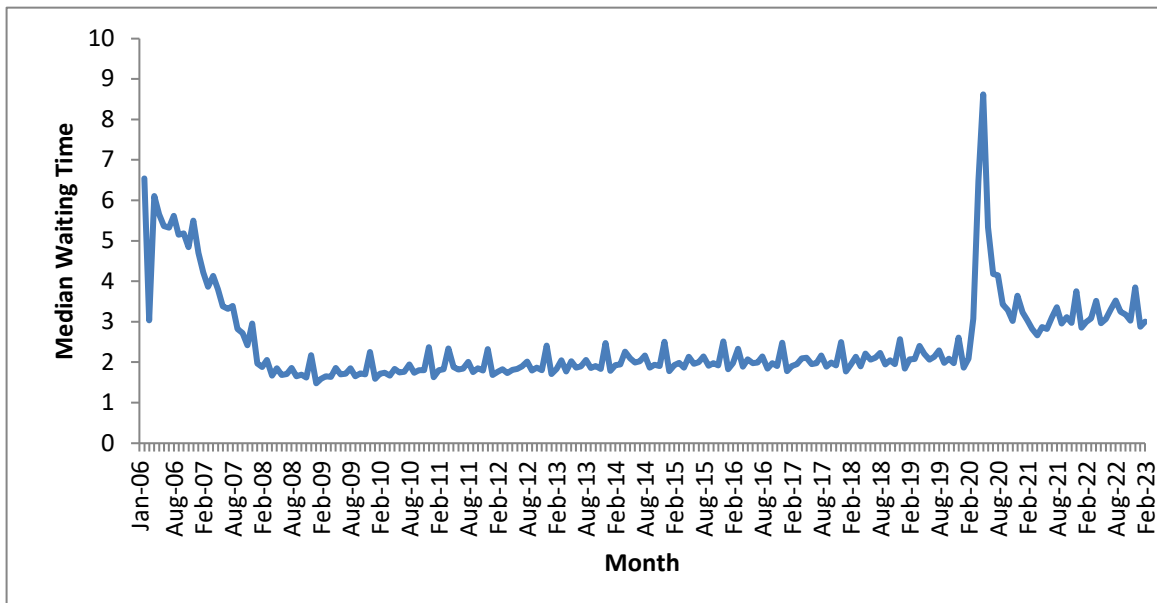
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to February 2023**



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 3.9 weeks (December 2022) and a low of 2.9 weeks (January 2023). The median waiting time in February 2023 was 3.0 weeks.

Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to February 2023

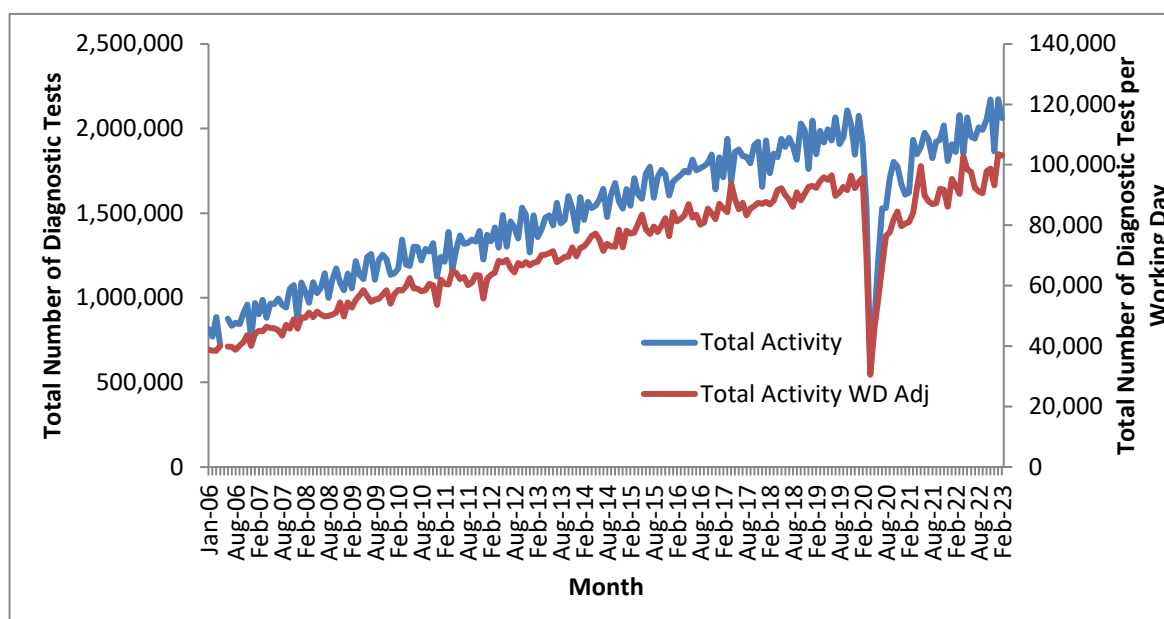


3.4 Total Activity

- 3.4.1. The monthly activity figure can significantly fluctuate month to month, with particularly notable decreases in December due to the bank holidays. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced (Chart 5).
- 3.4.2. The underlying trend showed an increase from January 2006 to the COVID-19 period when total activity in April 2020 fell by 68% compared to April 2019. Monthly activity subsequently started to rise again, with some further setbacks, and recover to pre-pandemic levels.

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**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to February 2023**



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 increase in activity was Sleep Studies, where February 2023 activity was 1.9% higher per month than February 2022 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – February 2022 and February 2023

	Feb-22	Feb-23	Average monthly growth
MRI	295,743	332,585	1.0%
CT	560,222	624,852	0.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	577,753	638,241	0.8%
Barium Enema	2,746	3,075	0.9%
Dexa Scan	36,320	41,835	1.2%
Audiology Assessments	81,169	85,039	0.4%
Echocardiography	126,795	143,350	1.0%
Electrophysiology	822	289	-8.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,582	18,766	0.5%
Sleep Studies	9,855	12,310	1.9%
Urodynamics	5,347	5,245	-0.2%
Colonoscopy	48,618	53,607	0.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,831	17,898	0.5%
Cystoscopy	26,271	25,092	-0.4%
Gastroscopy	55,432	58,670	0.5%
All Tests	1,861,506	2,060,854	0.9%

4 February 2023 Data

This section analyses the February 2023 diagnostic waiting times and activity data and includes comparisons between tests, regions, providers and commissioners.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of February 2023, there were a total of 402,100 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 25.1% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with February 2022, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 40,100, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 1.1 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with February 2022, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Audiology Assessments, which increased by 6.6 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was CT, which decreased by 5.2 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – February 2022 and February 2023

	Feb-22	Feb-23	Difference (%age points)
MRI	22.2%	20.8%	-1.3
CT	18.8%	13.5%	-5.2
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	16.7%	21.0%	4.3
Barium Enema	3.9%	2.1%	-1.8
Dexa Scan	29.8%	32.7%	2.9
Audiology Assessments	23.7%	30.3%	6.6
Echocardiography	41.7%	38.2%	-3.5
Electrophysiology	21.7%	18.2%	-3.5
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21.2%	18.9%	-2.2
Sleep Studies	29.9%	35.7%	5.8
Urodynamics	46.8%	42.6%	-4.2
Colonoscopy	35.9%	40.4%	4.5
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	34.5%	40.8%	6.3
Cystoscopy	32.0%	35.1%	3.1
Gastroscopy	33.8%	33.0%	-0.7
All Tests	24.0%	25.1%	1.1

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with February 2022, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Physiological Measurement with a decrease of 0.5 percentage points. Endoscopy increased by 2.9 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 1.0

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

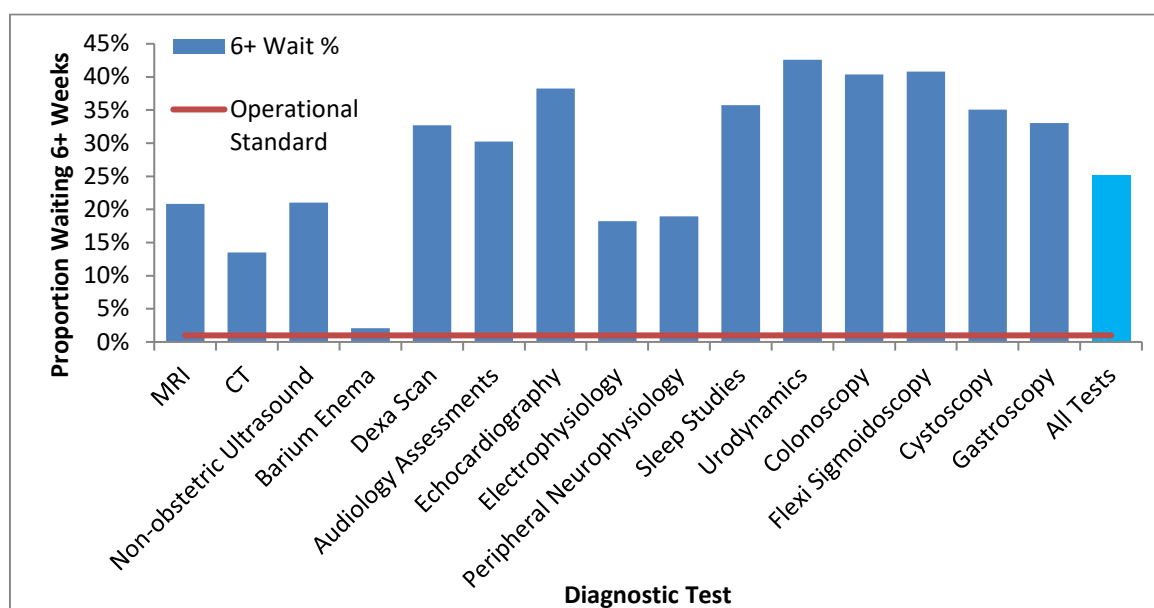
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – February 2022 and February 2023

	Feb-22	Feb-23	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	19.3%	20.4%	1.0
Physiological Measurement	34.6%	34.2%	-0.5
Endoscopy	34.4%	37.3%	2.9
Total	24.0%	25.1%	1.1

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 (2.1%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (42.6%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – February 2023



- 4.1.6. 141 of the 157 acute trusts that submitted data for February 2023 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.7. All 42 Commissioners (ICBs) failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.8. None of the seven NHS England Regions met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 10.3% (London) and 33.7% (Midlands) (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.

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Table 4: February 2023 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	23,006	10.3%	224,357	333,440	2.3
South West	44,828	29.7%	150,988	199,442	3.4
South East	65,773	26.5%	248,279	306,695	3.0
Midlands	121,875	33.7%	361,870	384,023	3.7
East of England	55,699	28.9%	192,955	225,627	3.3
North West	47,382	23.8%	199,032	284,466	2.9
North East and Yorkshire	42,772	19.4%	220,056	313,012	2.7
England	402,124	25.1%	1,601,492	2,060,854	3.0

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

4.2.1. At the end of February 2023 there were a total of 1,601,500 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 94,000 (6.2%) from February 2022.

4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 34.2% of the total waiting list, or 547,000 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.03% of the total waiting list, or 500 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – February 2022 and February 2023

	Feb-22	Feb-23	Growth (%age)
MRI	289,995	298,301	2.9%
CT	189,571	183,279	-3.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	502,406	547,016	8.9%
Barium Enema	1,729	1,948	12.7%
Dexa Scan	58,609	65,094	11.1%
Audiology Assessments	75,786	88,577	16.9%
Echocardiography	163,734	161,288	-1.5%
Electrophysiology	677	494	-27.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	24,987	26,790	7.2%
Sleep Studies	15,604	24,028	54.0%
Urodynamics	7,639	8,138	6.5%
Colonoscopy	63,599	78,385	23.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	22,810	26,941	18.1%
Cystoscopy	22,937	24,555	7.1%
Gastroscopy	67,400	66,658	-1.1%
All Tests	1,507,483	1,601,492	6.2%

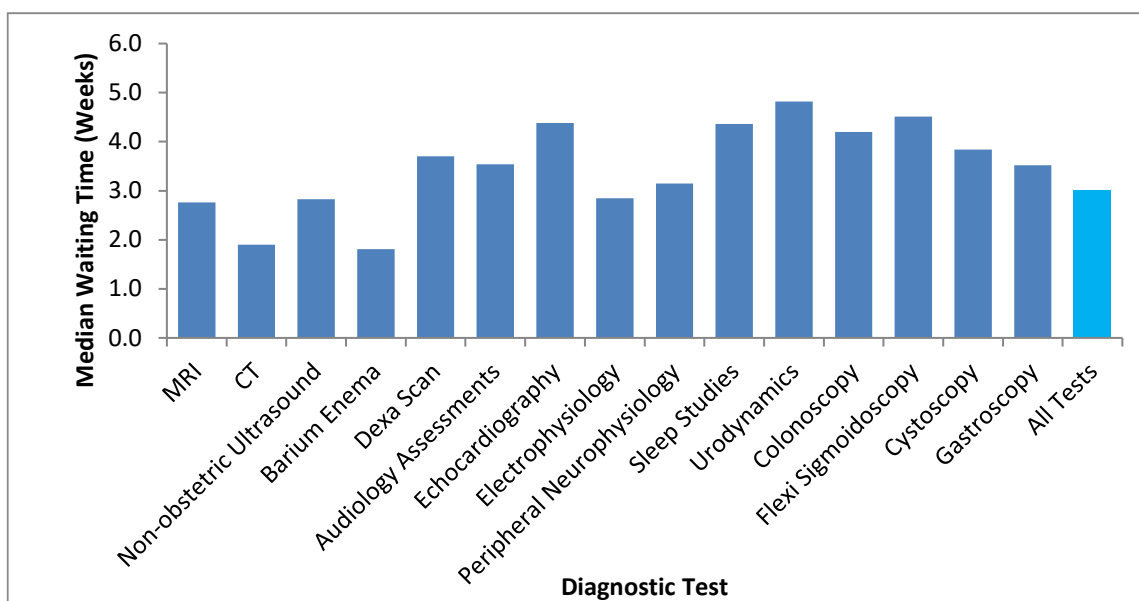
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

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 54.0% compared with February 2022.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of February 2023, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.0 weeks from the time of referral, up from 2.9 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.8 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 4.8 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – February 2023



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 2,060,900 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during February 2023. This is an increase of 199,300 (10.7%) from February 2022 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound with 638,200 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.0% of all activity in February 2023. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 300 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.01% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 6.8% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – February 2022 and February 2023

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

	Feb-23	Feb-22	YTD 22/23	YTD 21/22	Growth Feb 23 vs Feb 22	Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22	Adjusted Growth Feb 23 vs Feb 22	Adjusted Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22
MRI	332,585	295,743	3,549,265	3,316,303	12.5%	7.0%	12.5%	8.0%
CT	624,852	560,222	6,811,201	6,369,021	11.5%	6.9%	11.5%	7.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	638,241	577,753	6,797,883	6,516,229	10.5%	4.3%	10.5%	5.2%
Barium Enema	3,075	2,746	33,758	33,689	12.0%	0.2%	12.0%	1.1%
Dexa Scan	41,835	36,320	443,837	401,881	15.2%	10.4%	15.2%	11.4%
Audiology Assessments	85,039	81,169	937,653	876,891	4.8%	6.9%	4.8%	7.9%
Echocardiography	143,350	126,795	1,511,543	1,406,716	13.1%	7.5%	13.1%	8.4%
Electrophysiology	289	822	6,647	8,643	-64.8%	-23.1%	-64.8%	-22.4%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,766	17,582	201,326	196,527	6.7%	2.4%	6.7%	3.3%
Sleep Studies	12,310	9,855	125,909	105,262	24.9%	19.6%	24.9%	20.7%
Urodynamics	5,245	5,347	56,893	60,497	-1.9%	-6.0%	-1.9%	-5.1%
Colonoscopy	53,607	48,618	561,710	531,604	10.3%	5.7%	10.3%	6.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,898	16,831	186,528	186,579	6.3%	0.0%	6.3%	0.8%
Cystoscopy	25,092	26,271	288,107	295,968	-4.5%	-2.7%	-4.5%	-1.8%
Gastroscopy	58,670	55,432	623,587	616,696	5.8%	1.1%	5.8%	2.0%
All Tests	2,060,854	1,861,506	22,135,847	20,922,506	10.7%	5.8%	10.7%	6.7%

5 Annex

5.1 Methodology

5.1.1. NHS England 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 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 February 2023 for the months January 2021 through to February 2022.

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

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.

Integrated Care Board (ICB)

Integrated care boards (ICBs) replaced clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) in the NHS in England from 1 July 2022. ICBs oversee partnerships of organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined up health and care services.

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 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 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

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

Sheila Dixon
Performance Analysis Team, NHS England
Room 5E24, Quarry House, Quarry Hill, Leeds LS2 7UE
Email: england.nhsdata@nhs.net