

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

September 2023 Monthly Report

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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 September 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 September 2023 was 415,600. This was 26.3% 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 September 2022 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 52,100 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.6 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 25.0% (March 2023) and 31.3% (December 2022).
- At the end of September 2023, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 9.8%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 47.5% 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 September 2023.
- There were 1,582,700 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of September 2023. This is an increase of 14,500 from September 2022.
- A total of 2,198,000 diagnostic tests were undertaken in September 2023. This is an increase of 175,000 from September 2022.

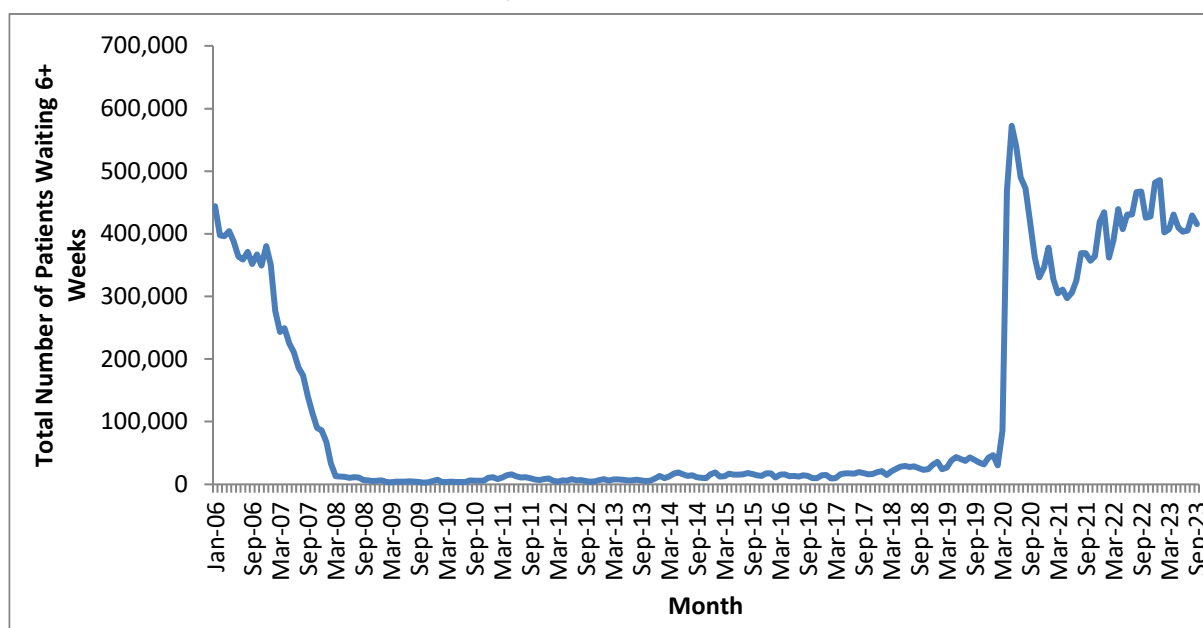
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

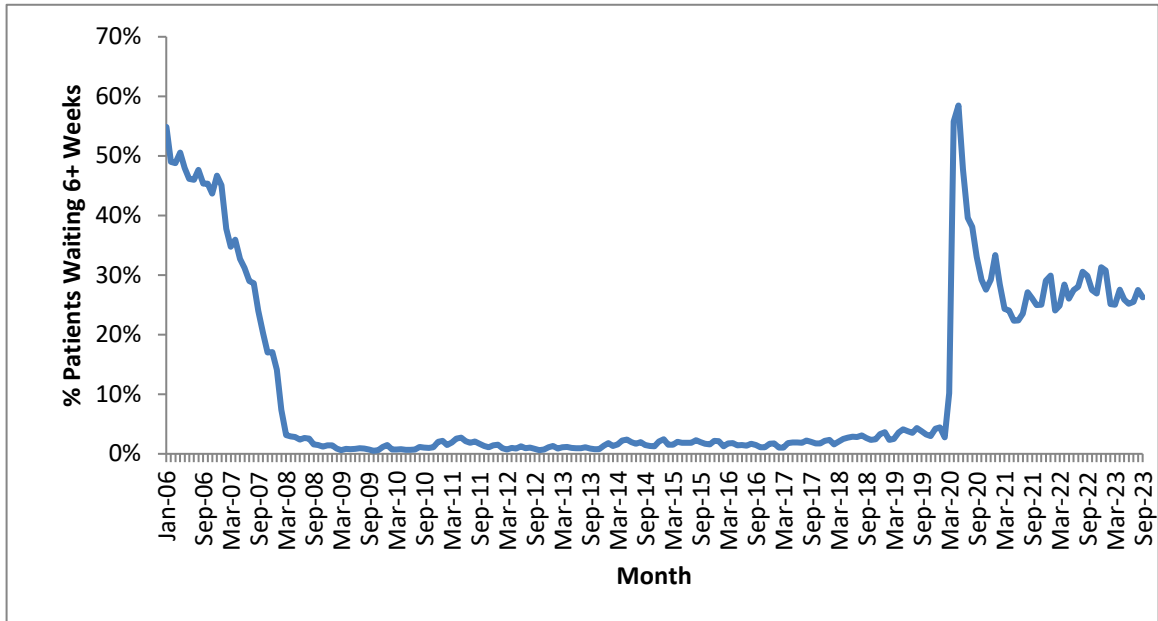
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008. Since March 2008 there 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 September 2023 there was a decrease of 13,900 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 September 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 25.0% (March 2023) and 31.3% (December 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

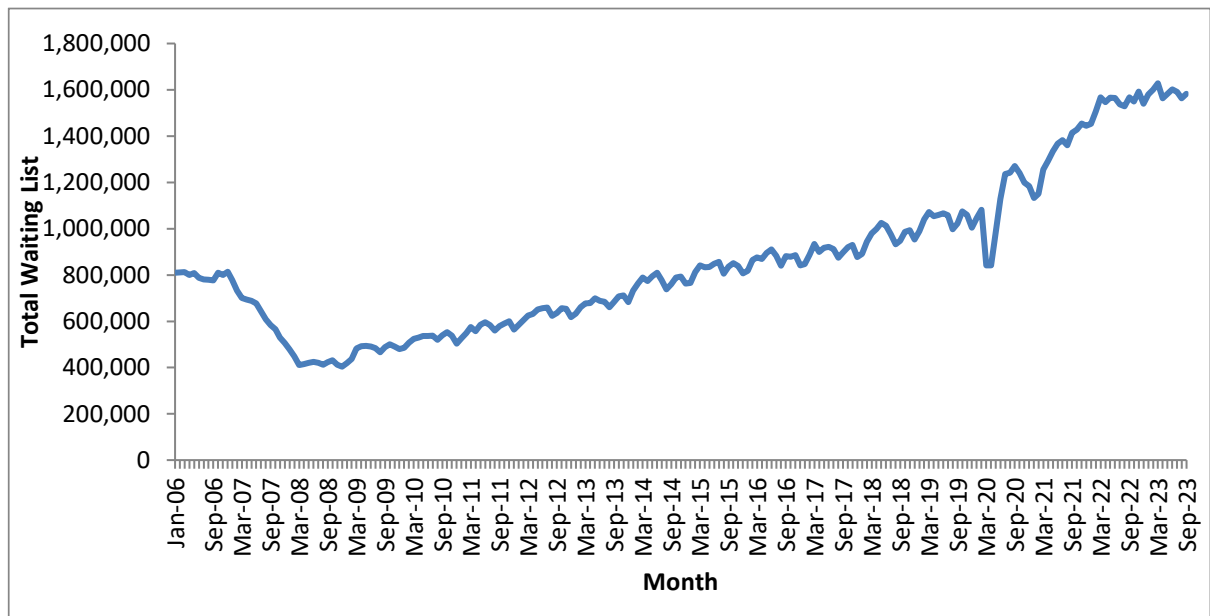
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to September 2023**



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.

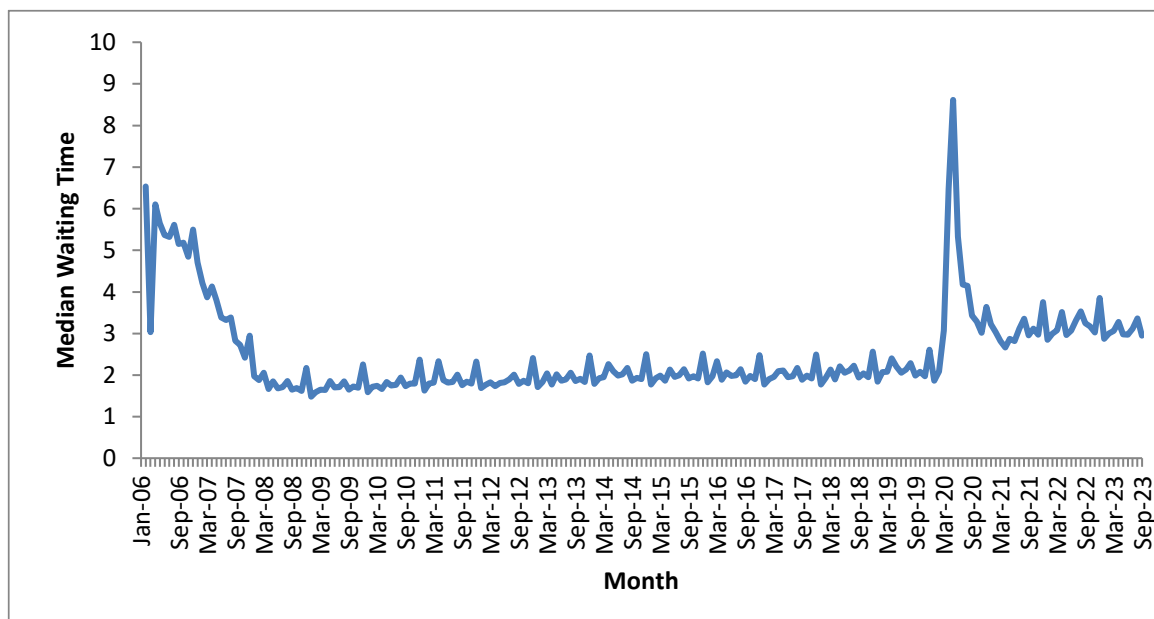
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to September 2023**



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 & September 2023). The median waiting time in September 2023 was 2.9 weeks.

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

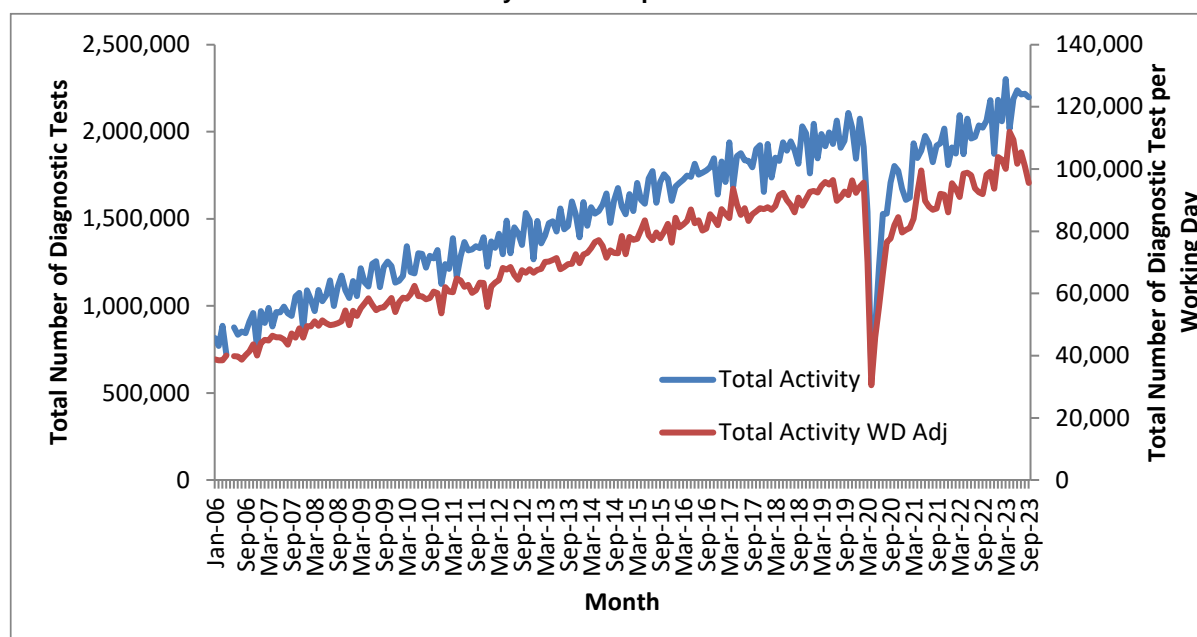


3.4 Total Activity

- 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 September 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 September 2023 activity was 2.1% higher per month than September 2022 (Table 1).

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

	Sep-22	Sep-23	Average monthly growth
MRI	320,517	355,643	0.9%
CT	622,105	674,098	0.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	623,701	684,629	0.8%
Barium Enema	3,026	3,052	0.1%
Dexa Scan	40,468	43,296	0.6%
Audiology Assessments	85,515	90,965	0.5%
Echocardiography	139,753	148,932	0.5%
Electrophysiology	584	595	0.2%
Peripheral Neuropsychology	17,626	19,685	0.9%
Sleep Studies	11,605	14,825	2.1%
Urodynamics	5,098	5,379	0.4%
Colonoscopy	52,208	54,105	0.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,205	16,571	-0.3%
Cystoscopy	26,395	26,977	0.2%
Gastroscopy	57,225	59,239	0.3%
All Tests	2,023,031	2,197,991	0.7%

4 September 2023 Data

This section analyses the September 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 September 2023, there were a total of 415,600 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 26.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with September 2022, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 52,100, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.6 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with September 2022, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Peripheral Electrophysiology, which increased by 18.0 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Echocardiography, which decreased by 9.6 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Sep-22	Sep-23	Difference (%age points)
MRI	24.1%	19.1%	-5.0
CT	16.6%	16.1%	-0.5
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	27.1%	22.5%	-4.6
Barium Enema	7.7%	9.8%	2.1
Dexa Scan	35.5%	33.6%	-1.8
Audiology Assessments	34.4%	38.3%	3.9
Echocardiography	47.7%	38.1%	-9.6
Electrophysiology	17.9%	35.9%	18.0
Peripheral Neurophysiology	24.4%	28.1%	3.7
Sleep Studies	39.7%	41.4%	1.7
Urodynamics	50.9%	47.5%	-3.4
Colonoscopy	40.3%	38.5%	-1.8
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	40.7%	42.9%	2.2
Cystoscopy	36.1%	33.2%	-2.9
Gastroscopy	36.2%	32.9%	-3.3
All Tests	29.8%	26.3%	-3.6

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

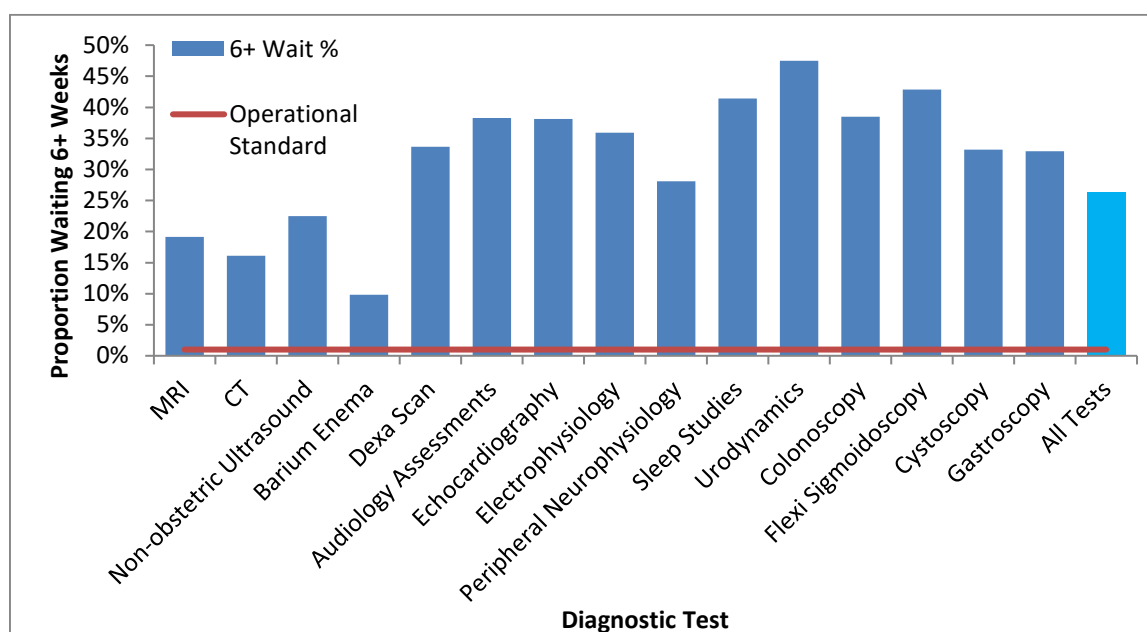
- 4.1.4. Compared with September 2022, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with a decrease of 1.9 percentage points. Imaging decreased by 3.9 percentage points, while Physiological Measurements also decreased by 3.9 percentage points (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 – September 2022 and September 2023

	Sep-22	Sep-23	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	25.1%	21.2%	-3.9
Physiological Measurement	41.5%	37.7%	-3.9
Endoscopy	38.5%	36.6%	-1.9
Total	29.8%	26.3%	-3.6

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 (9.8%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (47.5%) (Chart 6).

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

- 4.1.6. 139 of the 155 acute trusts that submitted data for September 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 13.9% (London) and 31.7% (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.

Table 4: September 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	31,544	13.9%	226,399	353,163	2.3
South West	45,300	29.6%	152,812	206,668	3.2
South East	69,752	28.5%	244,388	337,914	3.1
Midlands	103,837	31.7%	327,250	416,224	3.3
East of England	62,629	31.1%	201,426	246,379	3.5
North West	55,970	27.5%	203,774	292,881	3.0
North East and Yorkshire	45,741	20.5%	222,623	331,836	2.7
England	415,575	26.3%	1,582,684	2,197,991	2.9

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of September 2023 there were a total of 1,582,700 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 14,500 (0.9%) from September 2022.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 35.4% of the total waiting list, or 561,000 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 – September 2022 and September 2023

	Sep-22	Sep-23	Growth (%age)
MRI	282,783	280,575	-0.8%
CT	176,218	177,276	0.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	557,105	561,049	0.7%
Barium Enema	1,747	2,187	25.2%
Dexa Scan	62,112	61,986	-0.2%
Audiology Assessments	80,314	89,497	11.4%
Echocardiography	159,950	155,224	-3.0%
Electrophysiology	745	546	-26.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	24,730	31,580	27.7%
Sleep Studies	20,045	26,618	32.8%
Urodynamics	7,599	8,375	10.2%
Colonoscopy	81,870	73,853	-9.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	25,506	26,371	3.4%
Cystoscopy	20,945	25,482	21.7%
Gastrosocopy	66,550	62,065	-6.7%
All Tests	1,568,219	1,582,684	0.9%

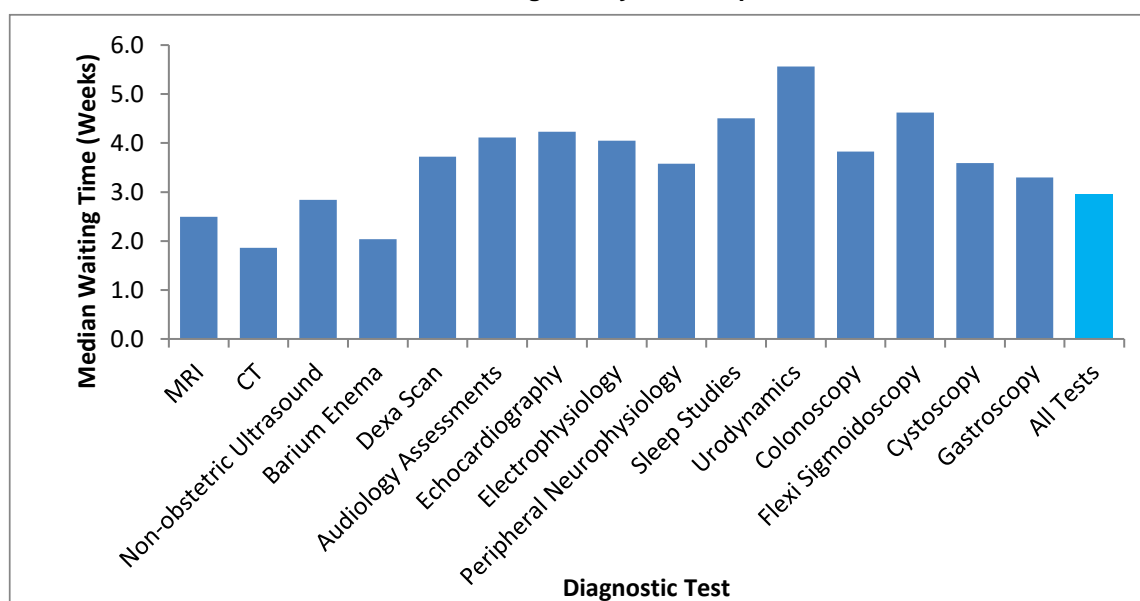
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Sleep Studies where the waiting list grew by 32.8% compared with September 2022.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

- 4.3.1. At the end of September 2023, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.9 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.4 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 1.9 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 5.6 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – September 2023



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 2,198,000 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during September 2023. This is an increase of 175,000 (8.6%) from September 2022 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 684,600 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.1% of all activity in September 2023. 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 9.2% from the same period last year (8.7% after adjusting for working days).

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – September 2022 and September 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.

	Sep-23	Sep-22	YTD 23/24	YTD 22/23	Growth Sep 23 vs Sep 22	Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23	Adjusted Growth Sep 23 vs Sep 22	Adjusted Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23
MRI	355,643	320,517	2,135,445	1,922,185	11.0%	11.1%	6.1%	10.2%
CT	674,098	622,105	4,011,469	3,680,998	8.4%	9.0%	3.6%	8.1%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	684,629	623,701	4,022,729	3,648,033	9.8%	10.3%	5.0%	9.4%
Barium Enema	3,052	3,026	18,901	17,264	0.9%	9.5%	-3.5%	8.6%
Dexa Scan	43,296	40,468	268,933	236,249	7.0%	13.8%	2.3%	12.9%
Audiology Assessments	90,965	85,515	549,779	505,910	6.4%	8.7%	1.7%	7.8%
Echocardiography	148,932	139,753	884,861	806,264	6.6%	9.7%	1.9%	8.9%
Electrophysiology	595	584	3,561	4,529	1.9%	-21.4%	-2.5%	-22.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,685	17,626	117,902	107,818	11.7%	9.4%	6.8%	8.5%
Sleep Studies	14,825	11,605	85,045	67,152	27.7%	26.6%	22.2%	25.6%
Urodynamics	5,379	5,098	32,211	30,689	5.5%	5.0%	0.9%	4.1%
Colonoscopy	54,105	52,208	323,709	301,415	3.6%	7.4%	-0.9%	6.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,571	17,205	100,398	101,758	-3.7%	-1.3%	-7.9%	-2.1%
Cystoscopy	26,977	26,395	160,770	160,706	2.2%	0.0%	-2.2%	-0.8%
Gastroscopy	59,239	57,225	356,628	345,031	3.5%	3.4%	-1.0%	2.5%
All Tests	2,197,991	2,023,031	13,072,341	11,936,001	8.6%	9.5%	3.9%	8.7%

5 Community Diagnostic Centre September 2023 Data

This section analyses the September 2023 activity data for Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) and includes comparisons with the main September 2023 activity data. Activity data for CDCs includes all the activity they have performed in the month for 15 diagnostic tests (which comprise around half of the diagnostic tests they provide); no waiting list data is collected for CDCs. The CDC activity is also included in the main activity report, since that covers diagnostic tests in all settings, but is only identified as CDC activity in the separate tables.

5.1 CDC activity

5.1.1. In September 2023, CDCs performed 142,000 diagnostic tests, 6.5% of the total. The most common were imaging tests and the highest percentage of imaging tests by CDCs was for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (10.4%), see Table 7.

Table 7: Total and CDC activity, by test – September 2023

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	355,643	36,823	10.4%
Computed Tomography	674,098	42,886	6.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	684,629	47,519	6.9%
Barium Enema	3,052	-	0.0%
DEXA Scan	43,296	1,839	4.2%
Audiology - Audiology Assessments	90,965	1,148	1.3%
Cardiology - Echocardiography	148,932	6,223	4.2%
Cardiology - Electrophysiology	595	264	44.4%
Neurophysiology - Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,685	75	0.4%
Respiratory physiology - Sleep Studies	14,825	749	5.1%
Urodynamics - Pressures & Flows	5,379	64	1.2%
Colonoscopy	54,105	2,018	3.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,571	538	3.2%
Cystoscopy	26,977	496	1.8%
Gastroscopy	59,239	1,484	2.5%
All tests	2,197,991	142,126	6.5%

5.1.2. In September 2023, the region with the highest diagnostic activity in CDCs was Midlands, with 30,500 tests (7.3% of their total), whilst the region with the highest percentage of tests by CDCs was the South East with 8.9% of their total, see Table 8.

Table 8: Total and CDC activity, by commissioning region – September 2023

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
London	353,163	20,677	5.9%
South West	206,668	14,039	6.8%
South East	337,914	30,048	8.9%
Midlands	416,224	30,476	7.3%
East of England	246,379	10,103	4.1%
North West	292,881	21,697	7.4%
North East and Yorkshire	331,836	14,823	4.5%
England	2,197,991	142,126	6.5%

5.2 CDC data completeness

5.2.1. In September 2023, 77 CDCs were invited to submit activity data and 73 are included in the activity counts (95% response rate). The activity is CDC-funded and should include all spoke sites and exclude services that have moved to the CDC from existing sites, making it additional activity.

6 Annex

6.1 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](#).

6.2 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 May 2023 for the months January 2021 through to May 2022.

6.3 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.](#)

6.4 Glossary

Community Diagnostic Centre

Community diagnostic centres (CDCs) provide a broad range of elective diagnostics (including checks, scans and tests) away from acute facilities, so reducing pressure on hospitals, providing quicker access to tests and greater convenience to patients. The earliest CDCs were started in 2021 and the list of sites and their services continues to expand. CDCs may use a range of spoke sites and submit aggregated activity data for them. They are hosted by acute Trusts but may receive patients from other Trusts.

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 September 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.

6.5 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

6.6 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>

6.7 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

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